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Review by **Steven I. Levine**, University of Montana

In the rough-and-tumble world of scholarly discourse, the commentaries by Michael Sheng, Qiang Zhai, and Deborah Kaple on Sergey Radchenko’s monograph *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* taken together with the author’s response, are remarkably temperate. All three commentators rightly commend Radchenko for his valuable contribution to the literature on the Sino-Soviet split, a judgment with which I concur. The arrows of their criticisms are not without sting, but produce merely flesh wounds in Radchenko’s work without imperiling any vital parts. My own comments are inspired by my colleagues’ discussion rather than aimed at any or all of them. I first address the question of theoretical framework and second the role of personality.

Readers accustomed to pigeonholing scholarly works in scholastic categories feel the need to know from the outset which of various theoretical approaches to the subject—realist, neo-realist, idealist, ideological, structural, psycho-historical—authors have adopted in their inquiry. By asserting the superiority of theory over historical data, international relations and political science theorists have created a miasmal environment in which area specialists, historians, and other lesser life forms must proclaim their theoretical orientation lest they be dismissed as mere empiricists. Such theorists are like white-gloved hydroponic gardeners who scorn diggers in the dirt of history who soil their hands in an effort to coax the truth from the earth. In this environment Lorenz Lüthi emphasizes the role of ideology while Sergey Radchenko says that his approach is that of “enlightened realism”, an assertion that Michael Sheng finds at variance with Radchenko’s narrative. In a review of his book, I, too, took issue with Radchenko’s claim, perhaps peevishly calling his approach one of “hodge podge realism.” Sheng and I are correct, but so what? The considerable value of Radchenko’s book is in no way diminished by his having sewed a questionable label into the garment of his prose. Careful scholar that he is, Radchenko provides a multi-factor analysis of the development of the Sino-Soviet conflict that, to be

sure, emphasizes power politics but does not exclude other elements. This is as it should be and there is no need for him to be defensive in his response.

Any treatment of the Sino-Soviet conflict inevitably confronts the roles of Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev in precipitating the breakdown of the comity of communist nations. In considering a conflict of colossi one naturally strives for some deeper explanation than a clash of personalities. Yet the irony of the system that Lenin, the devotee of organization, created is that it so quickly degenerated first into collective and then individual dictatorship. Together, albeit from positions of unequal power, Joseph Stalin and Mao created the Sino-Soviet alliance. Together, albeit still from positions of unequal power, Khrushchev and Mao destroyed it. The contempt that Mao felt toward Khrushchev, Stalin's unfilial and unworthy successor whom Mao viewed as a crude and incompetent buffoon, is nowhere better described than in Alexander Pantsov's forthcoming biography, *Mao: The Real Story*.¹

The Sino-Soviet alliance, like the international communist movement as a whole, lacked institutional conflict resolution or conflict abatement mechanisms. During the Sino-Soviet conflict, international communist conclaves that had long been occasions for celebrating monolithic doctrinal and organizational unity became verbal dogfights between Soviet and Chinese delegates mouthing the venomous verities of their respective masters. As Radchenko and other scholars show, when Khrushchev, badly misjudging Mao, sought to accommodate China by according China junior partner status in the international communist movement and giving Mao face, unlike his treatment of the scullery maids who ruled Eastern Europe, Mao read this as weakness. It confirmed his conviction that he, not Khrushchev, was the rightful heir to Stalin's bloody throne. Yet, just as none of Stalin's successors possessed the tyrant's untrammelled power, so none of Mao's close comrades-in-arms possessed the Great Helmsman's overweening ego or ambition, with the possible exception of Jiang Qing who was not a political factor until several years after the Sino-Soviet split became public. It is hard to imagine had Mao died in 1956, the year of Khrushchev's so-called Secret Speech, that either Liu Shaoqi or Zhou Enlai would have driven the Sino-Soviet alliance over a cliff the way Mao did. Of course, differences in national interest, revolutionary strategy, and foreign and domestic policy would certainly have manifested themselves, but even in the absence of institutionalized conflict resolution mechanisms, more moderate and reasonable Chinese leaders would likely have favored and worked toward the transformation of the Sino-Soviet alliance into a more equal partnership rather than been hell-bent on its ruin.

Was the inequality in the Sino-Soviet alliance the poisoned seed of its eventual demise? Radchenko makes this argument, which I find unconvincing. Alliances are rarely between equal partners. The inequality may well generate tensions and cause disagreements as the weaker partner or partners chafe at the superior role of the dominant power in the alliance, but such tensions and disagreements are usually susceptible to some sort of compromise solution or, at least, interim arrangement. Not so in the communist world with

¹ Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine. *Mao: The Real Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, forthcoming October 2012).

its extreme concentration of power, systematic prejudice against compromise, and self-righteous ideological certainty. Thus, I would argue, it was not the inequality of power that was the underlying cause of alliance breakdown, but rather a combination of the personal roles of Mao and Khrushchev—Mao in particular—within the context of the international communist system itself.

The work of a new generation of scholars like Sergey Radchenko and Lorenz Lüthi, to name just two among many, armed with linguistic versatility and enjoying access to many, though by no means all, previously closed archives, adds valuable and illuminating detail to our knowledge of the Sino-Soviet conflict. Like *Opportunity* and *Spirit*, the pair of Mars planetary rovers, they have ventured onto the hard surface of communist bloc politics, exploring every rock and ridge on the terrain and providing us a much fuller and more satisfactory picture of reality than previously available. As scholars of Cold War history we are deeply in their debt.

Steven I. Levine is Research faculty associate in the Department of History at the University of Montana and co-author, with Michael H. Hunt, of the recently published *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

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