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THE PRESENT STAGE IN SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS

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The Two Opposing Trends

The process of gradual improvement in certain aspects of Sino-Soviet dealings has by now been underway for more than two years, and has clearly established a certain momentum. Mutual contacts in cultural or sports affairs have become more frequent. After more than two decades, a few Chinese students will now again be sent to the Soviet Union to study. Cross-border trade has been reopened at certain points along China's northeast and northwest frontiers. Total trade turnover between the two states nearly doubled last year, to almost $800 million, and is scheduled to jump again this year to some $1.2 billion. China has apparently agreed, in principle, to have the Soviet Union reequip a few of the plants the USSR helped China build thirty years ago, in the days of the Sino-Soviet alliance. A modest number of Soviet experts may therefore come to China for this purpose, in the first return of such experts since Khrushchev's massive withdrawal of all the Soviet advisers from China in 1960. And on the political level, two sets of periodic talks on the issues dividing Moscow and Beijing have been established at the Deputy Foreign Minister level, one involving Leonid Il'ichev, the other Mikhail Kapitsa.

These trends are cumulatively fairly impressive, and a striking change from the near-total absence of intercourse between the PRC and the Soviet Union that had obtained through most of the 1960s and 1970s. They are only part of the story, however, and they are not the most important part.

Side by side with the developments just cited, a second process is also going on, in counterpoint to the first, and providing a remarkable contrast. This is the incremental growth of the Soviet military threat around China's borders and of Soviet geopolitical pressure against the PRC's interests on all sides. The most important single event of the last year for Sino-Soviet relations is a development that did not occur: while economic and cultural relations were improving and Sino-Soviet conversations were going on, the Soviet Union did not halt, or even begin to slow down, its activities around China's periphery that threaten China's vital interests. On the contrary, it increased them, in some cases in rather alarming fashion.

To the north, the Soviets continue their nuclear deployments in Asia and their conventional military buildup along the Sino-Soviet border and in Mongolia. To the east, the Soviet Pacific Fleet continues its steady growth, and with it, the deployment of Soviet naval units to areas sensitive to China's interests, such as the South China Sea. To the south, Soviet support for the Vietnamese effort to consolidate Hanoi's conquest of Cambodia goes on, in parallel with the growth of the Soviet military presence in Vietnam. And to the west, the Soviet punitive war against the Afghans also goes on, with no end in sight.

The ultimate object of Chinese policy toward the Soviet Union remains the hope of getting the USSR by degrees to desist from this general pattern of activity in Asia, to relax the military threat against the PRC and to begin to come to terms with Chinese geopolitical interests. To this end, the Chinese have posited three broad demands for the removal of what they describe as basic "obstacles" to a fundamental improvement of Sino-Soviet relations. This Chinese litany is by now well known. In its formal, most

extreme form, it calls for the Soviet Union to get its forces out of Mongolia and reduce its military strength east of the Urals to the level of Khrushchev's day, to end its backing for Vietnam's war in Cambodia (and, implicitly, end the Soviet military presence in Vietnam), and to get out of Afghanistan. In practice, as the Chinese have hinted on occasion, they would be pleased with much less, so long as they could get the USSR to halt the momentum of present policy and visibly begin to place the machine in reverse. In particular, they would probably especially welcome the beginning of a Soviet military withdrawal from Mongolia, where Soviet forces perpetually hold a sword over China's head, threatening with armor the invasion route to the North China plain and Beijing.

The Pattern of Soviet Military Behavior

Nothing of the sort has happened to date, in Mongolia or on any of the other fronts where China requests that the Soviet Union step back. On the contrary, each of the Soviet activities of which Beijing has complained in its talks with the USSR since the fall of 1982 still continues, and in some respects the situation, from Beijing's perspective, has gotten worse.

The Soviet Far East buildup, in train since Brezhnev's first year, shows no sign of stopping. The seventeen to twenty Soviet ground force divisions stationed in Central Asia, Siberia and the Far East in Khrushchev's day have now grown, according to the Japanese government, to fifty-two, and the 180,000 men in those divisions to nearly half a million.[1] The Far East high command the Soviet Union established five years ago was evidently intended to assure the independent viability of this growing military presence in Asia under all contingencies, and there is no evidence that the USSR has

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[1] Defense of Japan, 1983 (Tokyo: Japan Times, Ltd, 1983), p 30.

abandoned this strategic aim. The process of modernization of Soviet weaponry in this arena continues to enlarge the existing great Soviet advantage over China in firepower, bringing to the Sino-Soviet matchup such fruits of Soviet technology as the T-72 tank, the MIG-23 and MIG-27 fighters, and the SU-24 fighter-bomber.[2] The existing disparity is likely to grow with the advent of still newer Soviet weapons systems such as the SS-21, 22 and 23 short and medium range surface-to-surface missiles. Chinese vulnerability to Soviet tactical nuclear weapon systems is thus increasing. The Soviets have meanwhile stonewalled Chinese requests for the evacuation of Soviet forces from Mongolia on what Beijing regards as the specious ground that this question involves a "third country;" these forces, according to Japanese estimates, now number five divisions subordinated to the Far East High Command.[3]

On the strategic plane, the threat to China created by the new theater nuclear weapons the USSR has been deploying in Asia since the late 1970s -- the Backfire bomber and the SS-20 IRBM -- has grown rather than diminished while the Chinese and Soviet Deputy Foreign Ministers have been talking. Since a temporary moratorium on European SS-20 deployments was announced by Brezhnev in 1982, construction for fresh Asian deployments of this missile has apparently been accelerated. The number of these three-warhead missiles deployed in Asia has already risen well beyond the figure of 108 commonly cited in 1983,[4] and Western press reports allege that existing construction

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[2] Ibid, pp 30, 32.

[3] Ibid, p 42.

[4] Western press statements in early 1984 alleged that the total had risen to some 135. See Aviation Week and Space Technology, February 13, 1984, p 13.

will eventually double that figure.[5] Regardless of Soviet assertions intended to obfuscate the purpose of the SS-20 deployments in Asia, the Chinese probably believe that most of this threat is directed at them. Since the spring of 1983, the PRC has joined Japan in making repeated public protests against this activity, and has raised the SS-20 issue in the talks with Il'ichev, apparently to no avail.

With regard to Vietnam, the Soviets have evidently also refused to discuss the Chinese demand, pressed in each of the bilateral talks, that the USSR cease its backing for Hanoi's effort to complete its conquest of Cambodia. The Chinese see this behavior as a direct attack on PRC interests in a region that has traditionally been of major concern to China. In Indochina, as in Afghanistan, the Soviet leaders thus show every sign of determination to consolidate geopolitical gains over China and the United States staked out in the 1970s. Throughout the period of the recent series of Sino-Soviet talks, Soviet military use of Cam Ranh Bay -- the payment they have obtained from Vietnam in exchange for Soviet services -- has continued steadily to expand. Beijing is likely to regard as particularly ominous a new development that occurred in November 1983, when nine TU-16 medium range Badger bombers were deployed from the Soviet Far East to Cam Ranh Bay.[6] This appears to be the first time since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 that Soviet-manned bombers have been deployed outside the contiguous Soviet bloc. It therefore represents a new stage in Soviet policy, and raises the question of whether

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[5] Los Angeles Times, May 8, 1983

[6] Washington Post, December 21, 1983.

this change could eventually offer a precedent for further such deployments to Vietnam, perhaps including the Backfire.

For the present, the Badgers offer Vietnam an added measure of Soviet protection against any Chinese naval or air deployments in the vicinity of the South China Sea, and offer the Soviet Union a new instrument against American naval operations in the southwest Pacific. Perhaps more important than the military capabilities of these aircraft, however, is their symbolic significance. The PRC is likely to interpret Vietnamese consent to this important increment to the Soviet presence at Cam Ranh Bay as -- at least in part -- a quid pro quo for the Soviet refusal to betray Vietnam in order to conciliate China. This event thus makes it even more unlikely that the USSR will make concessions to China on the Indochina question for the foreseeable future.

Chinese Present Calculations

Despite these rather discouraging trends, the Chinese leaders apparently continue to regard the step-by-step improvement of their business dealings with the Soviet Union as worth pursuing for its own sake. From Beijing's perspective, by relaxing tensions with the Soviets this process eases some of the pressure on China created by the ongoing Soviet buildup, and to some extent, relieves the danger created since 1979 by China's two-front confrontation with Vietnam as well as the USSR. In so doing, the amelioration process provides a margin of safety allowing China to continue to limit the diversion to military modernization of resources badly needed for China's economic development. In addition, the Chinese have obviously sought to use the mere fact of Sino-Soviet conversations as a means of putting pressure on Vietnam, by raising the possibility, however remote, of a Soviet betrayal. Finally, as a side-benefit, Beijing evidently believes that its economic dealings with the Soviet Union may offer a useful supplement to the technological input to China's development furnished by the advanced capitalist world. While the latter continues to be of dominant importance to the Chinese, Beijing evidently believes that a moderate input of some medium-level Soviet technology, more easily assimilated than the advanced technology sought from the West and Japan, may be of some value, so long as it is carefully controlled and rigorously limited to prevent any possibility of a return of Chinese dependence on the USSR.

At the same time, the nature of Soviet behavior--and the fact that the Soviet threat is growing rather than receding--has evidently reinforced the Chinese conviction that association with the United States remains very important to China's interests. However vaguely understood, this association provides for the PRC the essential offset to Soviet power in Asia, and also promises to furnish significant long-term help to China's efforts to modernize, with important implications for the growth of military industry. These considerations, together with some concessions on the U.S. side, contributed to a noticeable improvement in Sino-American relations in 1983, and to a spectacular growth in high-level visits and contacts. This activication of Sino-U.S. dealings went on in

parallel with the slow growth in Sino-Soviet dealings at a much lower level, and was, in effect, a tacit Chinese response to the Soviet failure to respond to Chinese demands.

Soviet Calculations

The Soviet leaders, for their part, seem to view China's present behavior toward them with mixed feelings. It is clear that they are gratified that the PRC has been willing to abandon the prerequisites that China had posed in earlier years for the expansion of contacts and business dealings that is now unfolding. Whereas earlier Beijing had insisted on major Soviet geopolitical concessions--including massive troop withdrawals--before trade and contacts could improve, now this is no longer the case; now these Chinese demands have become prerequisites for a more vaguely defined "fundamental improvement" in the relationship. The Soviets are likely to see this change as a tacit unilateral Chinese concession to them, and as a gain for the Soviet Union. This is probably all the more the Soviet view because this Chinese shift in tactics has been accompanied by other Chinese shifts which Moscow also welcomes. Beijing has halted the drift toward outright strategic alignment with the United States which was visible in 1978 and 1979, it has abandoned its calls for a "worldwide united front" against the Soviet Union, and it has contracted the intensity and scope of its polemical attacks on Soviet foreign policy[7] to focus primarily on criticism of Soviet conduct of primary concern to China, that is, Soviet

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[7]Chinese ideological attacks on Soviet "revisionism" had disappeared earlier, after Mao's death in 1976, in parallel with China's own espousal of pragmatic policies once denounced by Mao as "revisionist." While many Soviets also welcome this change, they probably regard it as of secondary significance so long as a fundamental clash of Chinese and Soviet national interests and foreign policies continues.

behavior in Asia around China's periphery. The Soviets probably evaluate all these changes as due partly to Chinese difficulties with the United States over the Taiwan issue, but more fundamentally to a Chinese adjustment to the reality of Soviet military pressure.

But despite these gratifying modifications of Beijing's behavior, the Soviets apparently regard them so far as only superficial. From the Soviet perspective, what is decisive in Chinese foreign policy is still Beijing's orientation toward the United States in opposition to Moscow's achievements and ambitions in Asia. This view is fed by the spectacle of Sino-American parallel efforts to counter Soviet policy in Indochina and Afghanistan. It is reinforced by China's vast economic ties with a Japan that has grown increasingly hostile to the USSR, by China's benevolent tolerance displayed toward Japanese-American security cooperation against the Soviet Union, and by Hu Yaobang's recent reiteration of China's support for Japan's claims against the USSR regarding the "Northern Territories." And most of all, the Soviets see the Chinese leaders as vigorously striving to draw upon the United States for advanced technology with dual-use applications for the development of China's defense industries, and thus for the long-term strengthening of China vis-a-vis the Soviet Union.

In short, despite China's repeated disavowals of intention to form an alliance with the United States, the Soviet leaders are well aware that Beijing remains far from equidistant between Moscow and Washington. This perception has of course been greatly heightened by the long series of high-level Sino-American exchange visits arranged in 1983 and 1984, beginning with the visit of the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and culminating with that of the President.

As we have observed, thus far the Soviet reaction to these complex phenomena has not included any moves, even of a merely symbolic nature, to respond to China's fundamental security concerns about Soviet behavior. Instead, the Soviet inclination has apparently been to persevere along the line already taken toward Beijing, to strive to expand intercourse with China as far and as fast as the PRC will allow, and to build a network of relationships that will, the Soviets hope, gradually produce a more and more compliant attitude in Beijing. The Soviets, who have unsuccessfully sought summit meetings with Chinese leaders for nearly two decades, now vigorously press for the elevation of existing contacts to higher and higher levels; their anxiety on this score has evidently been exacerbated by Mr. Reagan's scheduled visit to Beijing.[8] They apparently desire the fastest possible growth of the trade relationship, and Chinese consent to the multiplication of Soviet reequipping of Chinese factories to include all the plants built with Soviet help in the 1950s. They evidently would like a long-term trade agreement, to formalize and consolidate such a greatly expanded economic relationship. They would also like to obtain a document setting forth principles of a new political relationship between China and the Soviet Union. And they would probably like to obtain a restoration of Sino-Soviet party-to-party relations, ruptured by China since 1966, particularly since this is an aspect of the bilateral relationship which the United States of necessity could not match.

In all these respects, the Soviets are the demandeurs, pressing for rapid movement from a coy and reluctant China. At the same time, the Soviets are

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[8]To this end, they have reportedly requested--and may obtain--a visit to China this year by Vice Premier Arkhipov.

aware that the Chinese are the demandeurs in a more fundamental sense, since it is the PRC that presses for far-reaching military and geopolitical concessions from the Soviet Union. At the time that Sino-Soviet conversations opened in Beijing in the fall of 1982, ambiguous public hints were dropped by some Soviet spokesmen to the effect that at some unspecified stage in the amelioration process, some Soviet concessions, again unspecified, might be forthcoming regarding the forces stationed on the Chinese border. The tacit message implicit in Soviet behavior is that if Chinese behavior in Sino-Soviet business dealings is sufficiently conciliatory for a long enough period, some such Soviet concessions may eventually appear: but not yet.

For their part, the Chinese seem well aware of this Soviet strategy, and appear determined to maintain limits on the extent and areas of improvement in their dealings with Moscow in the absence of the Soviet concessions they seek. The PRC is also conducting a carrot-and-stick campaign, agreeing to some minimal Soviet requests while leaving others in abeyance pending Soviet movement on the fundamental issues at stake. In this regard, the Chinese restoration since 1982 of party relations with some pro-Soviet Communist parties, such as the French CP, seems likely to have been intended as bait held out to Moscow, implying the possibility of the restoration of similar relations with Moscow once China's far-reaching demands have been met. In the absence of such far-reaching Soviet concessions, however, Beijing seems unlikely to grant Moscow's most ambitious requests, such as the desire for summit meetings or party ties. The Chinese strategy, in short, is to continue to move Sino-Soviet dealings forward, but slowly and incrementally, under severe constraints that remain dependent upon Soviet behavior.

The Process of Mutual Envelopment

In sum, taken as a whole, what is going on between the two states might be regarded as a process of enticement and mutual envelopment. Each side seeks, through the gradual expansion of state-to-state dealings on secondary matters, ultimately to entice the other into making concessions on the issues it considers of primary importance. On the Chinese side, this of course refers to Soviet removal of the three "obstacles" previously described: in essence, the abolition of Soviet military pressure against China and the abandonment of those geopolitical gains the USSR made in Asia in the 1970s that injure Chinese interests. On the Soviet side, the major goals are the elimination of Chinese opposition to Soviet policy in Asia, the incremental restoration of Soviet influence in China, and a drastic weakening of Sino-American relations, including particularly those aspects of Sino-U.S. dealings with implications for security issues. Each side wishes, through the amelioration process, to make progress toward its major objective without making serious concessions to the principal design of the other. Neither, however, is likely to be very optimistic about its chances.