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MOSCOW STEAMS FULL SPEED INTO AMERICA'S PACIFIC LAKE

INTRODUCTION

It may be hyperbole, but since the end of World War II, the Pacific Ocean has often been called an American lake. In fact, this seeming exaggeration merely recognizes not only the United States' compelling strategic and economic interests but also its enormous land, sea, and air military presence in the Pacific region. Today, however, America's role in the Pacific is being challenged. No area of the world has seen so great a buildup of Soviet military forces as has the Pacific. In light of this challenge, the Reagan Administration must review and evaluate whether it is doing enough to keep the U.S. and its Pacific Ocean friends and allies secure from the Kremlin's interference and intimidation.

Signaling Moscow's new assertiveness in the Pacific was Soviet boss Mikhail Gorbachev's July 28th speech in Vladivostok. He declared the Soviet intentions to assume a larger political, economic, and security role in the Far East and Asia. He stressed the importance of the development of Siberia to the USSR's economic growth and announced that Siberia would become export-oriented, open to foreign investment and joint enterprises. He made significant gestures to improve relations with China, and he stated Moscow's intentions to play a major role in a new economic and security order in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Gorbachev political initiative was viewed seriously by the U.S. It came in the wake of a newly enhanced Soviet geopolitical position in the Pacific that followed a massive Soviet military buildup and the Soviets' acquiring naval basing rights in Vietnam and

North Korea. It made it clear that Moscow plans to challenge U.S. superiority and to shift the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. And with that challenge, it threatened an area of vital importance to the U.S. in terms of trade, access to raw materials, security alliances, and the evolution of democracy and free enterprise.

Whether the Soviet leader will be able to match his sophisticated rhetoric with the specific steps necessary to make major political inroads in Asia is an open question. Most countries, including the People's Republic of China (PRC), have adopted a "wait-and-see" attitude.

The U.S. enjoys a strong position in the Asia-Pacific region by virtue of its substantial military presence, its acceptance as a Pacific power by Asian nations, the gigantic consumer market and source of high technology it offers its Asian trading partners. And the U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific region is based on the political, economic, and ideological interests it shares with the noncommunist Pacific rimland states on the periphery of mainland Asia.

This rimland strategy is essentially sound, but it must be carefully monitored in light of the recent Soviet challenge. U.S. responses should include: continuing to modernize its military forces in the Pacific and Indian Oceans; maintaining existing security arrangements and expanding military cooperation with noncommunist friends; encouraging fair trade, including moves to open more markets and dismantle protectionist barriers; continuing economic and military assistance to needy friends such as the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and South Pacific island states; and generally taking actions to convince friend and foe alike of U.S. determination to protect its interests and to maintain its strong position in the region.

The U.S. strategy must take special account of the PRC and Japan because of their unique status as major regional powers.

Japan should remain the centerpiece of U.S. strategy in Asia. Some improvement in Soviet-Japanese relations might be forthcoming, but the USSR is Japan's historical enemy and will continue to be so because of conflicting national interests over such issues as the Soviet occupation of Japanese islands in the Kuril chain north of Hokkaido.

Of concern to the U.S. is the reaction of the PRC toward the Soviet Union since Gorbachev's conciliatory remarks. Sino-Soviet relations have improved since the Vladivostok speech, but Beijing still regards Moscow as its greatest threat. The U.S. should continue to pursue friendly but nonaligned relations with the PRC based on mutual interests. The U.S. should not attempt to use the Taiwan issue to stop improvement of Sino-Soviet relations.

Congress and the Administration must guard especially against the twin evils of protectionism and isolationism. Closing American markets to Asian nations and isolating the U.S. by drastically limiting foreign aid expenditures would only give the Soviet Union targets of opportunity in Asia. In sum, the Gorbachev speech places a new urgency on Congress to be more sensitive to national security issues in formulating trade, defense, and foreign aid legislation.

SOVIET EXPANSION INTO ASIA

The growing Soviet military presence in the Far East took on a significant political dimension with General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's July 28 speech in Vladivostok. Since 1978 the Soviet Union has been increasing dramatically its power projection capabilities in the region.¹ Currently, over one-third of the Soviet mobile SS-20 missile force is deployed in the Far East. More than 50 Red Army divisions are in the region, and their mobility and firepower have been enhanced by helicopters and modern self-propelled weapons systems. Some 1,700 tactical jet fighters are deployed in the region, including the most modern Soviet interceptors and ground-attack fighters. The introduction of 85 Backfire bombers into the Soviet Air Force and Pacific Ocean Fleet Air Force has dramatically increased USSR strategic and maritime strike capabilities. The Soviet Pacific Fleet, composed of some 840 vessels, has been transformed from a homeland defense force into an offensive "blue water" fleet capable of threatening shipping lanes throughout the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Soviet air and naval units are now forward based at Cam Ranh Bay, enabling them to operate throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. The Soviets' right to use North Korean airspace and ports increases Soviet flexibility, especially as a threat to the PRC, South Korea, and Japan. In addition, the Soviet Union has invaded Afghanistan with more than 120,000 Soviet troops threatening not only Afghan sovereignty but also Pakistan and the oil fields of the Middle East. And Moscow has stationed advanced fighters and troops on the Soviet-occupied Japanese island of Etorofu, which threaten northern Hokkaido and deeply offend Japanese national pride.

Even prior to Gorbachev's speech, the Soviet Union had begun to leverage its growing military might into political advantage in the Asia-Pacific region. Beijing felt it necessary to improve relations with Moscow to reduce the immediate Soviet threat. And Moscow can

1. See Captain Jack Roome (USN), "Soviet Military Expansion in the Pacific," paper presented at a conference on U.S.-ASEAN Relations, March 31-April 2, 1986, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, sponsored by Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies and Malaysia's Institute for Strategic and International Studies.

claim greater influence in Pyongyang, a close military alliance with Vietnam, stronger ties with India, and expanding economic and political links with South Pacific island nations such as Kiribati, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea. And there are other continuing events in the Pacific political ambience that the Soviet Union is seeking to exploit: the Philippine insurgency, Vietnam's occupation of Laos and Cambodia, the anti-nuclear movement in the South Pacific, and the withdrawal of New Zealand from the ANZUS treaty organization.

THE GORBACHEV INITIATIVE

The Vladivostok speech must be seen against this backdrop of recent Soviet military and political expansion into the Asia-Pacific region. Gorbachev proposed to limit the arms race in Asia and promised to improve bilateral relations with all regional countries, including the PRC and Japan. He also suggested efforts toward an understanding with the U.S. over the future of the Pacific, and he pressed for the inclusion of the Soviet Union in any future Pacific economic community.

Gorbachev also reiterated the old Soviet plan to establish a regional cooperative security system. He called for the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations and the establishment of closer ties between the countries of Indochina and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). He proposed limiting nuclear weapons in the region, reducing U.S. and Soviet naval fleets, and cutbacks in regional conventional forces, including those along the Sino-Soviet border. Finally, he announced the withdrawal of six Soviet regiments from Afghanistan.

Many of the Soviet leader's proposals were rhetoric with little or no substance. For example, of the six regiments to be withdrawn from Afghanistan, three were anti-aircraft regiments, unneeded since the Afghan freedom fighters possess no aircraft. Other proposals, such as economic cooperation and regional arms control, were designed to convince the U.S. and other powers that the Soviets should be included as equal participants in regional issues. And proposals to improve relations with the PRC and Japan were obviously an attempt to weaken the U.S. position in the region.

SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS

Perhaps the most important Gorbachev initiatives were his proposals for Sino-Soviet relations, which have shifted greatly over the years. The Soviet leader addressed the three main objections raised by the PRC concerning normalization of Sino-Soviet relations.

The area of greatest concern to Beijing is the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. In this case, Gorbachev said only that "much...depends on the normalization of Chinese-Vietnamese relations." He added, however, that Soviet interests would be served by the restoration of good relations between Beijing and Hanoi. The Chinese, who want Moscow to use its economic leverage on Hanoi to persuade Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia, interpreted this to be no concession at all on the part of the Soviet Union.²

Beijing has always insisted on an early withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan as a condition for improved Sino-Soviet relations. The announced token withdrawal of six Soviet regiments, therefore, was viewed by the PRC with a certain amount of derision. Chinese military officials believe the USSR is overextended in Afghanistan and, if the Mujahideen continue their "people's war" against the Soviet invaders, Moscow eventually will have to negotiate a settlement.

Gorbachev's proposals concerning the withdrawal of Soviet forces along the Chinese border were better received in the PRC. He disclosed that "the question of withdrawing a considerable number of Soviet troops from Mongolia is being examined." This is symbolically important because the PRC has long viewed these forces as an extraordinary threat because of their proximity to Beijing. The Soviet leader also held out the prospects for further troop reductions along the Sino-Soviet border when he said: "the USSR is prepared to discuss with the PRC specific steps aimed at a balanced reduction in the level of land forces."

The Chinese viewed the Mongolian troop withdrawal as removing "half" an obstacle only, because the greater part of the Soviet forces along the 4,300-mile Sino-Soviet border remains in place. Furthermore, People's Liberation Army strategists have noted that the military installations built in Mongolia by the Soviet Union probably will remain, meaning that Moscow could redeploy its troops in Mongolia on very short notice.

In addition to his responses to the PRC's chief complaints, Gorbachev held out several rhetorical carrots to the PRC:

- o Statements to the effect that the Soviet Union and China were neighbors and "predestined...to live side by side from this day forward and for all time."
- o Praise for "the noticeable improvement" in Sino-Soviet relations in recent years and hope for improved relations in the future. Gorbachev said: "I want to confirm that the Soviet Union is ready

2. The Soviets give Vietnam \$3 to \$5 million each day in aid.

at any time and at any level in the most serious way to discuss with China matters concerning supplementary measures to create an atmosphere of good-neighborliness."

- o Calls for cooperation in economic development and an increase in trade.
- o Acceptance of the Chinese position on the location of the Sino-Soviet border along the main channel of the Amur River--a longstanding territorial dispute between the two communist governments.
- o Cooperation in building a railway linking China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and the USSR's Kazakhstan.
- o Offers for mutual cooperation in space, including the training of Chinese cosmonauts.

The PRC Response

Beijing has taken Gorbachev's proposals seriously, since they may indicate a shift in short-term Soviet strategy toward the PRC. Nonetheless, the Chinese were cautious in their public response. Senior Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping told a visiting Japanese delegation in August: "It is premature to believe that Soviet foreign policy has been determined by that [speech]. However, a positive stance was also hammered out and thus it is important to see through to the real substance with caution."³ PRC Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian said: "We cannot determine now whether the Soviet Union is still seeking hegemonism or has changed its strategy for world hegemony," but the speech "indeed says, among other things, something that has not been said before."⁴ A PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman said the PRC had "taken notice" of Gorbachev's proposal to withdraw troops from Mongolia and that the Chinese government was studying the speech.

Meanwhile, the Soviets have stepped up high-level contact between themselves and the Chinese. Early this September Nikolay Talyzin, chairman of the Soviet State Planning Commission and alternate Politburo member, visited the PRC to "discuss relevant questions in economic and planning work." Nikolay Maslennikov, head of a Kremlin budget control committee, led a Soviet team to the first inter-parliamentary talks between Beijing and Moscow in late August.

3. Mainichi Shimbun, August 6, 1986, p. 7.

4. Yomiuri Shimbun, August 5, 1986, p. 5.

5. Xinhua, August 6, 1986, in FBIS-China, August 6, 1986, p. A1.

And Soviet vice-premier Ivan Arkhipov, who was in Beijing at the time of Gorbachev's speech to receive "acupuncture treatment," managed to talk with several PRC vice-premiers including Wan Li, Yao Yilin, and Li Peng.⁶

Yet another signal of Soviet intentions to improve relations with the PRC was the recent appointment of Igor Rogachev, new Deputy Foreign Minister, to be the chief Soviet negotiator in the next (9th) round of Sino-Soviet talks, scheduled for October in Beijing. Rogachev, who was previously the head of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Asian Affairs Department, is one of the chief architects of Gorbachev's Asia policy.

Finally, Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze agreed in New York in late September to reopen Sino-Soviet border talks, suspended by the Chinese since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978.

PRC Bargaining Tactics

PRC officials have explained that Beijing should make a positive response to Gorbachev's proposals. The response must be carefully crafted, however, and serve two purposes: to demonstrate to Moscow a sincere desire to improve relations; and to convince Washington that Sino-Soviet rapprochement will not harm U.S. interests. Beijing no doubt will attempt to use the new atmosphere in Sino-Soviet relations to strengthen its bargaining position with both Moscow and Washington. In the case of the USSR, the PRC will continue to seek to reduce the Soviet threat to China's security and to sever the Soviet ring of containment around PRC borders. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the Soviet Union needs to prove the sincerity of its initiatives through "concrete actions by greatly reducing nuclear weapons and missiles already deployed [in Asia] and easing the tension in the region and removing the hot spots of Afghanistan and Kampuchea."⁷

PRC objectives toward the U.S. remain freer access to advanced military and civilian technology and further concessions over the Taiwan issue. In recent months Beijing has focused effort on reducing the level of U.S. arms sales to Taipei and urging the U.S. to nudge the Republic of China into reunification talks with the mainland.

Deng Xiaoping touched upon these issues in a September 2 interview on the CBS TV program, "60 Minutes." Regarding relations with the Soviet Union, the senior PRC leader said: "If Gorbachev takes

6. Asiaweek, August 31, 1986, p. 17.

7. Xinhua, August 6, 1986, in FBIS-China, August 6, 1986, p. A1.

a solid step towards the removal of the three major obstacles in Sino-Soviet relations, particularly urging Vietnam to end its aggression in Kampuchea and withdraw its troops from there, I myself will be ready to meet him."

As for the U.S., Deng said: "There is one obstacle in Sino-U.S. relations. That is the Taiwan question, or the question of China's reunification of the two sides of the Taiwan Straits....I hope that President Reagan will, during his term in office, bring about further progress in Sino-U.S. relations, including some effort in respect of China's reunification. I believe that the United States, President Reagan in particular, can accomplish something with regard to this question."⁸

AN APPROPRIATE U.S. RESPONSE

The U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region is essential to preserve regional peace, stability, and prosperity. But the Gorbachev speech has raised the chances of a potential challenge to U.S. dominance in the future. In adapting to this new environment it would appear that the U.S. has three alternatives to consider:

- 1) A strategy based on the PRC serving as a counterweight to the Soviet Union (China-first strategy).
- 2) A strategy based on cooperation with U.S. friends and allies along the periphery of the Asia mainland (rimland strategy).
- 3) A strategy based on the increased forward deployment of U.S. forces throughout the region to protect American interests unilaterally (self-reliant strategy).

The China-first strategy assumes that Soviet fears of a strong PRC will preoccupy the Soviet Union in Asia and divert Moscow's resources away from areas more vital to U.S. interests. To a certain extent this already holds true, because a major proportion of Soviet military deployment in the region is targeted on the PRC. The U.S. hopes to increase Soviet anxiety by improving Sino-American cooperation on security-related issues. The U.S. also hopes that, by playing a role in the PRC's economic modernization, Washington can draw Beijing into the Western-dominated international economic system and encourage the Chinese communists to implement political and social reform.

8. Embassy of the People's Republic of China, "Deng Xiaoping on Sino-U.S. Relations" and "Deng Xiaoping on Sino-Soviet Relations," Press Release, September 6, 1986, pp. 1-3.

Because of the sheer size and potential power of the PRC, U.S. interests are well served by friendly Sino-American relations. But a China-first strategy is fatally flawed in that its effectiveness stems largely from Sino-Soviet hostility, over which the U.S. has no control. This is especially true in the era of an independent PRC foreign policy that dictates a strategic alignment with neither superpower and friendly relations with both.

A U.S. strategy centered on the PRC's counterweight value against the Soviet Union, would lead, as it has in the past, to accommodating Beijing on such issues as limiting arms sales to Taiwan to gain PRC cooperation against the Soviets. Inevitably, these efforts prove fruitless. For example, scarcely a month after the signing of the August 17, 1982, U.S.-PRC Communique limiting future U.S. arms sales to the Republic of China, Hu Yaobang announced the PRC's willingness to improve relations with the Soviet Union.⁹

A second alternative is the rimland strategy, which is essentially current Reagan Administration policy. It is based on the shared political, economic, and social ideals held by the U.S. and the noncommunist rimland countries, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, with Japan as the centerpiece. And its strength lies in its creating an interlocking network of interests beneficial to all sides. Unlike the PRC, which remains a communist country seeking "socialism with Chinese characteristics," most of the smaller countries of the rimland are predisposed to the American way of life, genuinely friendly with the U.S., and in need of American support for their national security. Cooperation with the U.S. by these nations is almost always ensured since it is in their best interests. But to be successful, this strategy requires an unswerving commitment from the U.S. to these rimland nations, in terms of a substantial U.S. military presence and attention to their individual economic development needs.

In a self-reliant strategy the U.S. would go it alone in Asia. Through a direct use of U.S. political, economic, and military power, Washington would attempt to direct the course of regional affairs in accordance with its own policies without having to accommodate the interests of other states.

The weaknesses of the self-reliant strategy make it prohibitive. First, there is the exorbitant cost of expanding the U.S. military presence in Asia to a level sufficient to dictate regional affairs. Then there is the severe antagonism that such a heavy-handed approach is bound to generate among the Asian countries. And most important,

9. Hu Yaobang, "Create a New Situation in All Fields of Socialist Modernization," The Twelfth National Congress of the CPC (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1982), pp. 58-59.

the self-reliant strategy is completely out of step with the times. It flies in the face of current trends in economic interdependence and political cooperation.

Of the three strategies, only the rimland strategy could achieve its objectives at an acceptable cost. Most of the elements necessary for its success are in place, and it reflects Reagan Administration geopolitical thinking for the most part. A rimland strategy does not negate the importance of friendly Sino-American relations, but it takes account of the PRC's growing national power and the independence of its foreign policy. Moreover, the rimland strategy recognizes that most of the strategic advantages of a China-first strategy can be gained through existing friendly relations with the PRC and without additional concessions over Taiwan.

CONCLUSION

The Soviet Union has not been a party to Asia-Pacific regional affairs primarily because of its expansionist tendencies and heavy-handedness in dealing with Asian nations. Although Soviet expansionist policy will not change, Gorbachev's July speech in Vladivostok indicates a more subtle approach to regional issues, and some increase in Soviet influence may result. Much more important is the possibility that the Soviet Union may be able to take advantage of targets of opportunity in the region arising because of political instability or economic dislocation.

Over the next few years, the U.S. will face not only a military challenge but also economic and political challenges from the Soviet Union in Asia. Because of its own strength in each of these areas, the U.S. can limit Soviet inroads. But U.S. protectionism and isolationism could exacerbate any of a number of potential problems in the Pacific areas:

- o The communist insurgency in the Philippines may succeed because of that country's failing economy and inadequately trained and equipped armed forces.
- o South Pacific island states may turn increasingly to the Soviet Union for fishing agreements because of perceived U.S. indifference to their economic plight.
- o ASEAN unity and the economies of individual member states may be undermined because of U.S. trade barriers and the dumping of competing American commodities such as tin, rice, and sugar on the international market.
- o The anti-nuclear movement in the South Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan may get out of hand because the U.S. has

failed to make a strong enough case as to why regional deterrence is necessary for common security.

- o The free Cambodian resistance may collapse because of insufficient U.S. aid, resulting in Vietnamese domination of Indochina and in a more direct threat to Thailand.

Whether or not these problems materialize will be heavily influenced by U.S. policy, particularly congressional legislative decisions. This year the House and Senate Appropriations Committees slashed over 15 percent from the President's \$15.4 billion foreign aid request. After full funding had been allocated for Israel and Egypt, assistance for most Asian countries may be cut by as much as 50 percent. Congress also has been inundated with protectionist legislation, but such trade barriers would be very destabilizing to Asian economies because of their heavy dependence on trade with the U.S.

If the U.S. continues to cut foreign aid and enact protectionist legislation, many of the rimland countries on which the U.S. depends for security cooperation will be weakened economically to the point where severe political disruption may occur. The Soviet Union will be quick to take advantage of these targets of opportunity. It is therefore vital that Congress examine foreign aid and trade legislation, in light of its tremendous impact on national security in Asia.

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