SECURITY ISSUES IN EAST ASIA

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Michael D. Rich and Mary E. Morris*

The extraordinary economic and technological dynamism of the Asia-Pacific region over the past decade has occurred in a time of comparative political stability. With no major crisis looming on the horizon and the likelihood of armed conflict relatively low, individual states have had the time, opportunity, and incentive to undertake more responsibility for their own defense.

The maintenance of this prevailing framework for regional politics, commerce, and security is dependent upon the deterrence of major military conflict that would jeopardize political stability and internal economic growth. It also depends upon the denial of opportunities for any power to intimidate or coerce its neighbors, as well as on a credible commitment to maintain the territorial integrity of individual states. And it is associated with the maintenance of a maritime balance that permits unimpeded movement of goods, raw material, and energy resources.

It is within that framework that we must analyze the actions of the Soviet Union in East Asia and the Pacific and the responses of the United States. Both countries have vital interests in the area, interests critical to their global military planning. Those vital interests dominate the behavior of both superpowers in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in relation to the longer-term directions of U.S. and Soviet policy. In the following remarks we will outline the motives for the Soviet Union's strategic objectives in East Asia and the military and political initiatives it is taking to achieve those objectives. We

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will then discuss some of the interests of the United States in the region and set out some regional security objectives that appear to be consistent with the goals of the United States and those of the East Asian nations.

SECURITY ISSUES FROM THE SOVIET PERSPECTIVE

Motivation

The actions of the Soviet Union in East Asia reflect three major concerns. The first of these is homeland defense. Over half of Soviet territory is east of the Urals. This geographic reality presents the Soviets with an enduring two-front problem because of traditional rivalry with China and the proximity of Japan to the Soviet Far East. Thus, they must not only protect themselves from a perceived European threat, but they believe they must also protect themselves from encroachments against their position in Asia. As a result, the Soviets must maintain an extraordinarily large and diversified force structure.

The second Soviet concern in the Far East is the vulnerability of Soviet naval forces. Again because of their geography, Soviet naval forces may have trouble traversing the Sea of Japan through the Soya, Tsugaru, and Tsushima Straits. They thus run the risk of being bottled up in their coastal waters, unable to operate on the high seas in time of crisis. Even if they can escape, they are likely to be lacking air cover and subject to the vulnerability of their resupply lines.

Finally, the Soviets are concerned about U.S. forces deployed in locations near Soviet territory. The Soviet Union feels it must counter these to ensure its own security. In fact, of course, U.S. forces have been deployed in response to Soviet military initiatives. Let's now take a look at some of these recent initiatives.

Military Initiatives

In response to the security concerns just outlined, Moscow began to augment its defenses opposite China in the mid- to late 1960s. Today, as a result, Soviet ground forces in Asia comprise 53 divisions in Siberia and the Soviet Far East; there are approximately 500,000 troops—one-quarter of total Soviet ground force strength. More than 10,000 of those have been stationed on the four islands in the Kurile chain, Japan's Northern Territories.
Soviet forces in Asia have been increased and modernized without drawing down forces deployed to other fronts. And, in the late 1970s, Soviet forces in East Asia were organized into a separate theater of military action, an indication of the increased Soviet focus on Asia. All Soviet services in Asia now receive frontline combat equipment, and the logistic base, readiness, and mobility of Soviet Asian forces have been steadily improved.

In the past 20 years, the Soviet Union has also strengthened its Pacific Fleet, transforming it from a relatively compact coastal operation into a high-seas naval force with distinct offensive capabilities. The fleet now comprises more than 120 attack submarines, 19 amphibious vessels, and more than 90 major surface combatants, including 2 Kiev-class aircraft carriers. The Soviet Pacific Fleet is now the largest of the four Soviet naval fleets and is at least one-third bigger than it was in the late 1970s. The growth and increased visibility of the Soviet naval power deployed in the region is testimony to Moscow's determination to contest U.S. naval strength in the West Pacific.

The growing power of the Soviet Pacific Fleet is not due simply to increased numbers but also to expanded port opportunities. Soviet access to Cam Ranh Bay gives them their sole warm-water port in the Pacific as well as their largest base outside of Soviet territory. The Fleet is in a much better position from Cam Ranh than from Vladivostok to blockade the vital southern straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok, through which much of the West's oil and other strategic materials pass. Facilities at Cam Ranh Bay could also assist Soviet ships in moving quickly from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and then on into the Persian Gulf.

East Asia is also a focal point for increased Soviet air power. The Soviets have placed about 2400 combat aircraft in the area, of which around 1400 are modern fighters, including the MiG-23, MiG-27, SU-17, and SU-24. These aircraft are stationed on Japan's northern islands and in Vietnam as well as on Soviet territory. The Soviets have also deployed 85 TU-26 (Backfire) bombers within range of Japan, China, and other Asian countries. Medium bombers have been transferred to Cam Ranh
Bay, where they serve as a Soviet counterpoint to the U.S. Philippine bases, which are within bombing range across the South China Sea. With the Soviet air base at Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay provides a launching point for air attacks against China. In addition, there are as many as 171 SS-20 intermediate-range land-based nuclear missiles in Soviet Asia, significantly more than were deployed there just three years ago. Each missile carries up to three independently targeted nuclear warheads.

This accumulation of military power in the Pacific region is aimed at achieving at least seven political and military objectives:

1. Neutralizing the power projection capabilities of the United States.
3. Defending Soviet territorial waters, air space, and conventional military assets against intrusion and encroachment.
4. Targeting vital military facilities in China, Japan, and other states without having to rely on central strategic systems.
5. Impeding or disrupting any efforts to interdict lines of communication vital to Soviet military operations.
6. Encircling China, with the potential of deterring major PRC military actions and with the added potential of encouraging Beijing's neutrality in the event of Soviet-American hostilities.
7. Intimidating Japan, with the intent of limiting Japanese support of U.S. military interests.

The Soviet Union hopes that the result of all this will be exclusion of the forward deployment of U.S. military power, a pliant, non-aligned China, and a quiescent Japan. Moscow would thus be left in a position of unquestioned regional dominance.
Political and Economic Initiatives

Moscow's interest in Asia is not limited to military overtures alone: the island chain of Kiribati has signed a treaty with the Soviets, allowing Soviet tuna fishing in return for $1.5 million--10 percent of Kiribati's total budget. Offers of economic assistance have been made to many island states in the region, and as a consequence several South Pacific nations have recently lifted a six-year-old ban on Soviet cruise ships in their waters. Vanuatu has established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and says it will soon sign a fishing agreement that would also allow the Soviets to set up onshore plants. Future Soviet military operations, according to Malcolm Fraser, Australia's former Prime Minister, will be "an absolute certainty....It will start as a fish-processing facility. But that will have some refueling facilities, which will require repair facilities and, in turn, an airfield. Then it is a base."  

Recently, anti-Chinese rhetoric has been jettisoned to help secure an improved Sino-Soviet relationship. The Gorbachev speech on July 28 in Vladivostok has been called a watershed event: for the first time a Soviet leader made conciliatory gestures touching on Chinese security interests. The speech touched on the three Chinese obstacles to normalization: Soviet troop deployments on the Sino-Soviet border, Soviet support of the Vietnamese war effort, and the Soviet "war of conquest" in Afghanistan.

Gorbachev, however, offered a partial solution to only one of the obstacles with his discussion of withdrawing Soviet troops on the Mongolian border. The most likely action would involve a pullback of one of the five Soviet divisions to Siberia and would thus not really reduce the total or materially alter the Soviet posture to China. The gesture would nonetheless be a concession to one of Beijing's three obstacles to normalization, and could serve as a symbol of future, more meaningful concessions.

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1 The recent conclusion of a long-term agreement between the United States and Kiribati, however, has lessened the impact of this Soviet "coup."

Gorbachev's further proposal to negotiate with the People's Republic of China over balanced reductions in conventional ground forces is new and is also a gesture--especially in view of the Chinese force advantage along the border that offsets the Soviet advantage in conventional and nuclear firepower. Geographically, also, Soviet forces are closer to the Sino-Soviet border than are the bulk of Chinese forces. And Soviet firepower facing China continues to grow, while the Chinese have just completed a cut in the size of their army.

In his Vladivostok speech, Gorbachev offered no significant Soviet movement regarding the other two "obstacles." On Indochina, Gorbachev adopted the bland position of urging the PRC and Vietnam to settle their differences. While this is a shift from standard Soviet statements, and may irritate the Vietnamese because of its weak display of solidarity, it is not likely to produce meaningful concessions from them. On Afghanistan, Gorbachev's announcement that he was withdrawing six regiments was most likely a political gesture aimed at non-Chinese audiences, and part of the effort to weaken support for the Afghan resistance coming from the West and the Moslem world. While the Soviet Union has shown increasing signs of desire to extricate itself from Afghanistan, it has yet to withdraw a militarily significant number of troops.

The various Gorbachev statements directed at Beijing constitute the centerpiece of a broad Soviet-Asian-Pacific diplomatic offensive that has been emerging for the past year. Gorbachev would probably prefer to see the following results:

1. Warmer relations between the Soviet Union and China, as in the spring and summer of 1985.
2. Chinese receptivity to Soviet overtures for high-level contacts, if possible at the summit level, but in any case by abandoning resistance to an early exchange of Foreign Minister visits.
4. Convincing China that the SS-20s are directed against U.S. forces and facilities in the Pacific rather than against China.
5. The creation of new leverage to use in Soviet-American relations.

It is of course to China's advantage to keep tensions with the Soviet Union at a manageable level. In addition, the Chinese appear to believe that Soviet geopolitical expansion has passed its zenith, and that there are diminished Soviet opportunities for intervention in the third world. Also, Gorbachev seems determined to revive the stagnant Soviet economy, suggesting a possible Soviet preoccupation with an internal economic agenda rather than external expansion. And Gorbachev's rapid consolidation of power and the likelihood of his long tenure in office offers the possibility of dismantling the entrenched policy of hostility and military threat. Gorbachev is untainted by any previous close identification with the China issue, and so has very different political opportunities than his predecessors. Finally, the expansion and institutionalization of Sino-American and Sino-Japanese relations provides China with leverage in dealings with Moscow. Thus, the Chinese have responded to the Gorbachev speech with a mixture of encouragement and skepticism, while reserving judgment on whether Gorbachev's overtures will actually result in significant changes in Moscow's policy toward China.

Despite Moscow's recent overtures to China, the Soviet Union and its allies remain passive bystanders to the economic boom in the Pacific region. A partial political breakthrough would therefore be of great advantage to the Soviet Union. However, outside of calls for expanded economic ties, the Soviets have offered no positive incentives for any regional state to test the possibilities of a serious accommodation. Moscow has failed to define a security concept that is politically acceptable to the states of the region. A major improvement in the USSR's regional political position would require the acquiescence of local powers to the permanence of Soviet military deployments. This would be unlikely, for Soviet regional presence is "pervasively military and pervasively negative."
Thus, despite recent and continuing overtures to China, the basic directions of Soviet foreign policy in Asia appear to remain, although they are now expressed in a more skillful diplomatic effort. These directions include:

- The undiminished deployment of Soviet nuclear and conventional power east of the Ural's, much of it oriented directly against China.
- A continuing effort to subjugate Afghanistan and underwrite Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia.
- A growing naval and air force presence in Cam Ranh Bay.
- An attempt to establish a political beachhead in East Asia.

In the long run, the Soviets must deal with the emergence of a more powerful, self-confident and assertive China. While China will continue to collaborate with the United States and may achieve an incremental accommodation with Moscow, Beijing does not wish to be tethered to the global policy of either superpower. China has pledged "never to attach itself to any superpower or enter into alliance or strategic relations with either of them". Thus a neutral but more powerful China will still require Moscow to allocate substantial forces against the PRC in both peace and wartime. At present, the Sino-Soviet relationship exhibits a combination of cooperative and conflictive elements in a balance that neither side has reason to upset. But the dictates of geography will lead the Soviet Union to continue its direct multifront threat to the security of China.

SECURITY ISSUES FROM THE U.S. PERSPECTIVE

The vibrancy and stability of the Asia-Pacific region is critical to American interests. A central objective of U.S. regional strategy is to maintain an appropriate balance among three factors: the continued advancement of U.S. political and economic interests in East Asia and the Pacific; regional expectations that the United States will maintain

3Zhao Ziyang, *Beijing Review.*
a credible presence in the area; and the objectives of U.S. global military planning. The United States must thus consider the most appropriate means to sustain or improve upon existing circumstances. It must consider the gains and risks created by the deployment of U.S. forces in the region. And it must consider the adverse developments that might threaten it.

A predominant concern of U.S. military planners in the Pacific is the denial of potential Soviet wartime objectives. Specifically, the United States is concerned with the threat of Soviet long-range aviation to U.S. naval and air power in the West Pacific and with Soviet threats to air and sea lines of communication in Northeast and Southeast Asia. The United States is also worried about the continuing buildup of North Korea's armed forces near the 38th Parallel and the possibility of renewed conflict on the Korean Peninsula, particularly in light of impending leadership changes on both sides of the line.

For the United States, however, these military considerations are subservient to much broader social and political considerations. The United States has strong economic ties and growing cultural affinities with the Asian nations. Strong, dynamic, independent East Asian states are an important American objective. U.S. strategic planners are well aware that a larger portion of U.S. defense resources would be required if the area were less stable. In addition, the regional economic growth that has facilitated political stability has also increased the capacity of individual states to undertake more responsibility for their own defense.

Thus, on the regional stage, the United States has attempted to play the role of regional guarantor as well as natural trading partner and principal source of advanced technology. While recognizing that states in the region wish to remain autonomous from external control and free from coercion, the United States has provided a credible political and military presence within the region, easing anxieties of regional dominance by a single state and preventing the taking of geopolitical advantage and opportunity by the Soviet Union.

For both the United States and its regional allies and friends, the stability of national security policy objectives is crucial. Here are four objectives that would appear to be consistent with the interests of all parties:
1. Avoiding destabilizing internal political change where it might undermine existing security arrangements.

2. Preventing a serious degradation in bilateral relations with any key regional actor.

3. Preventing a major shift in the regional balance of forces that might lead to severe instability or open hostilities.

4. Avoiding any major shift in the Soviet-American "rules of engagement" in the Pacific that could lead Moscow to alter its risk-taking calculations in the region.

Neither the Soviet Union nor the United States has an incentive to goad its rival into conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. While the prospects for major conflict between the superpowers are slight, there is a question as to the degree to which Soviet-American competition in East Asia can be limited, and how China can contribute to that process. Moscow and Washington find their strategic interests intertwined in the region; thus, the importance of East Asia to both superpowers seems likely to increase in the future.

Through foreign policy measures, trade and investment, cultural relations, and mutual security interests, the United States and the states of the Asia-Pacific region are cultivating a healthy relationship. Economic prosperity, rooted in political stability, will help this multifaceted relationship grow. The challenge will be to withstand the periodic differences and potential upheavals that could threaten the relationship and reverse the trend of political and economic opportunities in the region.