

U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA: IMPLICATIONS FOR KOREA

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I.

The pace of change in Soviet-American relations since 1985 has been truly breathtaking. In the fall of 1990, two historic meetings of the leaders of the erstwhile Cold War rivals accelerated that already breathtaking pace still further. At a one-day summit meeting in Helsinki, Presidents George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev jointly affirmed their common determination to reverse Iraq's aggression against Kuwait. A few days later, in Moscow, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze joined their German, British, and French colleagues in signing a treaty terminating Four Power occupation rights in the two German states, thus removing the last external obstacle to their full unification.

For a latter-day Rip Van Winkle awakening from a five-year sleep, or even only from a brief one-year snooze, these events would have been truly mind-boggling: American and Soviet high officials jointly celebrating what is in effect the absorption of the German Democratic Republic into the Federal Republic of Germany and the entry of a united Germany into NATO; the Soviet and American presidents concerting a common position to oppose an act of aggression by a Soviet Third-World treaty partner against an Arabian feudal dynasty.

Some have seen these events as turning points signaling a new era both in international politics and in Soviet-American relations. German unification has been widely hailed as the decisive act ending the old Cold War era. The Persian Gulf crisis has been called the first test of the emerging new international order, a new order in which Soviet-American cooperation is to replace their old confrontation.

That the Cold War era is effectively over is now indisputably clear. The era in which world politics was dominated by Soviet-American military-ideological confrontation has come to an end. Intense global rivalry between the two states is no longer the all-absorbing

preoccupation of either. But beyond that, precisely what the longer-term character of their relationship will be, remains for the time being very much an open question. It is a question that depends on much larger and more fundamental considerations than the outcome of the Persian Gulf crisis. A great deal will depend on how the United States more generally accommodates its foreign policy to the more multipolar environment we have now entered. But much more will depend on what happens in the Soviet Union, on the character and configuration of the new political entities that finally emerge from the deep crisis now engulfing the territory of what we have known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. How will the rising new leaders of these political entities define their national interests and their roles in the world in the light of their internal capabilities and priorities? About these most fundamental questions, there are profound uncertainties. And these uncertainties are likely to remain unresolved for a long time during a drawn-out process of Soviet transformation that is bound to be uneven and full of surprises. It is hard to see how the shape of the new post-Cold War international order can be clearly defined until the shape of the new Soviet Union becomes more apparent.

However, this radical, and for the time being irreducible uncertainty, has not prevented the Soviet Union and the United States from cooperating successfully to end the division of Europe and to help heal Cold War wounds in Afghanistan, Cambodia, and southern Africa. Provided that the peoples of the Soviet Union can avert a violent discontinuity as they complete the historic reconstitution of their state, there are almost certain to be other fresh opportunities for U.S.-Soviet cooperation to avoid or resolve international conflicts. Not the least of the potential candidates for the application of such cooperation is festering instability on the Korean peninsula.

II.

Without doubt, it is change in the Soviet Union and in its foreign policy and security behavior that has been the single most dynamic element propelling the revolution in world politics and the

transformation of U.S.-Soviet relations. The magnitude of change that has occurred in Soviet external policy and behavior would have been unthinkable without profound internal change in Soviet politics. Of course, tactical shifts and even substantial modifications of foreign policy strategy would have been possible and, indeed, given the international environment of the mid-1980s, would probably have been carried out even by a Soviet leadership bent on preserving the old order at home.

But without a profound change in weltanschauung and in self-image, the foreign policy changes would have stopped far short of what we have seen to date. The radical transformation of the USSR's geostrategic position in the world, notably in Europe, might not have occurred at all; or, if it had, the change would almost certainly not have been peaceful and its consequences far less hopeful than they are today.

In this profound reorientation of Soviet foreign policy, the relationship with the United States has been the key and it has received the lion's share of the top leaders' personal attention. The goal of ending the confrontation with the United States became a central objective of the Gorbachev leadership from the very outset. It was pursued with remarkable determination and consistency in the face of what were, until fairly recently, deeply suspicious or skeptical adversaries in Washington. Early speculation that the Soviet Union, under Gorbachev, would shift to a "Europe first" strategy never materialized. Nor did Moscow adopt, as many anticipated, an "indirect strategy" toward Washington, one that would have relied primarily on influencing U.S. allies to affect American policy, rather than on dealing directly with the United States. Instead, the Soviet Union moved directly to engage the United States on a broad range of issues in which Washington was the sole or leading interlocutor for the West.

In deciding to engage the United States directly, Gorbachev and his associates took major initiatives to move ongoing negotiations out of the sterile dead ends into which they had fallen and to open fresh dialogues in new areas where there had been none. They did so by boldly abandoning old Soviet positions that were no longer defensible and by

taking a fresh look, from an altered perspective, at U.S. positions that had been flatly rejected in the past.

The new approach was first evident in strategic arms (START) negotiations. In the fall of 1985, Moscow made the first in a series of shifts in the START negotiations that moved the Soviet position in the direction of the American proposal for "deep cuts" in strategic missiles, and notably in Soviet "heavy missiles" for which there was no counterpart U.S. system. The new Soviet approach became more strikingly apparent in 1987 when Moscow in effect accepted the long-standing American "zero option" for intermediate nuclear missiles (INF) in Europe, going Washington one better by tacking on a second "zero" for shorter range systems in which the Soviet numerical advantage was even greater. It is true that the new Soviet position on INF was interpreted by some conservative U.S. skeptics as continued Soviet pursuit by other, more flexible means, of the old Soviet strategy aimed at undermining extended deterrence and splitting the Western alliance. But in the final year of the Reagan Administration, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and Gorbachev's announcement of major unilateral cuts in Soviet conventional forces, seem finally to have persuaded most in Washington that the Soviet changes went far beyond mere tactical maneuvering or easily reversible regrouping of forces.

By the time the Bush Administration took office in January 1989, virtually the entire American foreign policy establishment was agreed that there was now a Soviet leadership with which the West and the United States could and should "deal." But some, especially outside the administration, were prepared to deal more quickly than others, and for larger stakes. They were not only ready but eager to "help Gorbachev" in the bargain. Others, including most of the senior policy figures in the new administration, wanted to move much more cautiously and were less certain that "helping Gorbachev" was in the U.S. interest. The new president and the experienced, pragmatic foreign policy team around him evidently still had doubts about Gorbachev's intentions and especially about his staying power and chances for survival. There was a gnawing anxiety that Soviet diplomacy was loosening the cohesion and resolution

of the Western alliance and threatening premature dismantling of tried and true security structures that had held a hostile Soviet Union at bay for forty years. In these circumstances, Soviet diplomacy was perceived to be at least as much a threat to be parried as an opportunity to be explored.

By the fall of 1989, however, the new U.S. administration had swung sharply in the direction of accelerated and broadened engagement with the Soviet Union. Unusually productive ministerial meetings between Baker and Shevardnadze were important milestones in the evolution of the administration's new policy. In a Moscow meeting in May, the Soviet side produced specific numbers for several categories of weapons to be reduced in the new Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) negotiations that were so close to NATO's as to persuade the administration that Moscow was serious about making a deal, even on terms highly favorable to NATO. In September, in Wyoming, a new Soviet concession on a key stalemated issue in START removed a major obstacle and cleared the way for an agreement to hold a full-fledged summit in 1990. In a major policy speech in October, Baker made clear the administration's new conclusion that uncertainty about the fate of Gorbachev and perestroika provided "all the more, reason, not less, for us to seize the present opportunity" to reach agreements.

What made the decisive difference, however, was Soviet acceptance of the collapse of communist domination of Eastern Europe. It provided dramatic, tangible evidence of far-reaching change both in the policies and geopolitical position of the Soviet Union, which could not possibly be explained away as a ruse or a temporary tactical retreat that might leave the USSR free to resume the old struggle after a respite. Events in Eastern Europe in the fall and winter of 1989-1990 reinforced a U.S. perception that real strategic opportunities lay ahead, not only in arms control but in new political-military arrangements that could end the division of Europe and fundamentally improve European security--the central area of U.S.-Soviet competition and the heart of the Cold War.

III.

Because the United States and the Soviet Union are nuclear superpowers with far-flung interests, a major improvement in their bilateral relations inevitably has global repercussions. But the effects have not been evenly distributed across all the regions of the world.

Geographically, the change has centered on Europe. This is hardly surprising because it is in Europe that the most vital interests of the two countries have intersected most immediately and directly. It is the region where the burdens and risks of Cold War tensions have been greatest and where the largest opportunities for a fundamental alteration in East-West relations have resided. Moreover, it is the region in which the Soviet Union has had the most substantial assets to put on the table in high-stake negotiations with the United States and the Western alliance. And in any case the tumultuous pace of unfolding events in Eastern Europe in 1989 virtually commanded the urgent and immediate attention of the major powers.

In the Asia-Pacific region, by contrast, there has been no comparably deep across-the-board U.S.-Soviet engagement and no urgent demand for it. This is not to say that the region has been insulated altogether from the Europe-centered changes in international politics and U.S.-Soviet relations. The overall lessening of global tensions and improved Soviet-American relations have greatly facilitated U.S.-Soviet cooperation in moving toward settlement of outstanding regional conflicts in which their interests have been engaged.

But structural differences between the Asia-Pacific region and Europe make the U.S.-Soviet relationship much less central to the international politics of the former than the latter. These structural differences are well-known and do not require extensive elaboration. The Asia-Pacific political-military environment is much more complex than the one in Europe was before the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Instead of a European constellation dominated and disciplined by what were two superpower-led alliance systems, in Asia-Pacific there are multiple power centers, including--in addition to the United States and the Soviet Union--China, Japan, and India. There

are large asymmetries in the kinds of military capabilities deployed in the region by the United States and the USSR and in their missions; unlike Europe, they are only partially intended to confront each other. There are even larger asymmetries in the nonmilitary assets and activities of the two countries in the Asia-Pacific region and, particularly, in the extent of their involvement in the dynamic economic life of the region.

For a variety of reasons, there does not appear to be a great sense of urgency about beginning a comprehensive U.S.-Soviet engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. Asia is the most dynamic and rapidly growing region of the world economy, but its international relations have been relatively stable compared to the revolutionary storms that have battered Europe. Washington does not have strong incentives to engage Moscow more broadly in Asia. On the whole, the United States is quite satisfied with the geostrategical status quo in the Asia-Pacific region and does not perceive major opportunities for fundamental improvement through broad engagement with the Soviet Union.

The United States has thus far been able to pick and choose Asian issues on which to engage the Soviet Union politically, while shrugging off periodic Soviet efforts to draw the United States into more comprehensive dialogue. In the two outstanding cases of U.S.-Soviet cooperation in the region, movement toward political settlement involved the disengagement of Soviet and Soviet-allied military forces (from Afghanistan and Cambodia, respectively).

It should also be said that the Soviet Union has put less on the table in Asia than in Europe. In part, this may be because the Soviet leadership is so deeply preoccupied domestically and has concentrated its foreign policy energies on more pressing matters in Europe. Gorbachev's personal involvement in the USSR's foreign relations in Asia has been intermittent and episodic. But, priorities aside, the USSR in fact has fewer assets of interest to the United States with which to play in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Gorbachev leadership has enjoyed more success in Asia in its policy toward China. In Sino-Soviet relations, each side has had a great deal to offer to the other and both have perceived opportunities for large returns from rapprochement. The goal of rapprochement with China was clearly laid out in Gorbachev's two major Asian foreign policy statements (Vladivostok, 1986, and Krasnoyarsk, 1988) and followed up by concrete Soviet initiatives including the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Mongolia. The normalization of Sino-Soviet relations, culminating in the Gorbachev trip to China in May 1989, is clearly the outstanding success of Soviet Asia policy to date. However, because the dynamics of the "strategic triangle" are no longer operative, this improvement has had relatively little effect on Soviet relations with the United States.

In addition to rapprochement with China, another major goal of Soviet Asian policy has also been achieved: lowering regional perceptions of Soviet military threat. That accomplishment, together with the overall improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations and in Soviet political relations with most states in the region, has removed most of the political obstacles blocking greater Soviet participation in the dynamic economic life of the Asia-Pacific region, perhaps the most important broad objective of Soviet policy in the region.

But, on strictly economic grounds the USSR is still unable to attract investors and partners and remains, for the most part, only a marginal actor. The deteriorating Soviet economy, Moscow's failure to open up the Soviet Far East for foreign investment on attractive terms, and radical uncertainties about the USSR's economic reform and recovery prospects have impeded the development of substantial Soviet participation in the burgeoning economic life of the Asia-Pacific region, despite lowered perceptions of Soviet threat.

In short, the broad "new" approach laid out by Gorbachev in Vladivostok and Krasnoyarsk has achieved some partial objectives, but these successes have not substantially widened or deepened the role of the USSR as a regional actor nor attracted American interest in more comprehensive engagement with the Soviet Union in the Asia-Pacific region.

IV.

Whether the Soviet Union can soon begin to play the larger role to which it aspires in the Asia-Pacific region depends less on further incremental improvements in U.S.-Soviet relations, which are already quite good, than on other factors which the United States can, at most, only marginally influence. The first, almost exclusively domestic requirement, is to increase the economic attractiveness of the Soviet Union to others in the region. Foreign perceptions currently are dominated by massive uncertainty about the directions in which the Soviet leadership intends to take the country's economic development, including such fundamentals as the identity of the economic partners who will be empowered to deal with foreign investors. The devolution of political power from the center to the republics and expanded freedom of action for regional and municipal authorities within the republics, could help break the bottlenecks which have thus far obstructed the long-promised "opening up" of the Soviet Far East. This means, above all, relaxing the military's stranglehold on the region. Russian republic and local Siberian leaders will have greater incentives to move ahead on such new departures as the creation of free economic zones and innovative joint venture plans than officials of the Moscow central ministries for whom breaking new ground in Siberia has enjoyed a lower priority than intensifying the development of industries in the heartland.

The most important foreign policy change required for wider and more rapid Soviet involvement in the region's political and economic life is a breakthrough in Soviet-Japanese relations. Japan is the only major "adversary" power with which the USSR has not substantially improved relations in the Gorbachev era. It is, of course, the economic powerhouse of the Asia-Pacific region and the world's largest source of investment capital. Although the economic attractiveness of Soviet energy and other natural resources has clearly declined since the early 1970s--due to the shifts in the structure of the Japanese economy away from energy-intensive to information- and technology-intensive industries--there is still room for substantially more economic

interaction than strained Soviet-Japanese political relations have thus far permitted. More and more Soviet observers see a breakthrough in Soviet-Japanese relations as the key to a Soviet breakout into the economic life of the region. Hopes for such a political improvement now center on the scheduled April 1991 visit to Japan of President Gorbachev and in the possibility that substantial progress can be made in resolving the "Northern Territories" issues.

A major improvement in Soviet-Japanese political relations would likely have repercussions going well beyond the bilateral economic realm, affecting the environment for a security dialogue as well. So long as Tokyo remains dissatisfied on the Northern Territories question, Japan will almost certainly continue to deflect Soviet efforts to open trilateral arms control discussions with Japan and the United States. Washington is disinclined on general grounds to respond to these Soviet overtures and will surely not wish to reconsider so long as Tokyo continues to oppose. But a major improvement in Soviet-Japanese relations could alter Japanese perspectives on a security dialogue with the Soviet Union. A breakthrough on the Northern Territories issue would almost automatically have an arms control dimension. Most of the plausible alternative resolutions would have to provide for some form of demilitarization of the islands, by the Soviet Union during a transitional period, and ultimately by Japan, if some or all of the islands were returned. In these circumstances, Japan might wish to broaden the discussion to include constraints on threatening Soviet air and naval activities in the Sea of Japan to which Tokyo has long objected. The USSR, in turn, would present its own concerns about U.S. and Japanese forces that pose a threat to home-ported Soviet naval forces, particularly to Soviet ballistic missile-launching submarines in the Sea of Okhotsk "bastion." Thus, a breakthrough in Soviet-Japanese relations could open up multiple possibilities for a security and arms control dialogue that may otherwise remain blocked.

V.

However, the most logical near-term focus for U.S.-Soviet security cooperation is the Korean peninsula. This is probably true independently of any change in Soviet-Japanese relations, though an improvement there would surely add fresh impetus. The Korean peninsula remains the most potentially explosive flash point in Asia, and, as other regional conflicts are resolved or dampened, perhaps in the world. With the impending creation of a large buffer zone in Europe that will separate NATO and Soviet military forces by hundreds of kilometers, the Korean peninsula will contain the world's largest concentration of hostile military forces in direct contact with each other. And, finally, the Korean peninsula continues to be the one place where the vital security interests of the four great powers of Asia--the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, and China--intersect.

The interests of the United States and the Soviet Union in avoiding military conflict on the Korean peninsula have long been converging. But until recently, the regional environment was not conducive to meaningful dialogue or cooperation to secure those interests. The rigid stances of their respective Korean allies and their lack of political access to each other's ally, deprived both Washington and Moscow of sufficient room for maneuver. Recent changes in the global political climate and in bilateral relations involving the Soviet Union, the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea have laid the groundwork for a much more intense multilateral dialogue to stabilize the Korean peninsula, if not yet to resolve the Korean question definitively. The most dramatic of these bilateral changes, of course, is the establishment of Soviet-South Korean diplomatic relations at the end of September 1990.

- (1) The stake of both the Soviet Union and the United States in preventing tensions on the Korean peninsula from growing has been increased still further by the enormous mutual investment both now have in preserving and extending the present global detente.

- (2) Sino-Soviet rapprochement has relaxed constraints on Soviet freedom of maneuver by reducing Moscow's concern that Beijing would exploit for hostile purposes any North Korean "tilt" toward China.
- (3) Soviet policy on Korean affairs has gained greater flexibility as a result of the breakthrough in Soviet-South Korean political relations and the rapid development of Soviet economic ties. The U.S. administration played a key role in facilitating the June meeting of Presidents Gorbachev and Roh Tae Woo in San Francisco, which was a major milestone in the evolution of Soviet-South Korean relations. By virtue of its contacts with both Korean states, the USSR is now much better positioned than ever before to gain access to any formal multilateral dialogue that may ensue.
- (4) The development of economic relations and political contacts between Seoul and both Moscow and Beijing reduces constraints on the flexibility of both Washington and Tokyo in pursuing contacts with Pyongyang, a process which would also serve the interests of advancing toward a multilateral dialogue. There has already been fairly dramatic evidence of this in the "unofficial" Japanese-North Korean talks in Pyongyang in September. Thus far, however, the U.S.-North Korean talks pursued under Chinese auspices in Beijing have reportedly not been very fruitful.
- (5) North Korea is now more isolated than ever and is out of step not only with the Western and developing world, but also with most of what until recently was the community of communist-ruled states. Less than ever can it count on the support of either the Soviet Union or China for any military adventure it might launch against the south to achieve forcible reunification under northern control. This should make continuing on the present trajectory seem increasingly unpromising to Pyongyang. The fact is that North Korea is becoming progressively less important to its allies while

falling even further behind a South Korea that is becoming more important to them.

- (6) The United States has stronger incentives than ever to explore new political means for ensuring stability on the Korean peninsula. In the context of the dismantled confrontation in Europe, overall improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations, and the growing U.S. budget deficit crisis, pressures for large cuts in the U.S. defense budget and for the drawdown of military forces permanently deployed overseas, including in South Korea, are growing. A 10 percent reduction in ground forces deployed in Asia has already been scheduled, but pressures are almost certain to persist if global tensions continue to ease, and if North Korea does not raise the political military temperature in Northeast Asia.
- (7) An increasingly self-assured Republic of Korea is much more open than before to contacts and political dialogue with the North, evidently more confident that the potential benefits outweigh the risks. Although North Korea can be expected to persist in efforts to employ these contacts to subvert the authority of the Seoul government, the exposure of North Korea to the progress and dynamism of the South is on balance likely to contribute more to favorable prospects for stable relations and ultimately for peaceful reunification.
- (8) However, as before, the single greatest uncertainty resides in Pyongyang. For the North Korean leadership to abandon once and for all its commitment to reunification only on Pyongyang's terms and its self-isolating emphasis on "self-reliance," would require a fundamental change in the regime's core foreign policy principles. It is doubtful that North Korea, any more than the Soviet Union before, could accomplish the radical foreign policy shift required without equally profound changes in its domestic system. Absent such an internal transformation, North Korea is unlikely to go beyond tactical and propagandistic exploitation of the new situation in the

region and in the world. Rather than opening up to an international community with which it is more and more out of step, the North Korean leadership under Kim Il-Sung might choose to turn even more inward in an effort to insulate itself from "alien" outside trends and to use the reunification issue primarily to wage political warfare against the South.

In that case, the new potential for multilateral dialogue and U.S.-Soviet cooperation on Korea would not be realized. The United States would probably see no alternative but to continue as before, contributing to its South Korean ally a vital increment of deterrence in the face of an intransigent and heavily armed North Korea. The United States would reduce its military presence in proportion to the growth of South Korea's own capabilities relative to North Korea, rather than to the reduction in mutual South-North hostility and in levels of armaments on the two sides.

In such circumstances, however, the Soviet Union would come under heavier pressure to choose between two competing strands of its present policy in the Korean peninsula: whether to persist in providing the North Koreans with measured support and reassurance great enough to prevent desperation from provoking Pyongyang to dangerous adventure, but not sufficient to provide the North confident grounds for a calculated aggression against the South; or to disengage gradually from Pyongyang, pending the advent of a political leadership in that country open to change, meanwhile pursuing the economic and regional political benefits of closer relations with the Republic of Korea.

If, on the other hand, Kim Il-Sung, or, more likely, his successors come to see opening up to the outside world not merely as a calculated risk worth taking to advance the old North Korean agenda, but as part and parcel of a reconstruction of the North Korean political and economic system, then the last and indispensable precondition for a genuine peace dialogue on the Korean Peninsula would be in place. Even under those conditions, the two Korean states could not move directly or immediately toward a political settlement without first easing greatly

their confrontational postures along their border. And in such a process, both the United States and the Soviet Union would have vital roles to play. Never have they had stronger incentives to do so and never fewer inhibitions about cooperating.

