

## Down the Amur, Statistically (U)

(U) In 1649 the Russian adventurer Erofei P. Khabarov set out from the Siberian village Yakutsk on an expedition down uncharted rivers flowing toward the realm of the Great Qing Dynasty. Encountering resistance from tribes subject to this Manchu/Chinese Empire, he returned for reinforcement and successfully penetrated the Amur River basin the following year. Khabarov settled in for the winter at the confluence of the Shilka and Argun Rivers after decimating the local populace. Moscow soon received what must have been its first intelligence report from the area — a report detailing vast wealth — and dispatched additional troops to secure the region.

~~(S-Moray)~~ Khabarov may not have envisioned that one day the Amur River would separate two rivals for world power and that their competition to control the river would create international tension. And while he may have valued the security of his horse-carried courier pouch, Khabarov probably gave even less consideration to the fact that one day his descendants would be victimized by [REDACTED]

(U) Sino-Soviet tensions along their border rivers — the Amur (Heilong), Argun (Erguna), and Ussuri (Wusuli) — began in earnest in the mid-1960s during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution launched by Chairman Mao. The shrill denunciations of Soviet revisionism by the young Red Guards surely offended the USSR, but the denunciations were merely concrete expressions of deepening fissures already apparent in the much-propagandized “fraternal bond.” The Soviet reaction to this was swift — no longer were the Chinese permitted to operate on the border rivers as a friendly ally.

(U) The Soviets cast aside Lenin’s argument that imperial Russia, in its own *Drang nach Osten*, had infringed upon Chinese sovereignty in the border river area, and adopted the czarist notion that the border rivers in their entirety (i.e., from bank to bank) were Soviet territorial waters. Chinese use of

the rivers was at the sufferance of Moscow. To bolster this contention they cited numerous 19th century Sino-Russian agreements, agreements denounced by Beijing (Peking) as “unequal treaties” imposed on a weak and fragmented China by imperialist powers. In truth, during their early contacts, both countries were expansionist powers trying to assert hegemony over an Amur River valley populated by many ethno-linguistic groups. Nevertheless, both sides continued the search for historical justification. The Chinese pointed to the ancient use of Chinese script in vast areas now part of the USSR. The Soviets rejected this irredentist argument and questioned, with tongue in cheek perhaps, that if the Amur were really the historic domain of China, why is the great wall more than a thousand kilometers south of the river valley?

(U) Both parties began to reexamine the river boundary question which, seemingly, had been settled in a 1951 navigation agreement. The Chinese contended that demarcation should be based on the internationally accepted “thalweg principle” — that is, the riverine boundary between two states should be fixed along the center of the main (i.e., deepest) navigable channel. According to this interpretation, all islands and waters on the Chinese side of the main channel should be Chinese.

(U) The Soviets argued for a simple “status quo” approach — islands belong to the occupiers. They rejected the contention that an international principle should cause them to relinquish any island they possessed, even though the island might constitute a natural extension of Chinese territory. The Soviets asserted that international law is in their favor on this issue, but could cite only one treaty supporting their argument — an obscure 1858 treaty between Costa Rica and Nicaragua which gave Nicaragua exclusive control of the San Juan River. While the Soviets have theoretically clung to the notion that they own the rivers in their entirety, in practice they have tacitly recognized Chinese claims to many islands; it is widely understood that they are willing to make

territorial concessions, trading large numbers of minor claims for a select number of strategically valuable islands.

(U) The greatest blow to PRC use of the rivers occurred in 1967 when the Soviets denied the Chinese transit privileges around Heixiazi (Tabarov—Bol'shoj Ussurijskij) Island by blockading the river with gunboats. This large, triangular island is strategically located at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers and is bordered on its third side by the Fuyuan (Kazakevicheva) Channel. The Soviets declared that Heixiazi Island was Soviet territory and that, notwithstanding the 1951 agreement, the Amur and Ussuri River segments at Heixiazi were Soviet internal waters. The Chinese were forced to transport their goods from one river to the other via the shallow Fuyuan Channel, which is unnavigable much of the year. Just a few years later Soviet tanks rolled over

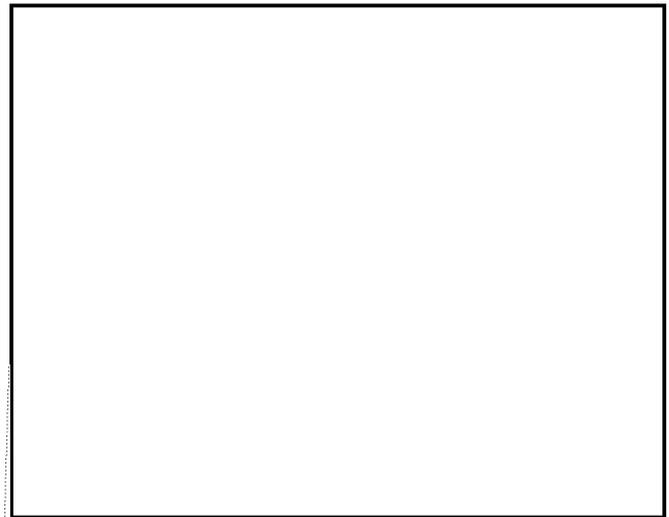
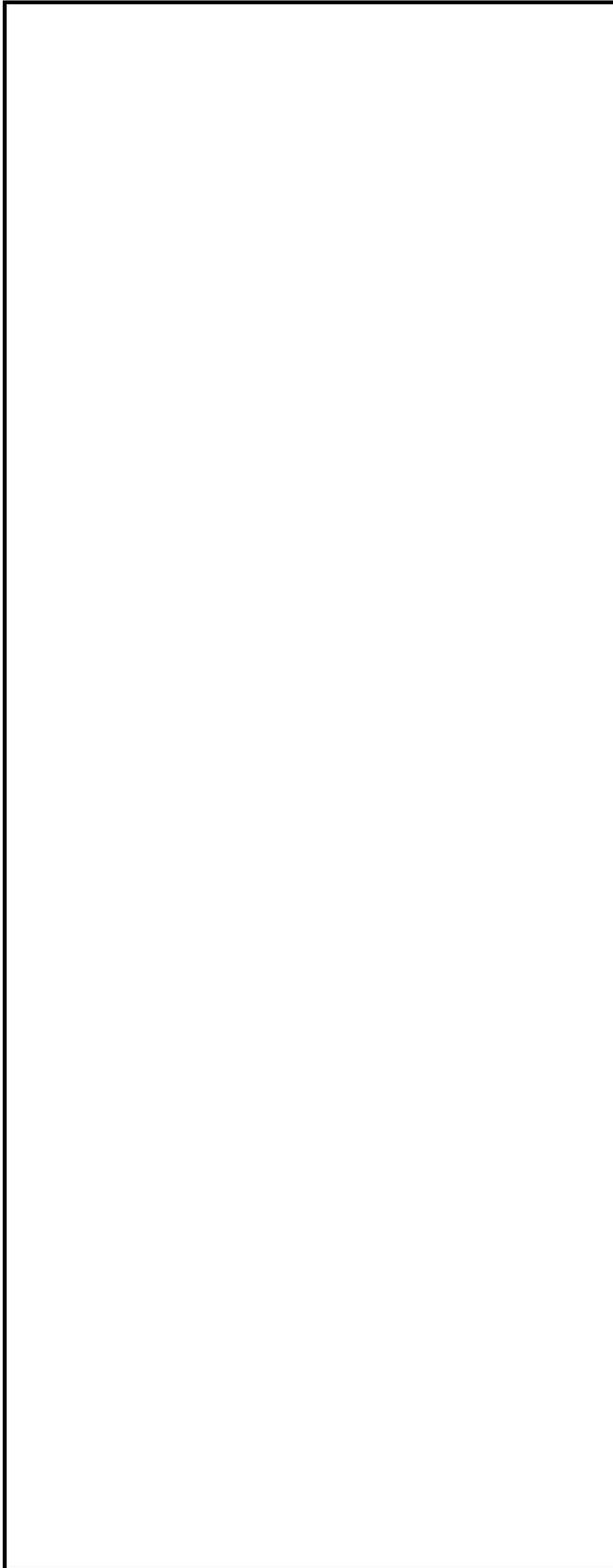
the icebound Ussuri in a bloody gambit to occupy the disputed Zhenbao (Damanskij) Island.



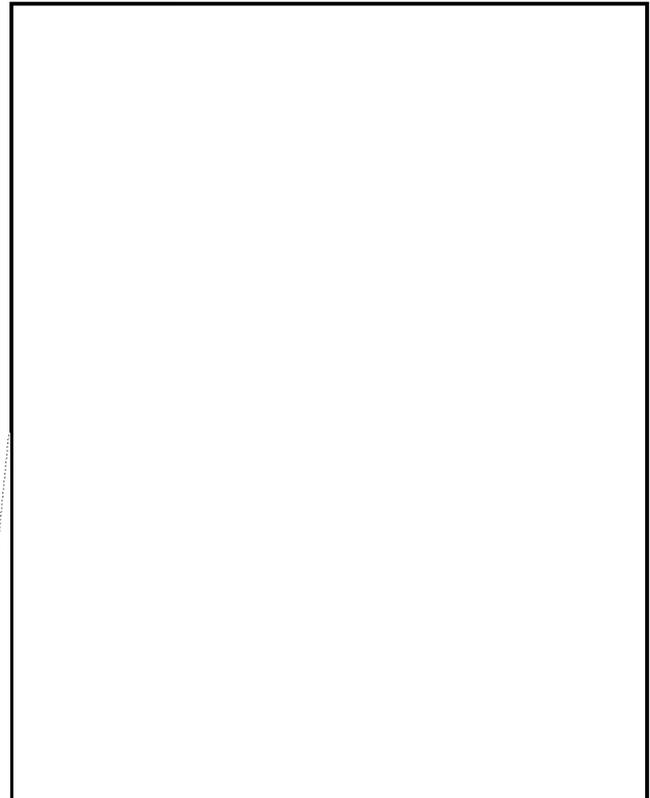
(U) The SSRNJC, established in 1950, is the primary monitor of border river affairs. The commission usually meets during the winter months to solve problems of the previous shipping season or plan the coming season. Contact between the two countries is purposely maintained at provincial level so that conflict on the border rivers will not automatically bring about international confrontation.

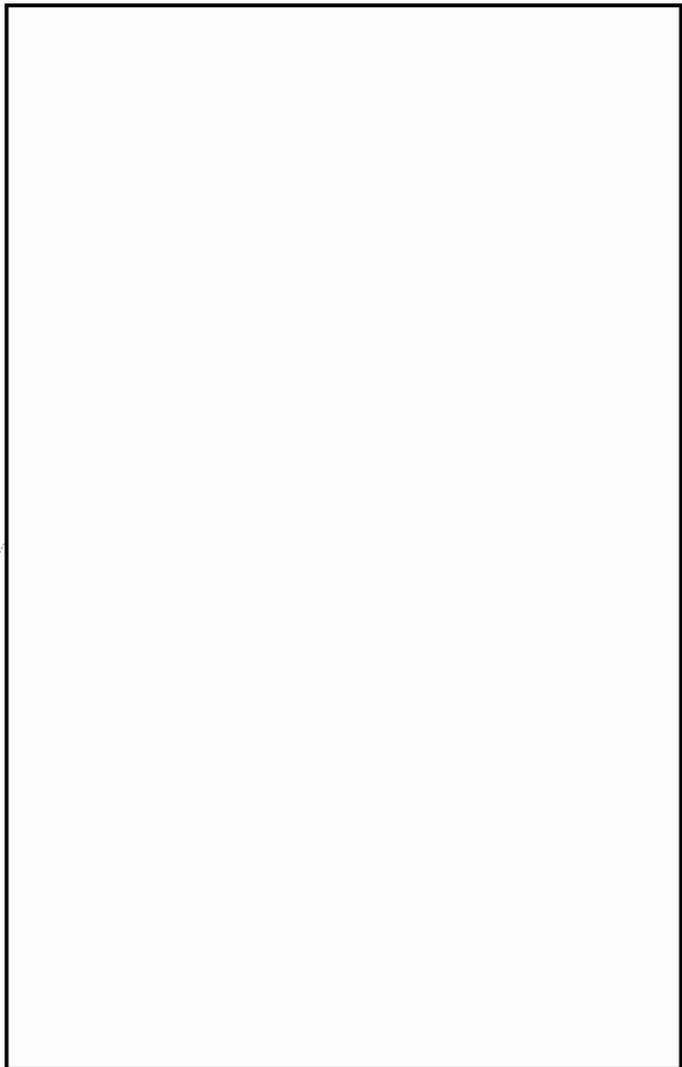
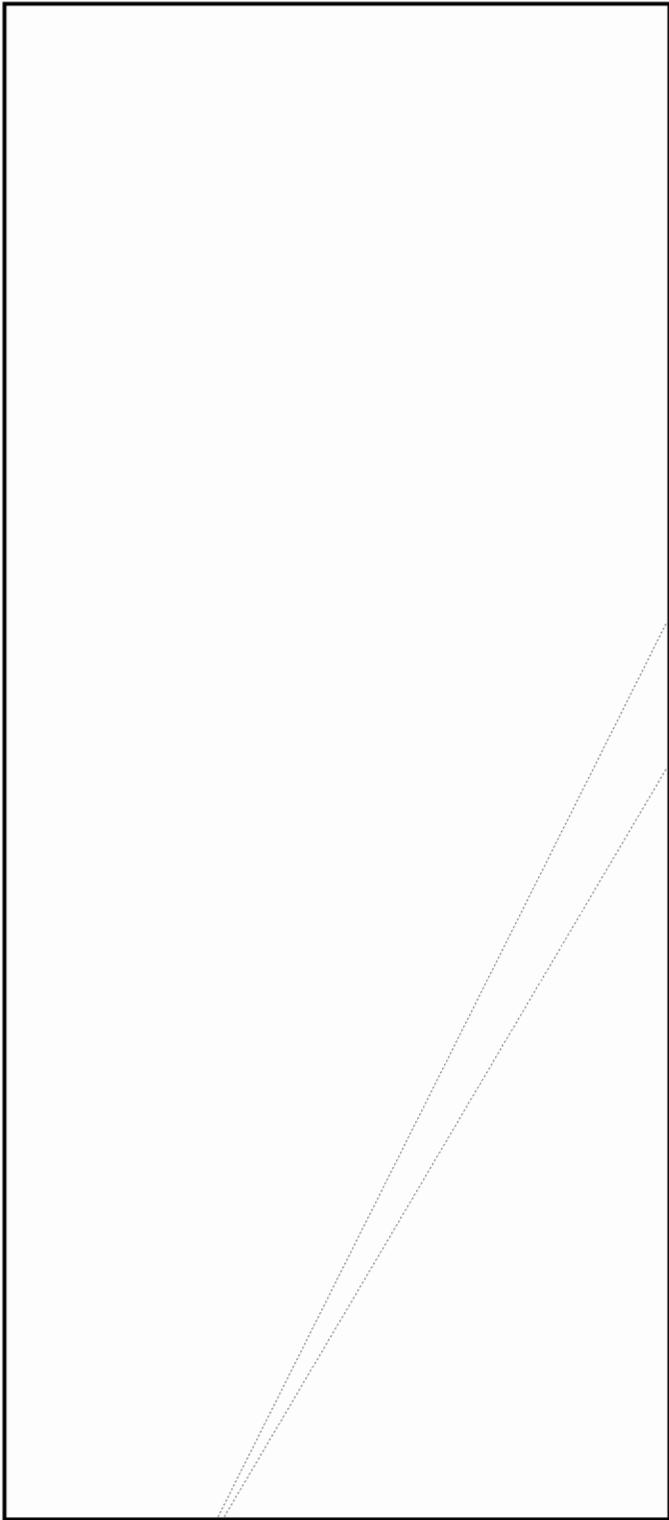


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(U) Actually, the state of affairs on the border rivers is a microcosm of the greater state of Sino-Soviet relations; no border river agreement will improve the situation if a general rapprochement is not achieved. However, gradual change in border river relations might signal a shift in the general state of Sino-Soviet relations. It was hoped that the quantitative study would forge a valid indicator of this greater state of relations and serve as a tool to measure movement toward either Sino-Soviet detente or a widening schism.





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