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Based on newly available Chinese and Russian archival documents and oral histories, this article examines the origins and evolution of Soviet policies concerning China’s nuclear weapons program from 1954 to 1960. The article argues that Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev consented only to assist China in developing nuclear energy in 1954 only because he needed Mao’s support in a domestic political struggle. But the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1958 unnerved the Russians, leading Khrushchev in June 1959 to rescind his promise to deliver a teaching model A-bomb to the Chinese. By August 1960 all Soviet specialists working on China’s nuclear weapons program were recalled. Nonetheless, the Soviet aid laid the foundation for China’s fledgling nuclear industry. Keywords: China’s nuclear program, Soviet aid, Sino-Soviet relations.

In October 1964 the People’s Republic of China (PRC) detonated its first atomic bomb. China has been a nuclear power ever since. How did China develop its nuclear weapons program? What role did the Soviet Union play in the process? How important was Soviet aid to China’s entry into the nuclear club? Why did the Soviet Union decide to terminate its aid in 1959?

Chinese scholarship focuses on China’s independent development of its nuclear weapons program after the Soviet Union went back on its promise to provide China with an A-bomb teaching model in June 1959. Scholarship in English makes short shrift of the topic. A recent article by Liu Yanqiong and Liu Jiefeng, two scholars from the National University of Defense Technology of China, has done a good job in sorting out the kinds of Soviet nuclear technology transferred to China and assessing its role in building China’s atomic bomb (Liu and Liu 2009, 66–110). But the article does not shed much light on
how nuclear technology transfer affected the ebb and flow of Sino-Soviet relations. Studying the issue from a historical perspective is thus necessary.

Based on newly available Chinese and Russian archival documents and oral histories, this article examines Soviet policies toward China’s nuclear weapons program, beginning with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s decision to assist China in developing atomic energy for peaceful purposes in October 1954 and ending with the withdrawal of all Soviet nuclear specialists from China in August 1960. The article examines the origins of Soviet policies and the reasons behind its policy alterations. The article also looks at the evolution of the Chinese nuclear weapons program in response to Soviet policies. The article argues that Khrushchev only consented to assist China in developing its nuclear energy program because he had to deal with an internal power struggle and needed Mao’s political support—but without committing to arm China with nuclear weapons. Once Khrushchev overcame his opponents in the Soviet Communist Party in June 1957, Chairman Mao Zedong immediately expressed his support. Khrushchev was grateful for Mao’s clear-cut stand and decided to reward him by helping him develop China’s nuclear program. The PRC’s bombardment of Jinmen (Quemoy) near Taiwan in the summer of 1958, however, caught Moscow off guard. Khrushchev was justified in feeling that there was a general weakening in Sino-Soviet relations, and in retaliation decided to rescind the October 1957 Sino-Soviet agreement to deliver an A-bomb teaching model to China. By August 1960 all Soviet specialists working on China’s nuclear weapons program were recalled.

**Khrushchev’s Role in China’s Nuclear Energy Program**

**The Sino-Soviet Agreements**

Before 1954 the Soviet Union was willing to offer a nuclear umbrella to all socialist countries, but was unwilling to share nuclear secrets to enable them to build their own nuclear weapons. After Josef Stalin’s death, in the struggle to acquire political supremacy in Soviet internal politics, Nikita Khrushchev resolved to improve relations