

# 6

## Mao's China and International Relations

### POINTS TO CONSIDER

No modern state can exist in isolation. It has to live with its neighbours and the wider world. How the PRC handled the problems of its foreign relations tells us much about Mao Zedong himself and the new China he had created. The topic is studied under the following major themes:

- China's international relations under Mao
- Mao's China and the Soviet Union
- The PRC and the United States

### Key dates

1917	Russian Revolution
1950	Mao visited Moscow Sino-Soviet Treaty
1953	Death of Stalin
1956	Beginning of de-Stalinisation
1957	Mao attended Moscow Conference
1958	Khrushchev met Mao in Beijing
1961	Soviet advisers withdrawn from PRC
1962	Sino-Indian War Cuban Missile Crisis
1963	Mao attacked Soviet policy of coexistence with the West
1963–75	Vietnam War
1964	China produces its own atom bomb Khrushchev dismissed in USSR
1967	China produces its own hydrogen bomb
1968	Soviet crushing of Prague spring
1969	Lowest point in Sino-Soviet relations
1971	PRC replaced Taiwan in UN
1972	Visit of US President Nixon to China

### 1 | China's International Relations under Mao

In 1917 Russia had been the first great nation to undergo a successful **Marxist revolution**; China in 1949 was the second. The PRC's triumph left it with a dual aim: to develop China into a modern nation and to lead the rest of the world towards

#### Key question

How did Mao's China see its role in the world?

Key term

**Marxist revolution**

In October 1917, the Bolshevik (Communist) Party led by Lenin, seized power in Russia.

international proletarian revolution. The pursuit of this second aim created huge questions for China:

- Was it realistic for it as an economically backward nation to attempt to play such a role?
- Would an aggressive revolutionary attitude towards the capitalist world leave China friendless and unable to obtain essential resources?
- Where did the young PRC stand in the world Communist hierarchy? Was it merely to follow the Soviet Union or did it have an equal right to interpret Marxism for itself?

There was a sense in which it was the last of these questions that presented the greatest difficulty. The PRC was formed in 1949 just after the Cold War had begun to take shape. This meant that as a Communist state it would naturally line up with the USSR against the USA and the capitalist world. But while it was certainly the case that at the beginning the PRC 'leaned to one side', Mao's term for its alliance with the Soviet Union, things were never as simple as that. Mao and the Soviet leaders as people, and the PRC and the USSR as nations, had a strained relationship.

**Key question**

What factors explain the tensions between the PRC and the USSR?

**2 | Mao's China and the Soviet Union**

Deep differences between the Soviet Union and the PRC were present from the beginning. They were sometimes submerged, but they were never far below the surface. After 1949 there were occasional periods of apparent harmony when the two Communist powers seemed to represent a solid front towards the West, but the prevailing relationship was one of suspicion, which at times degenerated into warlike hostility.

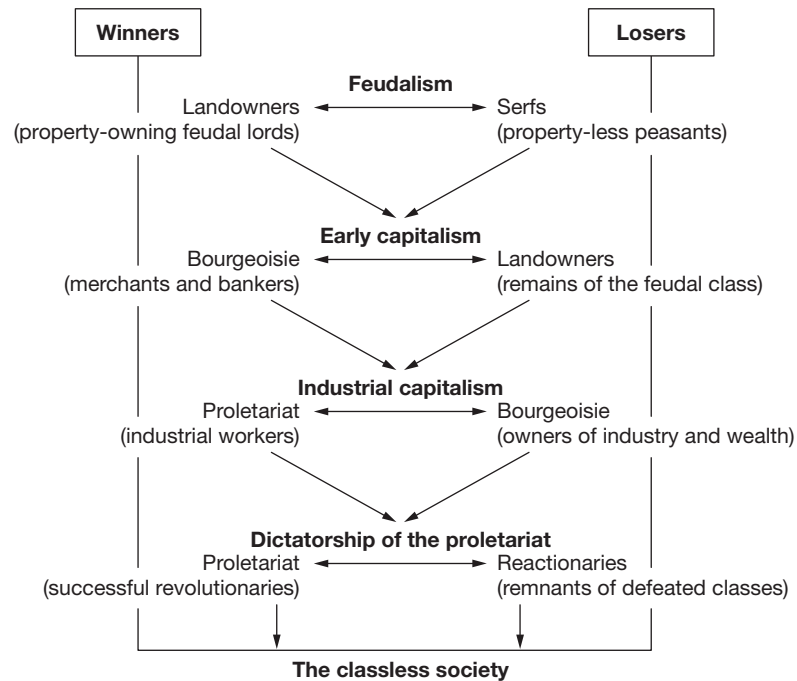
**Border disputes**

The reasons for the strains between the PRC and the USSR went back well before 1949. The 7000-km border between China and Russia had made the two neighbours very wary of each other in tsarist times. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 did nothing to alter this. In 1919, Lenin's Bolshevik government seized Outer Mongolia, a province which the Chinese had traditionally regarded as their own. At the end of the Pacific War in 1945, Manchuria, which had been occupied by the Japanese, was returned to China, but only after the withdrawing Soviet forces had stripped the region of its industrial resources, depriving China of over \$2 billion worth of plant and machinery. Even after the PRC had been established in 1949, border disputes continued to sour Sino-Soviet relations for decades. It was an aspect of their mutual jealousy as great powers.



A map showing the Sino-Soviet border.

**Figure 6.1** A visual representation of the Marxist notion of the workings of the dialectic. How does the diagram help to explain why Chinese and Soviet Communists disagreed over their interpretation of revolution?



### Ideological differences

It has to be stressed that the Chinese Communists did not regard Marxism simply as a political movement. For Mao, Marxism was a means by which the regeneration of China as a great nation was to be achieved. The Marxist dialectic (see Figure 6.1) provided a programme for achieving revolution in China, but it was vital that the Chinese revolutionaries interpret that programme in their own terms. Mao had a crude peasant expression for this: 'the Chinese', he said, 'must plant their backsides on the soil of China'. His approach was essentially nationalist; he insisted that Communism in China must take its character from the Chinese situation. Revolutionaries outside China could not dictate to the Chinese how they should conduct themselves:

China's revolutionary war is waged in the specific environment of China and so it has its own specific circumstances and nature ... Some people say that it is enough merely to study the experience of revolutionary war in Russia. However, although we must value Soviet experience ... we must value even more the experience of China's revolutionary war, because there are many factors specific to the Chinese revolution.

Such a **Sino-centric** view of Marxism and revolution was bound to cause friction between Communist China and the Soviet Union, which, as the country of Lenin and Stalin, regarded itself as the only true interpreter of the **Communist faith**. These differences of attitude within the international Communist movement were often as fierce as the conflict between Communism and its

#### Key terms

##### **Sino-centric**

Having Chinese interests at the centre of things with all other considerations secondary.

##### **Communist faith**

The intensity with which Communists held their beliefs in revolution may be legitimately compared to the conviction that inspires the followers of a dogmatic religion.

political enemies. Sino-Soviet relations after 1949 often descended into a battle over who represented true Communism: the Soviet Union or Maoist China.

Differences over the meaning of Marxism and how it should be applied in China had bedevilled relations between Mao and Stalin since the 1920s. Stalin had been unwilling to accept that a peasant-based movement such as Mao was leading could be genuinely revolutionary. For him, the Marxist rules of the dialectic dictated that true proletarian revolution had to be urban based.

Stalin's insistence on this point convinced Mao that what the Soviet leader wanted was a disunited and divided China which would leave the USSR as the dominant force in Asia. This was why Mao found it hard to accept the USSR, despite its revolutionary pedigree, as the true voice of international Marxism. He came increasingly to believe that what motivated the Soviet Union was not Communism, but national self-interest. He later reflected:

After the success of our revolution, Stalin feared that China might degenerate into another Yugoslavia and that I might become another **Tito**. I later went to Moscow [in 1950] and concluded the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Alliance. This was the result of a struggle. Stalin did not wish to sign the treaty; he finally signed it after 2 months of negotiations.

### Mao and Stalin: a clash of personalities

The treaty to which Mao referred was the first formal agreement between China and the USSR. Despite Stalin's earlier doubts about the ability of the CCP to survive, the establishment of the PRC in 1949 was officially welcomed by the Soviet Union. Stalin calculated that China, as a newly formed Marxist state in a hostile capitalist world, would look to the USSR, the first great Communist nation, for guidance and protection. Indeed, the US State Department referred to the Sino-Soviet alliance as 'Moscow making puppets out of the Chinese'. However, events were to show that Mao Zedong and China were far from regarding themselves as mere creatures of Stalin and the USSR.

Mao's official visit to the USSR in 1950 confirmed his doubts concerning Stalin's attitude. Mao was offended by the superior air adopted by the Russians and by Stalin's offhand treatment of the Chinese delegation. Mao complained that he had been dumped in a poor-quality villa outside Moscow with a wonky table-tennis table as the sole means of recreation. His hosts had made no arrangements to entertain him beyond the formal round of official meetings and banquets. His only other outing was to the Bolshoi Theatre.

Mao, who was on his first visit abroad, felt slighted. Biographers suggest that the two leaders disliked each other as people and this may explain why Stalin was reluctant to meet Mao, except formally. Their personalities conflicted because they were so similar in type. Once Mao had negotiated the treaty,

**Josip Broz Tito**  
(1914–90)  
Communist leader of Yugoslavia who defied Stalin by keeping his country independent of the Soviet-dominated eastern bloc.

Key figure

**Key question**  
What lay at the root of the mutual suspicion between Mao and Stalin?

Mao visited Moscow:  
1950

Key date

which was the sole purpose of his visit, he left the USSR as quickly as possible.

### Key question

What did the PRC gain from the treaty?

Key dates

Signing of Sino-Soviet Treaty: 1950

Death of Stalin: 1953

## The Sino-Soviet Treaty 1950

It soon became apparent that Mao had good reason for distrusting Stalin. The Chinese realised soon after the 1950 treaty had been signed that the Soviet Union was intent on exploiting the agreement in its own favour. This was in spite of Mao's initial belief that the hard-won treaty had obliged the USSR to provide China with expertise and aid at low cost. Its wording, which spoke of 'friendship and equality' and 'economic and cultural co-operation', had appeared to promise much. But Stalin had struck a hard bargain. Under the terms of the treaty:

- the \$300 million Soviet advance was a loan not a gift; the PRC had to undertake to repay the full amount plus interest
- the upkeep of the 10,000 Soviet economic and military advisers who went to China had to be paid for fully by China
- China had to give the bulk of its bullion reserves to the Soviet Union.

Key figure

**Nikita Khrushchev**  
(1894–1971)

Emerging from the power struggle that followed Stalin's death to become the Soviet leader between 1956 and 1964.

**Nikita Khrushchev**, a later Soviet leader, admitted that the treaty had been 'an insult to the Chinese people. For centuries the French, English and Americans had been exploiting China, and now the Soviet Union was moving in.'

Mao's realisation that China had been exploited put the barely formed Sino-Soviet partnership under great stress. The tension was felt as early as the Korean War which began in 1950 (see page 28). Mao remarked that China had to pay 'down to the last rifle and bullet' for the Soviet *matériel* it received during that conflict. There were also suggestions that Stalin deliberately prevented an early armistice being reached in Korea in order to exhaust the Chinese. It was certainly the case that almost immediately after Stalin's death in 1953 Zhou Enlai was able to negotiate a truce.

### Key question

Why did Mao, in spite of his deep reservations about Stalin's motives, allow Soviet influence to impose itself on China?

## The PRC's dependence on the Soviet Union

The Soviet planners and engineers who came to the PRC in its early years left a marked imprint on China's physical appearance. Over 200 construction projects were undertaken by the USSR in China during the 1950s. New public buildings and squares bore the Soviet stamp. In Beijing many of China's most delicate and antique structures were razed to be replaced by Soviet-style functional eyesores, which most Chinese loathed as an aesthetic affront. But, as Mao saw it, this was the price that had to be paid for the material aid that China needed from the USSR. Soviet scientific techniques were also adopted in China.

Even when these, in contrast to Western methods, were dated and cumbersome they were deemed to be superior since they represented 'socialist science'. One tragic example of the folly in allowing ideology to have precedence over fact was the disastrous effect of China's commitment to the pseudo-science of

Lysenkoism during the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s (see page 57).

The USSR's military assistance was also judged to be necessary, at least for the time being. Despite the great feats of the PLA, the hard fact was that China's international isolation meant that it could not easily obtain resources and expertise from anywhere other than the Soviet Union. This remained the situation until the 1960s when China was able to mount its own independent nuclear-research programme (see page 147).

### China and de-Stalinisation

Since it had principally been Stalin's uncompromising manner that had caused disharmony between Moscow and Beijing, it was reasonable to expect that after the Soviet leader's death in 1953 relations would ease. This appeared to happen at first; something of a Sino-Soviet honeymoon period intervened in the mid-1950s. The new Soviet leaders were willing to provide China with further loans and technology. But even as better relations developed, events undermined the possibility of a genuine partnership.

← **Key question**  
Why was Mao disturbed by the Soviet policy of de-Stalinisation?

Beginning of de-Stalinisation: 1956

Key date

### Mao's worries over the 'cult of personality'

In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev staggered the USSR and the Communist world by launching a detailed attack on Stalin for his 'crimes against the party'. A particular charge that rang alarm bells in China was that Stalin had put himself above the party by engaging in a 'cult of personality' (see page 37). While Mao had had profound differences with Stalin, he was deeply disturbed by the ferocity of this assault upon Stalin's record. He read the denunciation of the cult of personality as an intended criticism of his own style of leadership in China.

### Mao's concerns over the Communist bloc

Mao was also disturbed by the political developments that occurred in the Communist (Eastern) bloc in the wake of the de-Stalinisation programme. Greater freedom appeared to be offered to the **Soviet satellites** to criticise their Communist governments and to question their subordination to the USSR. This had not been Khrushchev's intention, as he was quick to demonstrate by ordering the suppression of the anti-Soviet rising in Hungary in November 1956. But for Mao, the Hungarian rising and those that had occurred in Poland and East Germany were the direct result of the Soviet Union's relaxation of its ideological grip. Mao was angered by the failure of the post-Stalin leadership to control what he regarded as the reactionary forces within the Communist bloc.

← **Soviet satellites**  
The various countries that had fallen under Soviet control between 1945 and 1948.

Key term

### Mao's concerns over Soviet revisionism and *détente*

Mao was equally offended by the softening of the Soviet attitude towards the West. Moscow now seemed to accept that there were alternative ways of achieving revolution in the modern world other than by armed struggle. Khrushchev had by the late 1950s

← **Key question**  
Why was Mao opposed to the Soviet Union's pursuit of better relations with the West?

**Key term**  
**Superpowers**  
 The description given to nations which possess advanced nuclear weapons.

concluded that in a world of nuclear **superpowers** the Marxist–Leninist notion of a final violent conflict between the international proletariat and the forces of capitalism was no longer acceptable. He said that had comrade Lenin lived in a nuclear age he would have adjusted his views.

This was rejected by Mao as heresy. He believed that the final struggle was unavoidable and that it was the duty of all revolutionaries not only to prepare for it but also to hasten its coming. For Mao, Khrushchev's policy of de-Stalinisation was clear evidence that Soviet Communism had taken the revisionist path.

**Key question**  
 What deep differences between China and the USSR were revealed during Mao's visit?

### Mao's second visit to the USSR 1957

Disturbed by the murmurings in the Marxist camp, Khrushchev in 1957 convened a conference in Moscow of the world's Communist parties. His broad aim was to repair the differences between the USSR and the other Marxist countries. His particular hope was that he could lay Stalin's ghost by bringing Tito and Yugoslavia back into the Soviet fold. However, at the last moment Tito declined to attend. This disappointed Mao, who had agreed to revisit the Soviet Union only because he thought Tito would be there. Nevertheless, since the arrangements were too advanced to cancel, Mao swallowed his irritation and went to Moscow.

**Key date**  
 Mao attended Moscow Conference: 1957

At the meeting, Mao was still prepared to recognise the USSR's unique place in Communist history. He also approved a Sino-Soviet declaration that expressed China's readiness to co-operate. But at the same time Mao let it be known that he regarded Moscow's approach to the West as too accommodating. He called on the Soviet Union to abandon revisionism and return to the true Marxist–Leninist path. Rather than making concessions to capitalism, it was the Soviet Union's revolutionary duty to fight the class war by fully supporting the liberation movements world-wide. This could not be done by extending peaceful overtures to class enemies: the imperialist Western nations.

### Mao's suspicions towards the Soviet Union

What prompted Mao's words was his suspicion that the Soviet Union was following a policy of *détente* with the West in order to leave China internationally isolated. Mao's chief spokesman at the Moscow meeting was Deng Xiaoping, who excelled himself in putting over the Chinese version of international revolution. Deng argued powerfully that the proletarian world revolution was achievable only through armed struggle; capitalism had to be overcome by force. In a tense series of exchanges he got the better of the leading Soviet political theorist, Mikhail Suslov, and won the admiration, if not the open support, of many of the other delegates. The Soviet hosts were embarrassed and angered by Deng's performance.



### Mao and Khrushchev

Despite Mao's strong words about the Soviet Union, Khrushchev made another attempt to improve relations with the PRC. In 1958, following the mishandling by Pavel Yudin, the Soviet Ambassador in China, of negotiations regarding a joint Sino-Soviet naval programme, Khrushchev flew to Beijing to meet Mao again. He came to assure Mao that Yudin had given the wrong impression by suggesting that China's navy must be brought under Soviet control.

← **Key question**  
Why did Mao get on no better with Khrushchev than he had with Stalin?

Khrushchev met Mao in Beijing: 1958

Key date

### Khrushchev humiliated

Mao, however, was not disposed to listen. In a tit-for-tat for the poor treatment he had endured during his visits to Moscow, Mao deliberately set out to make Khrushchev uncomfortable. He arranged for the Soviet delegation to be put up at a hotel without air-conditioning; the Russians sweltered in Beijing's fierce summer heat and were plagued by mosquitoes.

In one notorious incident Mao insisted that a round of talks take place in his private pool. Mao was a regular swimmer; Khrushchev hated the water. Nonetheless, to humour his host Khrushchev agreed. In a pair of baggy shorts and squeezed into a barely-buoyant rubber ring, the rotund Soviet leader desperately floundered and splashed while interpreters raced round the pool's edge trying to make sense of his gurgled replies to Mao's questions. The talks were not a success.



Mao and Khrushchev together in China in 1958. Why might their happy smiles towards each other be regarded as misleading?

Key term

**Chauvinism**

Exaggerated and aggressive belief in the value of one's own nation.

**Key question**

How did the question of Taiwan further divide the PRC and the Soviet Union?

Key terms

**Trotskyists**

Followers of Stalin's great rival, Lev Trotsky, who believed in the necessity of world revolution at any price.

**Albania**

Run by an oppressive neo-Stalinist regime, it was the only Communist state in Europe to recognise China rather than the Soviet Union as the leader of the international revolutionary movement.

**Key question**

How did Mao exploit the Albanian issue to hit back at the Soviet Union?

**PRC accuses USSR of 'chauvinism'**

The failure of the Moscow talks was not simply the result of the swimming-pool farce. Deng Xiaoping was again let loose to savage the Russian delegation as he had in Moscow. He attacked the USSR for its 'great nation, great party **chauvinism**', in acting as if it was the only true interpreter of Marxist theory. Deng repeated Mao's accusation that the technical advisers sent to China by Moscow were in fact Soviet spies. He charged the Soviet Union with betraying the international Communist movement. It has been suggested that it was Mao's remembrance of Deng Xiaoping's brilliant onslaught on the USSR that saved Deng from harsher treatment at the time of his disgrace in the Cultural Revolution in 1966 (see page 84).

**The Taiwan issue**

In 1958 the simmering Taiwan issue provided another test of the genuineness of Sino-Soviet sympathies. Without consulting Moscow, Mao ordered Chinese forces to make ready for full-scale assault on the Nationalist-held island (see page 7). The USA responded by preparing for war with mainland China. In the event, Mao held back from a direct attack on Taiwan. It is doubtful that Mao really intended to attack, but the reason he gave for not doing so was that the USSR had declined to offer China even moral support.

Khrushchev countered by saying that he was unwilling to put the USSR at risk by recklessly 'testing the stability of the capitalist system'. He denounced Mao and the Chinese as '**Trotskyists**' who had lost all sense of political reality. The resulting deterioration in relations led the Soviet Union to withdraw its economic advisers from China and to cancel its commercial contracts there.

**Soviet reaction to China's Great Leap Forward**

Sino-Soviet relations were not helped by Moscow's response to China's Great Leap Forward. In 1959, Mao was enraged by the news that the Soviet Union had dismissed his attempt to revolutionise the Chinese economy as a total blunder. He was particularly angered by rumours that one of his own chiefs-of-staff, Marshal Peng Dehuai, had passed on to Moscow details of the widespread starvation that the Great Leap Forward had caused (see page 62).

**Sino-Soviet rivalry over Albania**

China had condemned de-Stalinisation for the encouragement it had given to reaction and counter-revolution in the Eastern-bloc countries. Yet, when the Chinese leaders saw the chance to embarrass the Soviet Union by supporting the socialist countries hostile to the USSR, they took it. In retaliation for what Mao saw as the Soviet Union's attempt to undermine China's standing among the Communist nations, the PRC gave support to those countries which defied the USSR. An especially clear example was **Albania**.

In 1961, the Soviet Union, angered by the Albanian government's refusal to accept dictation from Moscow, withdrew its financial aid. The PRC immediately stepped in to supply Albania with money and technical assistance. It did not matter that the country was only a minor player on the socialist stage. It was enough for the Chinese that it was on bad terms with the USSR.

### China's walkout from the 1961 Moscow Conference

It was the Albanian question that brought matters to a head and led to the severing of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the PRC. The occasion was Zhou Enlai's walkout from the 1961 Moscow Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, to which China had been invited as an observer. Khrushchev's speech at the congress, abusing the Albanian Communist leaders for their backward Stalinist ways, was interpreted by the Chinese as a deliberately offensive attack on themselves. Having expected such an onslaught Zhou and the Chinese delegation quit the hall in accordance with a rehearsed plan. This dramatic gesture was the climax to a decade of Sino-Soviet recrimination.

### Sino-Soviet name calling

The collapse of diplomatic relations encouraged the Soviet and Chinese leaders to be still more offensive in their personal references to each other. Khrushchev abused Mao as an 'Asian Hitler' and 'a living corpse'. Mao responded by dismissing his Russian adversary as 'a redundant old boot' that ought to be thrown into a corner.

### Border disputes

One result of this flurry of insults was the sharpening of the local disputes between the USSR and China along their common border. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s there were frequent and sometimes violent confrontations. During this period, the USSR committed nearly 50 Red Army divisions to defend its Asian frontiers. China angrily asserted that the refusal of the USSR to return the Chinese territories that Russia had acquired by the 'unequal treaties' of the nineteenth century made it as guilty of imperialism as the original tsarist land grabbers. Beijing's news agency spoke of the 'anti-Chinese atrocities of the new tsars'.

### The Sino-India War 1962

The Chinese were especially incensed by the USSR's attitude during the **Sino-Indian War** that broke out in 1962. The Soviet Union was formally neutral, but it provided India with fighter-planes and its moral support was all on India's side. Mao regarded the offer by Kosygin, the USSR's foreign minister, to act as mediator between the PRC and India as hypocrisy. He rejected it as yet another attempt by the Soviet Union to undermine China's international standing.

Soviet advisers  
withdrawn from PRC:  
1961  
Sino-Indian War: 1962

Key dates

### Sino-Indian War

In 1962 a long-running territorial dispute, compounded by India's granting sanctuary to the Dalai Lama, led to an outbreak of fighting between Indian and Chinese troops on the Tibetan border.

Key term

**Key question**

What was Mao's view of Soviet actions over Cuba?

Key dates

Cuban Missile Crisis: 1962  
Mao attacked Soviet policy of coexistence with the West: 1963

**The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962**

A dramatic Cold War episode in 1962 provided China with the opportunity to ridicule the Soviet Union's claim to the leadership of world revolution. In October of that year the USSR exploited its influence over **Communist Cuba** to install rockets and nuclear warheads on the island. Since Cuba stood only 150 km off the coast of the USA, President Kennedy demanded the withdrawal of the weapons.

After a tense stand-off, Khrushchev complied. The two superpowers then made a compromise settlement in which the USSR agreed to withdraw all its weapons and installations in Cuba in return for the USA's promise never to invade the island and to withdraw its own nuclear weapons from Turkey.

China scorned Moscow for its original 'adventurism' in siting detectable nuclear warheads in Cuba and for its subsequent 'capitulationism' in abjectly bowing to the US threat to retaliate. Was this, China asked contemptuously, the way to inspire the world's struggling masses in their fight against American imperialism?

**Key question**

How did the PRC and the USSR differ over the issue of coexistence with the non-Communist world?

Key terms

**Communist Cuba**

In 1959 Communist guerrilla forces led by Fidel Castro had taken power in Cuba.

**Coexistence**

A willingness among nations with opposed ideologies to live and let live.

**Sino-Soviet disagreement over coexistence with the West**

The broad response in the West to the ending of the Cuban Missile Crisis was to congratulate both Kennedy and Khrushchev for their statesmanship in drawing back from the brink of war. Khrushchev was praised for putting his policy of **coexistence** into practical effect.

That was not how the Chinese saw it. For them, coexistence was a betrayal of the revolution. Instead of achieving peace, the policy simply played into the hands of the imperialist powers by settling issues on their terms. Genuine coexistence could exist only between equal nations. But, in Marxist theory, all pre-revolutionary states were in subjection to the exploiting capitalist power. In a formal statement in 1963, Chinese Communists explained the fallacy of coexistence and why they would not engage in it:

Only after victory in the revolution is it possible and necessary for the proletariat to pursue the policy of peaceful coexistence. As for oppressed peoples and nations, their task is to strive for their own liberation and overthrow the rule of imperialism and its lackeys.

They should not practise peaceful coexistence with the imperialists and their lackeys, nor is it possible for them to do so. It is therefore wrong to apply peaceful coexistence to the relations between oppressed and oppressor classes and between oppressed and oppressor nations.

The Soviet reply was to accuse the Chinese of total irresponsibility. It was arrogant and dangerous of them to claim to speak for the international working class: 'We might ask the Chinese: What right have you to decide for us questions involving our very existence and our class struggle? We too want socialism, but we want to win it through the class struggle, not by unleashing a world thermonuclear war.'

At the time of his fall from power in the USSR in 1964, Khrushchev was still trying to convince the rest of the Marxist world that the Maoist brand of Communism was heretical. His policy of isolating China was continued by the collective leadership that superseded him. In the fierce Sino-Soviet propaganda war each side accused the other of a long list of crimes against Communism. The USSR resurrected the spectre of the 'yellow peril'. The Cultural Revolution that began in 1966 was cited as an example of China's raging fanaticism, a fanaticism that threatened to destroy the world.

### Yellow peril

A term first used in the nineteenth century to suggest that China's vast population was preparing to spread out of Asia to swamp Europe, with Russia as the first victim.

Key term

### Mao's concept of continuing revolution

Mao Zedong responded to the Soviet insults by describing the USSR's leaders as the corrupters of true Communism. He condemned their reforms of the Soviet economy as a return to capitalism and their moves towards coexistence as collusion with the imperialist West. Mao called on Communists in all other countries to reject the USSR's lead and develop their own form of true Marxism along Chinese lines.

The vital concept for Mao was that of 'continuing revolution' (see page 82). Fierce ideological battles over this notion had been fought earlier within the Soviet Union. Trotsky, Stalin's arch opponent in the 1920s and 1930s, had made 'continuing' or 'permanent' revolution the essence of Marxism–Leninism. For Trotsky, revolution was not an event, but a continuing process that guaranteed the ultimate victory of the international proletariat. Revolutions which regarded themselves as complete, or that were confined to individual countries, would cease to be revolutions and would fall prey to reaction. Mao Zedong's own definition of continuing revolution corresponded to Trotsky's:

Our revolutions come one after another. Starting from the seizure of power in the whole country in 1949, there followed in quick succession the anti-feudal land reform, the agricultural co-operativisation, and the socialist reconstruction of private industries, commerce, and handicrafts. Our revolutions are like battles. After a victory, we must at once put forward a new task. In this way, cadres and the masses will forever be filled with revolutionary fervour.

### Key question

How did Mao interpret China's revolutionary role?

### Rivalry over the leadership of international Communism

The dispute between the USSR and China over the meaning of revolution raised the demanding question as to which nation was the real leader of the Communist world. Was it the USSR, direct heir of the great 1917 revolution, or Mao's China, whose peasant-based revolution in 1949 offered an inspiring model for all oppressed peoples?

In strict Marxist theory, true proletarian revolution could occur only in an urban, industrial society. According to Soviet political scientists, China, being a preponderantly rural, peasant society, could not be a fully developed Communist state. They asserted

that Mao had distorted Marxism to make it fit the Chinese context. The CCP's theorists retorted that the Soviet Union was betraying the cause of world revolution by pursuing a suicidal policy of *détente* with the West.

### Key question

Why were the Soviet Union and China so divided over the question of nuclear weapons?

### Key terms

#### Test Ban Treaty

Signed in 1963 between the USSR and the Western nuclear powers, in which the parties pledged to end their atmospheric testing of atomic weapons.

#### Paper tigers

One of Mao's favourite expressions; anything or anyone whose power, he believed, was more apparent than real.

### Key dates

China produces its own atom bomb: 1964

China produces its own hydrogen bomb: 1967

## The nuclear issue

The controversy over whether coexistence was compatible with Marxism–Leninism was at its fiercest in the Sino-Soviet dispute over the **Test Ban Treaty** of 1963. Mao dismissed the treaty as another betrayal by the USSR of its revolutionary role. Instead of confronting imperialism, it was collaborating with it: 'Soviet revisionists are uniting with the running dogs of capitalism'.

Khrushchev's rejoinder was that, rather than seek peace, the Chinese wished to see East and West destroy themselves in nuclear war, leaving China free to dominate what was left of the world. What gave particular irony to Khrushchev's charge was that China was only a year away from exploding its own atomic bomb.

Ever since the early 1950s Mao Zedong had been unhappy with the attitude of Stalin and successive Soviet leaders towards the nuclear question. Moscow's position was that if China wanted Soviet assistance in its nuclear programme it must give the USSR a controlling hand in the PRC's defence policy. This was too much for Mao. The Soviet demand redoubled his determination to make China a superpower by achieving nuclear status unaided.

In 1959 a particularly low point in Sino-Soviet relations was reached when the USSR decided to withdraw its scientists from the PRC. Nonetheless, China, undeterred, pressed on with its own research programme. Chinese nuclear physicists painstakingly pieced together the records that the Soviet advisers had shredded before their hurried departure.

Such efforts brought their reward. In 1964, to great rejoicing with massed crowds singing 'The East is Red' in Mao's honour, Communist China detonated its first atomic device. Three years later it became a superpower when it produced its first hydrogen bomb. China's remarkable feat allowed it to mock the USSR's refusal to assist. The first Chinese bomb was codenamed 59/6, a reference to the year and month in which the Soviet technicians had withdrawn from China. Mao recorded gloatingly:

Modern weapons, guided missiles, and atom bombs were made very quickly, and we produced a hydrogen bomb in only 2 years and 8 months. Our development has been faster than that of America, Britain and France. We are now in fourth place in the world. Guided missiles and atom bombs are great achievements. This is the result of Khrushchev's 'help'. By withdrawing the experts he forced us to take our own road. We should give him a big medal.

## Mao's willingness to contemplate nuclear war

China's emergence as a superpower frightened the world. China seemed not to have the same awesome fear of nuclear war that the West and the Soviet Union had. Mao referred to atomic weapons as '**paper tigers**'. He told Khrushchev at one of their

meetings that despite the awesome destructiveness of atomic weapons, the PRC was quite willing to contemplate nuclear war with its enemies. To Khrushchev's amazement, Mao casually informed him that China's population was so big that it would soon make up any losses it suffered, no matter how great the disaster.

This was in keeping with an earlier CCP statement, which indicated China's belief that it could successfully survive a nuclear war, 'On the debris of a dead imperialism, the victorious [Chinese] people would create very swiftly a civilisation thousands of times higher than the capitalist system and a truly beautiful future for themselves.' Mao believed that China's emergence as a superpower and its refusal to be frightened of paper tigers had confirmed its position as the true champion of the oppressed peoples of the world:

The success of China's hydrogen bomb test has further broken the nuclear monopoly of United States imperialism and Soviet revisionism and dealt a telling blow at their policy of nuclear blackmail. It is a very great encouragement to the revolutionary people of the whole world.

### Mao and Brezhnev

The dismissal in 1964 of Nikita Khrushchev as Soviet leader and his replacement in the late 1960s by Leonid Brezhnev did little to improve Sino-Soviet relations. Brezhnev, who was to remain at the Soviet helm until 1982, was a Stalinist hardliner in foreign policy and is best remembered for the attitude that bears his name, the '**Brezhnev doctrine**'. In 1968, in an example of this doctrine in practice, Soviet tanks rolled into the Czechoslovak capital to suppress the '**Prague spring**'.

While Mao had no time for counter-revolution in Communist states he was unwilling to accept the right of the USSR, by his reckoning itself a socialist **apostate**, to impose Soviet authority on the members of the Marxist camp. From the outset, therefore, it was unlikely that Mao would have any better relations with Brezhnev than he had had with Stalin and Khrushchev – and so it proved.

### Sino-Soviet confrontation 1969

In 1969 Brezhnev called an international Communist Conference in Moscow with the aim of outlawing China. However, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in the previous year had weakened the USSR's moral leadership and the conference was largely a failure from Brezhnev's perspective; he did not get the outright, unanimous condemnation of China that he had wanted.

The fact was that international Communism had seriously fragmented. The year 1969 marked the **nadir** in the relations of the two Communist superpowers. Serious border incidents threatened to turn into full-scale war. In an extraordinary development the PRC and the Soviet Union repositioned their nuclear-armed rockets so that they now faced inwards towards

#### Brezhnev doctrine

The demand that all Communist states toe the Soviet line. If they failed to do so they must be disciplined by the other Marxist states acting as 'a socialist community' under the leadership of the USSR.

#### Prague spring

The attempt of the Czech Communist government in 1968 to assert its independence of Soviet control.

#### Key question

What effect did the emergence of Brezhnev as Soviet leader have on the USSR's relations with China?

#### Apostate

A person, group or nation that abandons its original political or religious beliefs.

#### Nadir

The lowest point.

Key terms

Key terms

Key term

**Social fascism**

First used by Stalin to denote those Communists and socialists who were willing to compromise with their political enemies.

each other rather than outwards towards their Western enemies. This may have been bluff and counter-bluff, but there was no doubting that Sino-Soviet relations had reached their lowest point. This was powerfully expressed in Lin Biao's 1969 denunciation of Brezhnev and the Soviet 'revisionists':

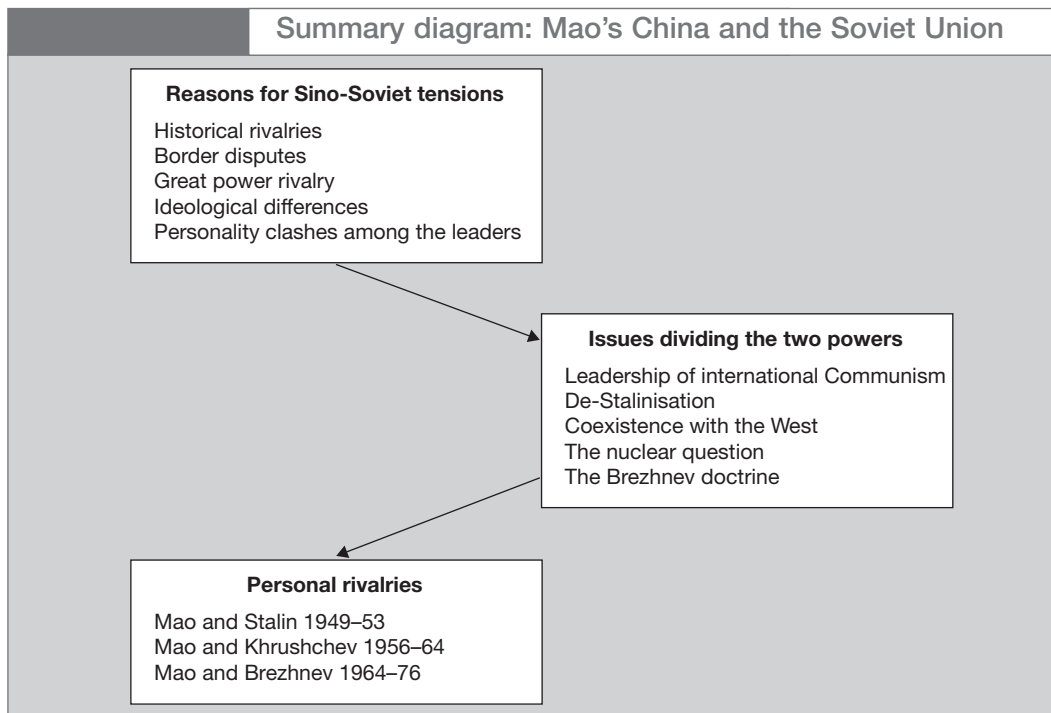
Since Brezhnev came to power, the Soviet revisionist renegade clique has been practising **social fascism** more frantically than ever. In order to justify its aggression and plunder, the Soviet revisionist renegade clique trumpets the so-called theory of 'international dictatorship' and the theory of 'socialist community'. What does all this stuff mean? It means they will exercise 'international dictatorship' over you – dictatorship over the people of other countries, in order to form the 'socialist community' ruled by the new czar.

Key question

What approach did Mao's successors adopt towards the Soviet Union?

**The impact of Mao's death on Sino-Soviet relations**

Mao's death in 1976, which was soon followed by the overthrow of the fanatically anti-Soviet Gang of Four, effectively removed the immediate danger of Sino-Soviet nuclear confrontation. Despite the previous difficulties, the new leaders of the PRC, Deng Xiaoping in particular, adopted a much more tolerant line towards both the USSR and the West. Deng adopted Zhou Enlai's accommodating style as an international statesman. He deliberately toned down the aggressive anti-Soviet approach that he had shown while serving under Mao. The possibility of nuclear war between China and either the USA or the USSR became increasingly remote.





### 3 | The PRC and the United States

For a generation after 1949, relations between the PRC and the United States were tense and bitter. The specific reasons are not hard to find:

- American anger at the fall of China to Mao's Communists in 1949
- the USA's protection of Taiwan
- the USA's refusal to grant diplomatic recognition to the PRC
- conflict in Korea
- US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) involvement in Tibet
- development of Chinese atomic weapons in the 1960s
- Mao's China was not directly involved in the **Vietnam War**, but it gave moral and diplomatic support to the USA's enemies
- the underlying ideological divide between the capitalist and Marxist systems they each represented.

From 1950 the PRC had mounted a continuous propaganda attack on 'American imperialism' which included the ritual daily chanting by China's schoolchildren of, 'Death to the American imperialists and all their running dogs'. The campaign reached new levels of intensity during the Cultural Revolution and the Vietnam War into which the USA was drawn between 1963 and 1975.

#### Mao's Third Line

Although official Chinese Communist propaganda made great play of Mao Zedong's mockery of the USA and its nuclear weapons as 'paper tigers', Mao's public bravado belied his private disquiet. From the time of the Korean War onwards he was convinced that the USA was planning a retaliatory attack on China.

There was a remarkable similarity between Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong in this regard. They shared an abiding fear that their respective countries were in constant danger of a strike against them by Western forces. Mao calculated, as Stalin had done earlier in the USSR, that when the West was ready it would move to destroy Communism. His anxieties led him to devise a defensive strategy for China, known as the 'Third Line'. This was a plan for a vast network of fortifications, installed above and below ground, so strongly built as to be capable of withstanding the heaviest bombardment.

#### Deng Xiaoping's role

To organise this great defensive system Mao turned to Deng Xiaoping, who undertook the task with his customary dedication. Deng planned to use the existing bases, which had been created by the GMD during the war against Japan, to establish a series of industrial and military settlements that would be defensible against US air strikes, including atomic bombing.

← **Key question**  
What were the roots of Sino-American hostility?

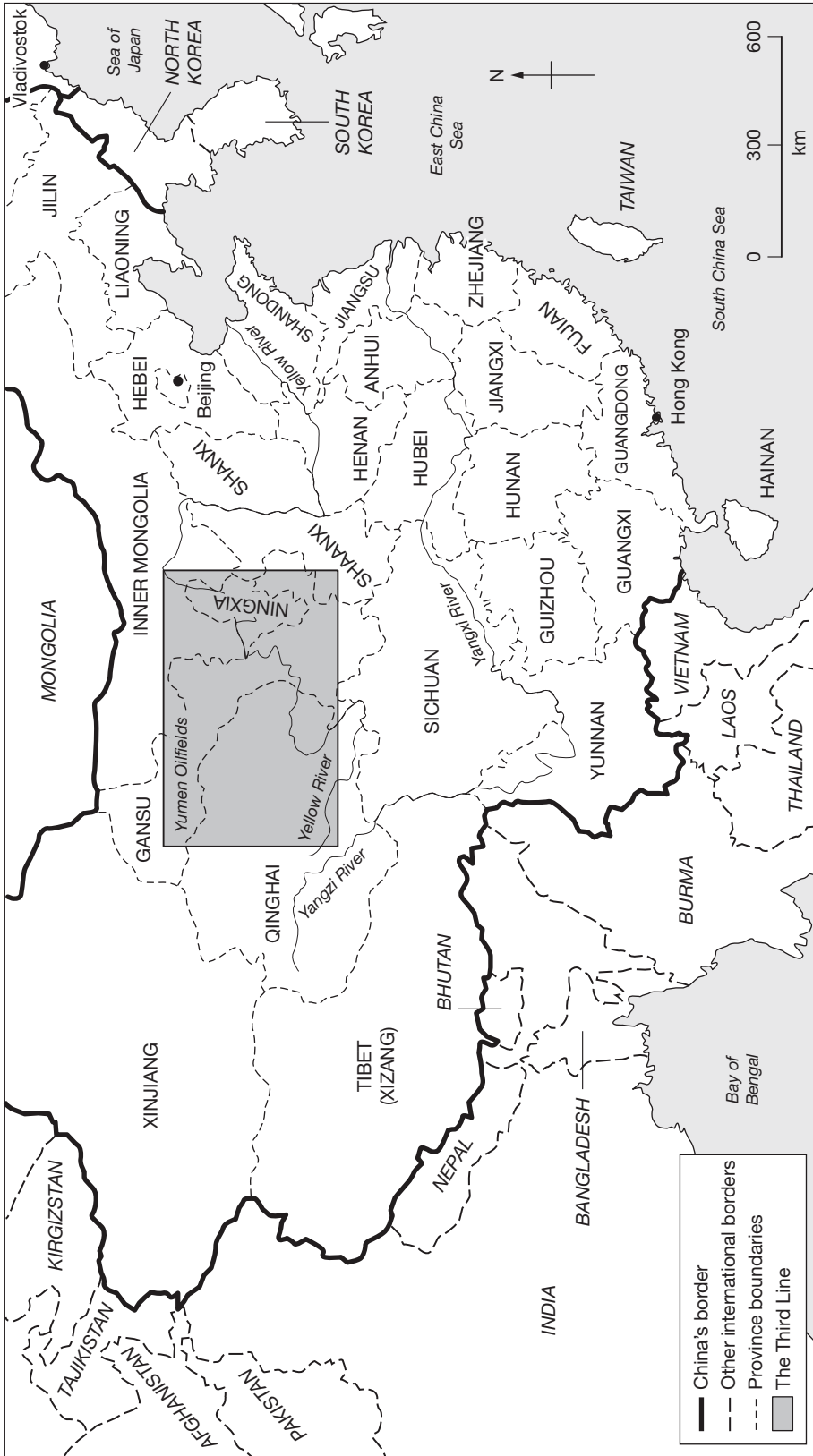
Vietnam War:  
1963–75

Key date

**Vietnam War**  
Between 1963 and 1975, the USA fought unsuccessfully to prevent South Vietnam being taken over by the Communists of North Vietnam.

Key term

← **Key question**  
What anxieties led Mao to construct the Third Line?



Map of China showing the Third Line. How is the particular location of the Third Line to be explained?

### Reasons for the particular siting of the Third Line

The Third Line was to be located in the remoter regions of central China into which, in the event of an American attack, the population and industries of the vulnerable eastern and southern provinces could be withdrawn. Deng aimed to overcome the remoteness of the designated areas by creating a communication network capable of sustaining the projected military–industrial complex. As planned, the schemes entailed a massive relocation of Chinese industry and labour. Although the Third Line was never fully completed, the many constructions that were finished became a model for the large-scale industrial projects which were later to provide the basis of Mao's economic strategy for China.

### The parting of the bamboo curtain

Mao's fears that had led to the creation of the Third Line hardly suggested that there was any likelihood of an easing of Sino-American rivalry. Yet this is what began to happen in the early 1970s. A major factor was the USA's reversal of its position on Chinese representation in the United Nations (UN); in 1971 it formally recognised Red China's right to replace Taiwan in the UN.

This important diplomatic gesture encouraged the PRC to soften its approach to the USA. While Mao was alive the fear that he had bred into the Chinese people of an American military attack would never entirely disappear, but following the USA's formal recognition of the PRC it was suspended sufficiently to allow talks to begin in 1971.

### Mao's aim of undermining the USSR

It has to be stressed that China's willingness to improve its relations with the USA had a deeper purpose than merely a desire to be on better terms with the West. The softening of China's previously hard line was part of its strategy to undermine the Soviet Union. The Chinese particularly resented the Soviet policies of *détente* and coexistence. They saw this attempt to draw closer to the Western powers as a Soviet tactic to leave China internationally isolated. The PRC decided to outplay the USSR at its own game by achieving a Sino-American *détente*. Given the Cold War tensions, the USA was equally eager to see the USSR embarrassed in this way.

### The role of Zhou Enlai and Kissinger

The initial diplomacy was conducted by Zhou Enlai and **Henry Kissinger**. A gesture that caught the headlines on both sides of the Pacific was the PRC's invitation to the US table-tennis team, then touring Japan, to play in China. It was this that gave the name 'ping-pong diplomacy' to the negotiations. The talks between Zhou and Kissinger prepared the way for Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in February 1972.

**Key question**  
Why did the early 1970s see a marked improvement in the relations between the PRC and the USA?

**Bamboo curtain**  
A figurative way of describing China's hostile and suspicious attitude towards the non-Communist world; it is similar to the notion of the iron curtain.

PRC replaced Taiwan in UN: 1971  
Visit of President Nixon to China: 1972

**Henry Kissinger**  
President Nixon's special adviser on foreign affairs.

Key term

Key dates

Key figure



Photo showing Mao and Nixon shaking hands in Beijing in 1972. Why might this photograph be described as iconic?

**Key question**

Why was Nixon's visit such a major event in East-West relations?

**The significance of the Nixon visit**

That Nixon's visit took place at all made it a momentous event. For the leader of the USA, 'the number one enemy nation', to be invited to China would have been unimaginable only a few years earlier. The ailing Mao seemed to take an almost boyish delight at the thought of meeting the President of the United States, arguably the most powerful man in the world. The two men genuinely took to each other; their talks and those between their officials went very well. Overall, the visit was certainly a major diplomatic success. A joint communiqué was issued in which the two nations expressed:

- the hope that there would be continuing Sino-American contacts
- the desirability of commercial, cultural and educational exchanges
- their joint agreement to give further consideration to ways in which the previously intractable Taiwan issue could be resolved.

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Nixon's visit was more than merely symbolic. As their communiqué showed, the PRC and the USA remained guarded in their approach. But the visit had indicated that after the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution China was prepared, if not to lift the bamboo curtain, at least to part it.

The Chinese were undoubtedly assisted in this by the more understanding approach of the Americans and by their mutual readiness to do down the Soviet Union. Relations continued to improve during Mao's remaining years and beyond; they reached a high point in 1979 with the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries. Much remained to divide the two nations. But the machinery for diplomatic contact and trade had been put in place.

