Asian Studies Center

Backgrounder

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# HOW THE U.S. SHOULD PREPARE FOR A SINO-SOVIET SUMMIT

## INTRODUCTION

Enmity, if not outright hostility, between Moscow and Beijing has been a fact of life of the global geopolitical landscape for more than a quarter century. This now may be about to change. If it does, it will spur the world's capitals to recheck their calculations of the globe's power line-up. Such recalculations should proceed slowly and carefully. Washington, particularly, might find that it would welcome a thaw in the Moscow-Beijing Cold War.

The most dramatic evidence so far of such a thaw was the early December meeting in Moscow between People's Republic of China Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and his Soviet counterpart, Eduard Shevardnadze. This was the highest level USSR-PRC meeting since 1969, when Aleksei Kosygin, then Soviet Prime Minister, met briefly in the Beijing airport with Zhou Enlai, then Chinese Premier.

**First Summit in 30 Years.** Though Qian and Shevardnadze last month discussed such regional issues as the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, their primary purpose in getting together was to lay the groundwork for a Beijing summit early this year between Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and China's paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping. If the summit convenes, as seems likely, it will be the first between leaders of the two nations since Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong met in Beijing in October 1959.

Had Sino-Soviet relations thawed in the 1970s or even the early 1980s, it would have been perceived as posing serious problems for the United States. In those days, Washington enjoyed, and exploited, closer ties with each of the two communist giants than either had with the other. Richard Nixon's dramatic opening to China in the early 1970s, for instance, helped isolate and put pressure on Moscow.

**No Return to 1950s.** Today, by contrast, a Beijing-Moscow summit need not bode ill for the U.S. For one thing, Ronald Reagan's rebuilding of the U.S. arsenal has improved the American military capability vis-a-vis the Soviet Union markedly. For another, Asian confidence in the U.S. as a dependable ally, which had hit a post-World War II low a decade ago, has been greatly restored.

Then, of course, there are Washington's own rapidly warming relations with Moscow; Americans hardly can look askance at the Chinese for following the U.S. lead. And because U.S.-PRC ties have deepened on so many fronts — industrial, trade, military cooperation, shared technology and vast cultural and educational exchanges — there is almost no possibility that a PRC rapprochement with the USSR would come at the price of cooler relations with the U.S. Indeed, in meetings with representatives from the Soviet Union and the PRC, The Heritage Foundation repeatedly has been assured that improved Sino-Soviet relations would not mean a return to these countries' close strategic relationship of the 1950s.

**Adding to Asian Stability.** The web of relations involving the U.S., the PRC, and the USSR no longer is what strategists call a zero-sum game. Meaning: the U.S. does not necessarily gain if Chinese-Soviet relations cool, nor does the U.S. necessarily lose if those relations improve. While Washington need not encourage Beijing to improve its relations with Moscow, Washington need not fear modest improvement.

Such an improvement actually would add to Asian stability. In fact, the conditions set by the Chinese for their summit with the Soviets — the removal of what they call the "three obstacles" — demand Soviet compliance on issues of global concern: reduction of the large Soviet military force along the 4,670-mile PRC-USSR border, an end to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the withdrawal of the 120,000 Soviet-backed Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. The U.S. would benefit specifically from Soviet compliance with these Chinese demands (that is, if the Soviet troops are not shifted from the Chinese border to Eastern Europe) and generally from a more stable Asia.

Meanwhile, notes U.S. Ambassador to the PRC Winston Lord: "There are inherent limits to Sino-Soviet relations."[1] The "three obstacles" illustrate

1 *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 1988, p. 17.

important security disagreements between the two. And because both Beijing and Moscow now are pushing domestic economic development, it is unlikely that either would risk access to vital Western financial and technological assistance.

Nevertheless, the Bush Administration should make clear that it is closely watching developments between the Soviets and the Chinese. After taking office, Bush should:

♦♦ Unambiguously advise Beijing and Moscow that a de facto PRC-USSR alliance would force him to reappraise the full range of U.S. dealings with both.

♦♦ State that military cooperation between the Soviets and the PRC could be viewed in the same light as an alliance and also might compel him to reappraise the full range of U.S. dealings with both.

♦♦ Remind the Chinese of the continuing Soviet military buildup in Asia and the Pacific Basin.

♦♦ Request that Chinese leaders brief the U.S. regularly on developments in the PRC-USSR relationship. In return, Washington would brief Beijing regularly on the U.S.-USSR relationship.

One of the most important challenges of the Sino-Soviet summit may be in the area of public diplomacy. America's Asian allies are very sensitive to the events in Moscow and Beijing and look to Washington for leadership. They could conclude that U.S. indecisiveness in crafting an effective response to a Sino-Soviet rapprochement reflects a lack of Western resolve. As such, the Bush Administration must insure that the preeminence of the U.S. interest in Asia and in the evolving USSR-PRC relationship is not eclipsed by the enormous publicity and press coverage of the Deng-Gorbachev summit.

To do this, the Bush Administration, in the weeks before the Sino-Soviet summit, should proclaim the criteria by which the U.S. will deal with the two communist powers. For heightened global public relations value, the Administration even could package these criteria as a U.S. version of Beijing's three obstacles, stating that Beijing and Moscow must move on three fronts if they expect improving relations with the U.S. These fronts are:

**1) Arms control:** Controlling the proliferation and transfer of nuclear and conventional weapons.

**2) Regional tensions:** Finding suitable responses to indirect communist aggression or working to reduce the potential for regional conflicts.

**3) Human rights:** Advancing human freedom and dignity.

These are the standards by which the U.S. traditionally has judged Soviet and Chinese actions. Bush should reiterate them, stating that failure to meet them means they will continue as the "three obstacles" to improved relations with the U.S.

By explicitly presenting arms control, regional tension, and human rights as the fundamental obstacles to improved relations with the U.S., Bush not only would spell out the most important Soviet and Chinese policy issues of special interest to the U.S., but also capture for the U.S. some of the global attention generated by the Sino-Soviet rapprochement and demonstrate that the U.S. remains a central player in Asian affairs.

## SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS: OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

Relations between the Soviet Union and China have been frozen for almost three decades. While Soviet officials, including Mikhail Gorbachev, repeatedly have called for a meeting between the leaders of the two nations, Beijing has dictated the pace and content of the rapprochement by insisting that the Soviets remove the "three obstacles" before there could be a summit. These obstacles reflect Beijing's assessment of the most immediate Soviet threat to PRC security. As such, China has insisted:

1) **That the Soviet Union withdraw its troops** from Afghanistan, the PRC's western neighbor.

2) **That Moscow reduce significantly** the number of troops along the 4,670-mile border between the two countries.

3) **That the Soviet Union pressure Vietnam** to remove its army from Cambodia, located on China's southern flank.

There are other, less clearly defined, obstacles to improved relations between the two. The persistent Soviet military buildup in Asia, for instance, belies Moscow's claims of friendly intentions. The Soviet Union deployed attack bombers at Cam Ranh Bay in late 1983, and the following year dispatched two of its three aircraft carriers to the Western Pacific. Meanwhile, the rivalry between the Soviets and Chinese for influence on the Korean peninsula continues.

**Watershed Address.** Although talks on border issues between the deputy foreign ministers of each country began in 1982, it was not until Gorbachev came to power in 1985 that Beijing apparently began to feel that it could deal with Moscow. Late that year, PRC Vice-Premier (now Premier) Li Peng was received by Gorbachev in Moscow. As a result, the Chinese in 1986 opened a consulate in Leningrad, and the Soviets, one in Shanghai. Exchanges of journalists, academics, and officials quickly followed.

Then, in Vladivostok in July 1986, Gorbachev delivered a major foreign policy address offering to meet with the Chinese "at any time and any place." His address was a watershed for Sino-Soviet relations, accelerating the normalization process. Moscow began to act on the three obstacles. In Afghanistan, Moscow has begun withdrawing its military forces. On the Cambodian question, informal talks between the Soviets and Chinese are underway. And it now appears that Moscow is willing to remove most of its troops stationed in pro-Soviet Mongolia, which shares a long border with China.[2]

Probably the most important factor leading to the summit, however, has been Beijing's conclusion that Gorbachev has consolidated his power inside the Kremlin. Until this October, when the Soviet leader orchestrated a major reshuffling in the Kremlin, many Chinese doubted his staying power.[3] Explained a Chinese journalist to The Heritage Foundation: "That the Soviets suddenly wanted to talk to us or that they de-emphasized their military power did not suffice. We had to see if this guy could last."

## CHINESE AND SOVIET MOTIVES FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

Spurring the Moscow-Beijing thaw may be the recognition in both capitals that their economies are ailing, are very inferior to the West, and must be modernized. If this is an accurate reading of the views in Beijing and Moscow, then continued tensions between the two surely are viewed as an economic liability.

There are other reasons as well why Moscow and Beijing now seek improved relations. For the Soviet Union:

♦♦ Rapprochement with the Chinese would enhance the Soviets' international standing as they negotiate with the Bush Administration on arms control and other issues. For Gorbachev, a trip to Beijing would be a milestone for his so-called new political thinking, which stresses the need for international cooperation. Asia, moreover, seems to be emerging as a focal point for Soviet foreign policy. From Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech of July 1986 to his speech in Krasnoyarsk this September, the Soviets have waged a "charm offensive" directed toward the East, seemingly recognizing the necessity of adapting to an emerging fact: that the 21st century will be a Pacific century.

♦♦ Improved relations with Beijing would enhance considerably Soviet efforts to influence Asian political events. The Soviets, who fear a

2 *The Washington Post*, "Chinese Aid to Moscow to Set Stage For Summit," December 3, 1988.

3 Typical of the reasons for the Chinese change of heart was Gorbachev's demotion of Yegor Ligachev, an ideologue and Gorbachev's principal opposition. The Chinese had seen Ligachev as the force behind the staunch Soviet support for Vietnam.

technologically advanced China on their border, apparently assume that improved Beijing-Moscow relations could reduce the transfer of U.S. and Japanese technology to the PRC. The Soviets also probably expect that improved Sino-Soviet relations will make Moscow seem less threatening to such key South and Southeast Asia states as Thailand and Pakistan.

♦ ♦ Improved relations with the Chinese could help limit the growing defense links between Beijing and Washington. In recent years, U.S. warships have called on ports in China, such as Shanghai, and the two countries are believed to be sharing intelligence on Soviet troop movements in Asia. Gorbachev too may hope that improved Sino-Soviet relations could reduce Western resolve to maintain a forward military defense in the Pacific.[4]

♦ ♦ Increased cooperation between the Soviets and the Chinese could open markets in China for such Soviet exports as raw materials and consumer goods.

From Beijing's perspective, improved relations with the Soviets means not only a removal of the three obstacles and more secure borders, but also access to the Soviet market for Chinese goods. Although there are limits to Sino-Soviet commerce because each lacks hard currency, bilateral barter trade in 1986 was worth $2.6 billion. China provides several million dollars worth of consumer goods, farm produce, and machine tools to the Soviets. And the Chinese remain somewhat dependent on the USSR for spare parts for the industries built with Soviet help in the 1950s.

**Wanting To Be Included.** Also prompting Beijing to improve its relations with Moscow is its desire not to be left out as Moscow and Washington cozy up to each other. Chinese scholars and government officials on a recent visit in Washington told The Heritage Foundation that they are concerned that closer U.S.-Soviet ties will reduce Soviet resolve to continue making concessions on the three obstacles and make the U.S. less sensitive to vital PRC interests. In particular, officials and scholars from the PRC seem to fear that Washington may become less responsive to Beijing's concerns about U.S. relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan or Beijing's requests for technology.

These Chinese scholars also worry that the U.S.-Soviet Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty could undermine NATO's effectiveness, reduce the credibility of the U.S. nuclear guarantee, and open the way for Soviet gains in Europe which eventually would strengthen the Soviet hand in Asia.

4 The U.S. forward military defense is the deployment of U.S. forces in the Western Pacific to meet any Soviet threat to United States and its allies. Currently, there are 144,000 American military personnel either afloat inthe Pacific Basin or stationed in Guam, Japan, the Philippines, or South Korea.

## THE U.S AND SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS

For Beijing, Washington's continued support for the Republic of China on Taiwan, the substantial U.S. military and economic presence in Asia, and the importance of American technology in the PRC's development plans, make the U.S. not only impossible to ignore, but also a vital component in the PRC's strategic planning. For this reason, the Chinese are careful to assure the U.S. that a Sino-Soviet summit would not harm American interests or lead to a renewed formal Sino-Soviet alliance. Says an unnamed Reagan administration official in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*: "The Chinese have been trying to prepare the U.S. psychologically and politically for a summit, which was presented as inevitable."[5]

**Reacting Wisely.** Indeed, the terms set by the Chinese for Sino-Soviet rapprochement have at times seemed directed more toward Washington than Moscow. The three obstacles are closely aligned with U.S. interests. Chinese engagement of the Soviets has proceeded deliberately, calculated to elicit specific responses from the Kremlin, and designed to eliminate any element of surprise.

U.S. officials wisely have reacted calmly to the Sino-Soviet thaw. U.S. Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci, for example, at the close of his visit to the PRC last September, stated: "We welcome this dialogue and we think the relaxation of tensions between the Soviet Union and China would be healthy for world peace and stability."[6] The U.S. indeed has no reason to fear the Sino-Soviet dialogue.

**Needing the West.** For one thing, the extent to which the PRC can move closer to the Soviet Union is limited by important security and economic concerns. Without its close political, economic, and military cooperation with the West, for example, Beijing would be isolated in Asia, left alone to confront the Soviet presence on its border. Reduced access to the markets, financial institutions, or goods of the U.S., Japan, and Western Europe, moreover, probably would doom the PRC's modernization effort.

For another thing, U.S. policy is less dependent than in the past on continued PRC opposition to the Soviet Union. The successful rebuilding of the U.S. arsenal and improved U.S. economic strength, combined with the social and economic strains on the Soviet Union at home and abroad, have reduced the importance of the PRC as a counterweight in U.S.-Soviet relations.

5 *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 13, 1988 p. 18.
6 Transcript of news conference in China, September 1988.

## PROBABLE OUTCOMES OF SINO-SOVIET RAPPROCHEMENT

The Bush Administration should expect improvements in Sino-Soviet relations to produce political and economic exchanges and to reduce tension between the PRC and Soviet Union.

**Outcome #1: Sino-Soviet Trade and Economic Ties.**

In many ways, the Soviet and Chinese economies are more compatible with each other than with the West. While both countries need Western technology and know-how to modernize, there is considerable demand in each country for the other's principal exports. The Soviet Union currently is China's fifth largest trading partner and trade figures since 1985 have improved consistently. For instance, Chinese customs figures show bilateral barter trade in the first eight months of last year rising nearly 30 percent from a year earlier to $1.8 billion. And this compares to $260 million in 1981. A five-year agreement signed in 1985 aims to raise trade to $6 billion by 1990.[7]

The Soviet Union supplies China with power-generating equipment, motor vehicles, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, timber, fertilizer, and chemicals. The Chinese provide soybeans, farm produce, textiles, and light industrial products. The two nations have cooperated in such diverse ventures as the joint construction of a $400 million pulp mill in Heilongjiang Province in northeastern China and thermos-making ventures in the Soviet Union.

A PRC-USSR political thaw could lead to:

♦ ♦ Increased barter trade.

♦ ♦ Extension of border trade links and relaxation of visa requirements for cross-border traders, particularly on the Russian border with Manchuria and in Central Asia between China's Xinjiang Province and Soviet Kazakhstan.

♦ ♦ Exchange of technicians, particularly to upgrade Soviet technology brought to China in the 1950s.

♦ ♦ Increased export to China of Soviet equipment for the transportation, power-generating, metallurgical, coal mining, and machine-building industries.

♦ ♦ Expansion of cooperative geological survey teams.

♦ ♦ Cooperation to develop areas of the Soviet Far East, particularly Chinese labor for Siberia.

7 *The Washington Times*, "Sino-Soviet trade accelerating, but still no big deals," September 27, 1988, p. A9.

♦ ♦ Cooperation on further development of Chinese civilian aircraft industry.

♦ ♦ Opening of more railroad links.

♦ ♦ More frequent bilateral meetings on economic issues.

**Outcome #2: Political Dialogue.**

Discussion at a Deng-Gorbachev summit will probably highlight such areas of mutual interest as criticism of the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative, opposition to apartheid in South Africa, and support for the newly declared Palestinian state. And if recent stories in the official Soviet and Chinese press are an indication, there could be a soft-pedaling of the outstanding issues between the two. The two may establish working groups to deal with outstanding grievances concerning the three obstacles. Discussion also could concentrate on developing their bilateral relationship through increased official visits and summits.

The extent to which the two nations will improve their communist party-to-party relations is still unclear. These were severed in 1963. At the least, there probably will be reciprocal visits of low-level Soviet and Chinese party members. The PRC also probably will move to further improve its relationship with Soviet bloc communist parties, and there likely will be exchanges of academic and technical specialists.

**Outcome #3: Security and military concerns.**

The most contentious areas of discussion at a Gorbachev-Deng meeting surely will concern the three obstacles. Beijing can be expected to press for further Soviet action on all three. A Moscow response could include:

♦ ♦ Withdrawal of Red Army troops from Soviet-backed Mongolia. Though Moscow withdrew 12,000 troops from Mongolia in 1987, as many as 50,000 to 60,000 troops remain. Some of these are likely to be withdrawn as part of a longstanding Soviet proposal to establish "confidence building measures," such as notification of troop movements or new fortifications, to reduce tensions on the Sino-Soviet border.

♦ ♦ Detailed explanation of Soviet withdrawal plans from Afghanistan. The Chinese expect a complete Soviet withdrawal by February 15, as stipulated by the U.N.-mediated agreement signed in Geneva last April. In return for pulling out of Afghanistan, Moscow could ask the Chinese to stop assisting the Afghan resistance. One particular problem for the two may be the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor, a 180-mile stretch of land bordered by the Soviet Union to the north, Pakistan to the south, and China to the east. The Karakoram Highway, Pakistan's sole land-link with its staunch ally, the PRC, is just 40 miles away from the Wakhan corridor. China

wants the Soviets to withdraw from the Wakhan because of the threat these forces pose to Pakistan.

♦ ♦ Further negotiations on Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. There is evidence that, in response to Soviet pressure, the Vietnamese have promised to withdraw their troops from Cambodia by 1990. The Soviets also have said that they will decrease their economic support for Vietnam. Nonetheless, Moscow has made less headway on this obstacle than on the two others.

♦ ♦ Discussions on the security situation in the Korean peninsula. This may become a fourth "obstacle." Both the PRC and the Soviet Union have historic interests in the region and close ties with North Korea. The two probably will discuss ways to maintain stability in the area and possibly agree to nudge Pyongyang to reconcile its differences with Seoul. Their motives: both wish to engage South Korea as a trade partner and investor.

**Outcome #4: External pressures.**

Though not very likely, improved Sino-Soviet relations could create problems indirectly for U.S. policy and interests in the region.

First, Taipei might be a target. At the summit, Beijing might express concern over increased economic links between the Soviets and several Warsaw Pact nations with the Republic of China on Taiwan and request Soviet assistance in efforts to isolate the ROC.

Second, many U.S. friends in Asia worry that Beijing, somewhat freed from concern about Soviet military intentions, might be tempted to flex its growing military muscle in the Pacific Basin. Of particular concern: Beijing's claims to the Spratly Islands, a strategically important archipelago in the South China Sea, are contested by Vietnam, the Philippines, and others.

Third, Japan could feel pressure to resolve its differences with Moscow. Senior Japanese defense officials confirmed to The Heritage Foundation in Tokyo this fall that as Moscow settles its longstanding problems with the Chinese there is increased public pressure in Japan to resolve Soviet-Japanese problems. Tokyo-Moscow relations remain strained by the longstanding dispute over the Northern Territories.

Finally, Soviet forces withdrawn from the Sino-Soviet border could be redeployed westward, thus threatening U.S. interests in Europe.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

George Bush should take several measures to define U.S. policy toward the expected improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. Among these:

1) **Make clear to Beijing and Moscow** that the U.S. regards as unacceptable a formal Sino-Soviet alliance. This should be done through diplomatic channels and in public pronouncements by the President and his key foreign policy advisors.

2) **State that military cooperation** between the Chinese and the Soviets could be viewed as an alliance.

3) **Stress to Chinese officials** the continued Soviet military presence in Asia and urge Beijing to pursue policies aimed at reducing the Soviet threat in the region. The U.S. should propose coordinated U.S.-PRC policies, such as intelligence-sharing operations, to determine if Moscow is really removing the three obstacles. The U.S. should stress to the PRC that improved relations with Moscow increase the importance of a U.S. military presence in Asia and ask Beijing for subtle and appropriate help in assuring the U.S. presence in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.

4) **Consult closely with the Asian allies** on developments in the Sino-Soviet rapprochement.

5) **Proclaim arms control, regional tensions, and human rights** as the basis for a U.S. version of Beijing's three obstacles to improved relations with the U.S. The President should declare that the U.S. expects Soviet and Chinese compliance on:

Various arms control issues. For the Soviets, this might entail full compliance with existing arms control agreements. For the Chinese, an agreement to cease transferring tactical and nuclear-capable missiles to such countries as Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia or a consent to begin arms control negotiations aimed at limiting further growth in its nuclear stockpile.

Specific regional issues. For the Soviets this might include compliance on China's three obstacles or the cessation of Moscow's for Marxist insurgencies in Ethiopia or Angola. For the Chinese, this might include an explicit statement by Beijing that it renounces the use of force to solve the Taiwan issue. The U.S. also could urge the Soviets and Chinese to pressure North Korea to make more concessions in its evolving relations with Seoul.

Human rights issues. For the Soviets this might include a pledge to release all of its political and religious prisoners and fulfill its commitments under the 1975 Helsinki Accords. For the Chinese, this might include a cessation of human rights abuses in Tibet or the codification of democratic rights and freedoms in the Basic Law now being drafted for Hong Kong.

## CONCLUSION

Improved Sino-Soviet relations almost surely do not bode ill for U.S. interests. If Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping carefully manage

improvements in relations between their countries that reduce tension on their borders and in Asia, it will enhance the prospects of regional stability and should be favorable to the U.S., its friends, and allies.

**Seizing Some Global Attention.** George Bush, nonetheless, should state unequivocally that a Sino-Soviet alliance is unacceptable to the U.S. And he should initiate a public diplomacy campaign that declares arms control, regional tension, and human rights as the most frequent barriers to improved U.S-USSR and U.S-PRC relations. By labeling these as the "three obstacles" to better relations with the U.S., Bush could seize for the U.S. some of the global attention generated by the Deng-Gorbachev summit and keep some of the initiative regarding the Sino-Soviet relationship in U.S. hands.

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