

The Road to “Normalization,” 1979–1991

The normalization of Sino-Soviet relations took a completely different path from that of Sino-US relations. Whereas the latter was a matter of recognizing the other side as a legitimate representative of the state and of establishing diplomatic relations, diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were established early on and were never suspended. Therefore, the so-called normalization was to find a premise, acceptable to both sides, upon which a normal relationship between the two countries would rest. It had to be sustainable and positioned in the middle of a spectrum, with alliance at one end and confrontation at the other. Whether and how such a position could be found and maintained depended on whether the two sides could reach a consensus on the guiding principles for their bilateral relations.

From the onset, the Sino-Soviet relationship was essentially a relationship between two new states born amidst chaos and revolution. The founding of the PRC opened a new chapter in that relationship. From the beginning of the Sino-Soviet alliance, there were three guidelines that operated simultaneously in the Sino-Soviet relationship: general norms that guided relations among modern states; the so-called socialist ideals and the spirit of proletarian internationalism; and the leader, that is, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and the led, that is, the CCP. Based on these complicated guidelines, the two countries determined that interparty relations were to be the core of their interstate relationship. With friendly relations between the two countries, other historical issues were utterly neglected by the leaders of both sides. As a result, bilateral relations gradually spiraled downward to a low point consisting of border disputes and resultant military confrontations. The two countries thus had to come up with a new foundation for their bilateral relations; both the process and the outcome of this search eventually achieved the consequent “normalization.”

As an historical process, normalization was affected by various complex factors, among which three were particularly crucial. These were the history of Sino-Soviet relations, the domestic politics of the two countries, and the trian-

gular strategic relationship among the PRC, the USSR, and the United States. Together, these factors constituted the intricate background from which the trajectory and the end result of normalization of Sino-Soviet relations can be traced and analyzed. It is imperative to sort out the history of Sino-Soviet relations, the domestic politics of the two countries, and the "strategic triangle" among the PRC, the USSR, and the United States in order to understand the causes, incentives, background, and characteristics of Sino-Soviet normalization, which simultaneously proceeded in parallel with competition between the two countries at both the regional and global levels. The consequences of this process not only brought about normalization between the two countries but also produced profound changes in strategic relations in East Asia and the world. Its lasting impact can still be felt in the post-Cold War era.