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IS THE SOVIET UNION REALLY A THREAT TO ASIA?

Thomas W. Robinson
Professor of Political Science
Georgetown University

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Historical and contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union have been present in Asia for over three centuries. During most of that time, it has been of little concern to any of its Asian neighbors for reasons of geography, comparative power, and the European-centered and global priorities of St. Petersburg's/Moscow's foreign policy. During much of the last century, Moscow appeared only sporadically in Asia as a power of consequence--in the late 19th century, the early 1920s, and the end of World War II.

However, during the 1960s and beyond, Soviet presence began to take on new forms. Due in part to the longer-term effects of the Sino-Soviet dispute (for which the Soviets initially suffered a big loss in Asia), and in part to the raw increase in gross Soviet power, the Soviet Union engaged in a three-pronged strategy. First, they increased their military power in the Asian region (especially after 1969) on the ground against China and in the sea and air against the United States and its Asian allies. Secondly, they began in earnest to lay the domestic basis in Siberia and the Soviet Far East to establish themselves as an Asian power of consequence independent of requirements of support from European USSR. And lastly, the Kremlin embarked on a program of diplomatic penetration, symbolized at first by the stillborn Brezhnev collective security proposal and, more recently, by working alliances with Vietnam and India and attempts to participate in the highly dynamic life of all of Asia.

While these three programs can hardly be said to have come to their intended fruition (and may in fact never do so), the Politburo has seen a few gratifying results. China has been cowed into keeping its military away from Soviet borders and has lost much of its previous prestige in Asia. The United States is playing catch-up in Northeast Asia in its own strategic and tactical air and sea deployments, and may never again be able to threaten Asian

portions of the Soviet Union with impunity. Moscow has definitively instilled itself in Southeast Asia, a result of the American defeat in Vietnam and Hanoi's subsequent need for a powerful but distant protector and supplier of economic goods. In South Asia, Moscow's ties with India, established so tentatively in the 1960s and 1970s, appear to have weathered the storm of criticism over Afghanistan and have become a permanent feature of South Asian international relations. And in Afghanistan, Moscow has demonstrated its ability to engage in imperialistic, territorial expansion without fear of penalty for its transgressions.

On the other hand, there are major, perhaps irremediable limits on the Soviet position in Asia. The Russians are liked nowhere (not even by their putative allies) and are resisted fiercely in Afghanistan. They are milked by Vietnam and India for whatever they can provide, with little to show in the way of long-term policy alignment. Their military activities provoke many Asian states to double their opposition and draw together amongst themselves. Soviet predominance extends only so far as the Russian military can reach without fear of answer. Perhaps most importantly for the longer term, Moscow lacks almost entirely any successful cultural and economic components in its policy. In Asia, as elsewhere, the Soviet Union is reduced to using only its military to support its security and ideological purposes in the region. In contrast to some other portions of the globe, Asia is composed mostly of strong states that the Kremlin cannot easily push around. Thus in Asia the Soviet Union has become its own worst enemy.

Evaluations of the Soviet "threat" in Asia expose this dichotomy of near-term advance and basic policy inadequacy. One group concludes that a crash rearmament *cum* alliance-building effort is required of the United States and its associates. These alarmists are mostly military analysts who look at the

combination of total Soviet capabilities and ideological intentions, but little else. Their syllogism thus necessitates arming Japan to the fullest extent, assisting China in its military modernization as a means of preventing Sino-Soviet rapprochement, weaning India away from Moscow's military-diplomatic embrace, continuing to help Afghani and Cambodian rebels, and, in general, confronting the Russians at every turn. This group believes that there must be no more territory-grabbing (Hokkaido is mentioned as the next Russian target); there should be armed punishment for Flight 007-type and airspace violations (of which there are plenty over Japan and the Philippines); and they should call for a Free World buildup to the point where Moscow is not only equalled militarily, but where Russians might even be confronted by superior military force.

Another group, the "pooh-poohers", agree with the facts as characterized by the alarmists, but interpret them differently and come to quite contrasting conclusions on how to handle them. They pay most attention to the many and continuous Soviet failures in Asia and note that Moscow is frozen out of most of the region. They consider that the lack of substantial policy symbolizes a fatal flaw in the Kremlin's diplomacy, draw attention to the small, residual Soviet strength in Asia in comparison to that of indigenous Asian powers and the United States, and distinguish between Soviet military capabilities and Soviet intentions. The latter are thought to be basically defensive, while the revolutionary character and appeal of Soviet policy are considered to have long since disappeared. When coupled with the rapid modernization of most of Asia, the proclivity of the United States to continue to play an important part in the region, and the presumedly chastising nature (for Soviet policy-makers) of Asian rejection of Soviet advances, this group concludes that there is little to worry about. They propose that Moscow is deterred in Asia from

further aggression and that secular changes (mostly economic) will most likely guarantee that Soviet diplomacy can come to naught. In their view, separate military buildups, presently underway or contemplated, will suffice to balance the Soviet effort. Finally, this group believes that Asia is not innately hospitable to Russians, politically, economically, personally or ideologically.

A third, intermediate school is that of the pragmatic-realists. They seek to combine intentions and capabilities in their understanding of Soviet military proclivities in Asia and focus on possible conflict-producing scenarios. This group notes the tremendous growth of the Asian economy and the resiliance of most Asian societies, and places the Soviet military position in Asia in the context of Asian and global developments as a whole and of Soviet foreign policy in particular. They conclude that Soviet military propensities in the region are a mixture of basic defensibility and marginal risk-taking when the probability of retribution is small. In their assessment, Asia is low on the list of Soviet priorities, running a poor fourth to the United States, Europe, and the Middle East in terms of global strategic weapons. The balance of weaknesses and strengths in the Soviet position in Asia, while changing, still favors a cautious Soviet approach in the region, while a rough balance of power exists in favor of the anti-Soviet group led by the United States, Japan and China.

Determining which of these viewpoints most accurately portrays the Kremlin's motives and policies is critical to Asian security. Asia is intrinsically important as the locus of the most powerful concentration of military forces on the face of the globe. It is the world's fastest growing economy, the home of nearly half of the world's people, and the only region where the three top military and economic powers physically meet. Moreover,

the balance of Asian power is changing rapidly, thanks not only to Soviet military expansion but also to the economic and political dynamism of China, Japan, India, and many of the middle powers. Finally, Asia (especially Northeast Asia) is an increasingly important arena of American-Soviet competition, which is growing stronger and more dangerous, more direct, and more critical to world peace. This will continue until the Soviet Union reverts to an internally oriented, status quo power.

Thus we need to be clear regarding the basic facts of the Soviet position in Asia. Militarily, Moscow poses a major nuclear threat to all of Asia and a strong conventional threat to states on its borders, particularly China. Soviet Asian deployments are already far above the levels necessary in every department for defense alone. Rarely does a country need over 1500 high performance fighter aircraft, 600 bombers, about 1200 missiles, over 2500 nuclear warheads, over 54 ground divisions, over 400 warships and power projection vessels, and 133 submarines (mostly nuclear) merely to guard one portion of its national boundary. Moreover, to everyone's despair, the Soviets seem to presume that all of Asia (except North Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, and India) is against them and that, therefore, they must prepare for a possible combined attack. Equally important, Soviet strategy as well as Soviet military deployments emphasize operations while claiming defensive intentions; this disjunction worries Moscow's neighbors greatly. Finally, the Soviet Union in Asia not only occupies a foreign country by force but also possesses an increasingly potent projection capability and a budding base structure to support it.

Diplomatically, the picture is rather different. The Kremlin does maintain alliance and quasi-alliance relationships with five countries: two satellites (Mongolia and Afghanistan), two independent communist states (North

Korea and Vietnam), and one non-communist nation (India). That set of relations, together with the Soviet Union's threatening military posture vis-a-vis China and Japan, is enough to divide most of Asia into two relatively hostile camps. Yet, within the groups of states roughly associated with the Soviet Union, there is little unanimity and no central direction or even coordination of policy by the Kremlin. In fact, Moscow's relations have been indifferent or bad with Pyongyang until recently, increasingly distant with India since 1979, and only reasonably good with Vietnam to the extent that Soviet economic assistance continues at high levels. With China, ties are mixed at best, with a gradual improvement of economic relations but a continued freeze in political and party ties as two great military machines constantly sharpen their swords against eachother. The Soviets' relations with the string of American allies in Asia, from Japan in the north to Australia in the south and Pakistan in the west, are also bad. Though non-communist Asia is a very diverse place, to say the least, it is not only the forces of modernization, principally economic growth and transnationalism, that draw them together. Of equal importance is the Soviet potential for mischief.

Attitudinally, Soviet diplomats and scholars often appear to believe that the Kremlin's policies and deployments in Asia are strictly defensive and they profess bewilderment as to why so much of Asia is suspicious of their country. Many of them genuinely believe their motives and policies in that region are pure and honest. This should not be surprising, given their tendency to reduce all to the zero-sum categories of "defensive" and "imperialist." In the next breath, however, they assert the right of the Soviet Union to participate in every Asian situation or dispute merely because their country is a superpower on equal footing with the United States. From that, it is but

a short step to declaring Moscow's right to project its power into all of Asia, to sign alliances with states at great distances from Soviet borders, to insist on participation in regional trade, and to even station military forces throughout the region. Needless to say, it is this attitudinal dualism that results in other states concluding that the Kremlin is imperialist in essence while defensive in form and thus is not to be trusted. It should be noted, parenthetically, that this is precisely the progression of thought on domestic and regional Soviet matters that has occurred for decades in other parts of the globe, and it is therefore not surprising that the same syndrome has arisen also in Asia.

Economically, the picture is not very bright for the Soviets. While their trade with Japan is several billions of dollars per annum and economic relations with China are on the upswing after a quarter century in the doldrums, the magnitude of economic exchange is not very great for either Moscow, Tokyo or Beijing, and the degree of influence in either case is low. Matters will remain such for the foreseeable future, despite the expected growth of Sino-Soviet trade to that of (declining) Soviet-Japanese levels. Domestic goods in the USSR, while adequate, are not top-of-the-line and are not actively sought. Moscow's currency remains inconvertible, further reducing the otherwise natural attractiveness of Russian participation in regional trade. Also, the Soviets do not open their country to international economic influence. Therefore, they suffer from the lack of competitiveness consequent of economic isolation. Soviet trade is small with all the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and likely to remain so. They, like most other Asian nations, are interested in participating in the enormous and rapidly developing intra-Asian, trans-Pacific, and Euro-centric markets of global interdependence. Moscow participates only marginally in

these markets. Only in relations with Vietnam and India is Soviet trade a significant factor. In the case of Vietnam, however, there is a net outflow of several million dollars ruble equivalent daily, due to the inability ot the Vietnamese to run their own economy properly and the need for Kremlin bankrolling of Hanoi's imperial conflict in Cambodia. India is the only financial bright spot for the Soviets in Asia, and even New Delhi has long since diversified its sources of arms, relieving itself of exclusive dependence on Moscow. Significantly, the United States recently replaced the Soviet Union as India's largest trading partner. In sum, Asia is not enormously important to Moscow economically, and Russia is even less so to most Asian nations.

Geographically, the Soviets see a somewhat better picture. Until the recent past, Russia/USSR has been a physical part *of* Asia but not a major player *in* the region. With a relatively small population base, very unfortunate weather, a marginal agricultural base, little developed industry, and tenuous transportation arteries, Siberia and the Soviet Far East could not provide the domestic foundation alone for an active involvement in Asia. That has been changing in recent decades. Transportation has dramatically improved with the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline railroad and introduction of the heavy-lift helicopter. Communications are much better due to the large jet aircraft, the earth satellite, and a more efficient radio and telephone network. Moreover, a million troops have been encamped east of Lake Baikal for a decade and a half, creating a logistical base for long-term survival. Equally important, the development of the Siberian minerals base, with its rising importance to European Russia, has brought much investment and a flow of people (still small) to areas heretofore uninhabited. The consequence is

that Moscow is slowly providing itself with a regional underpinning to a much more active Asian policy.

The results have been dramatic. In addition to the Soviet military forces north of China and Japan, Soviet SS-20 missiles based in Siberia have become a central element in the Asian military balance. The Camn Rahn naval base can easily be supplied from Vladivostok which, together with its sister ports on the Pacific, enables Moscow to project its power far to the east and the south for the first time. With Moscow in possession of Afghanistan, the way is open for the first time for them to become involved in the affairs of Indian Ocean states as a local powerhouse. Before all of these shifts occurred, Soviet policy in Asia was subordinate to the ups and downs of its policies elsewhere, particularly in Europe. That has not changed completely; Europe, the United States and the Middle East are still more important to Moscow than is Asia. Yet for the first time in history, Soviets are in Asia to stay. And for the first time, geography is an advantage rather than an obstacle for Moscow in Asia.

Yet for several reasons the Kremlin might not effectively use its power, mostly military, in Asia. Perhaps most importantly, the other Asian powers are also militarily strong and opposed to Soviet expansionism there. Also, the United States is still a major military power in Northeast Asia, with strong ground, sea, and air units throughout the region. True, American forces are scattered and alone would be no match for their Soviet counterparts (except perhaps on the seas.) It is also true that the United States has been slow to augment its Asian-based and -configured forces in response to the Soviet force buildup. But the United States is hardly a negligible military factor there, especially when its base structure, its alliance and alignment system, and its nuclear weapons strength are considered. China is also

increasing its military strength, largely in response to the Soviet force buildup, and is unlikely to alter the anti-Soviet direction of its military policy in the foreseeable future. Finally, any direct Soviet use of force in Asia would meet with American, Chinese, and Japanese military opposition, jointly or independently. This is particularly likely with regard to American treaty allies in Asia and would probably be so as concerns those states not formally within the American-Asian treaty system but still assumed to be on the same side of the American-Soviet divide in that region. The former include Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan, Australia, and New Zealand, while the latter are comprised of China, Taiwan, and the remaining ASEAN states. Thus all of Asia, with the exception of Burma, India, North Korea and Vietnam, is in some way aligned with the United States. In some instances, Pakistan, Thailand and China give pause to Soviet military aggression in Asia. And in the case of India, Soviet military moves (however unlikely such seem) would undoubtedly be followed by some kind of Sino-American opposition.

A second factor rendering Soviet use of military power unlikely in Asia is that Soviet aggression in Asia would precipitate a larger conflict outside of Asia, perhaps a broad Soviet-American conflagration. In that case, i.e., a Third World War, the Asian theatre would be a relatively insignificant factor in the massive global struggle. In such a battle, which would undoubtedly be nuclear, Moscow would be constrained to applying most of its attention and most of its forces elsewhere--in the Middle East, along the Central Front in Europe, and against the United States. Asia would come only later in the global Soviet military scheme, once the battle had been won (if that were indeed possible, given the likely destruction of the Soviet homeland and the uncertain outcome in the other regions) and remaining Soviet forces were

available for Asian contingencies. Even then, the Kremlin first would have to face the possibility of Chinese nuclear attack against a vastly weakened Soviet heartland. Since a Third World War is, in any case, exceedingly unlikely, massive Soviet military aggression in Asia is equally improbable. In any such context, moreover, the Asian military situation would have to be integrated into the overall global military balance at the time of the opening of the conflict. Under present and foreseeable circumstances, that balance is unfavorable for Moscow. The Kremlin does not want to force a unity of Europe, North America, and Asia.

A third reason why Moscow is unlikely to use its military power in Asia concerns the structure of Soviet interests in the region. While complex, they essentially focus on three elements: defense, status, and revolution. Of these, defense against possible attack by its various opponents (principally America, China, and Japan), separately or together, is of primary concern. Much of the Soviet military buildup during the post-1965 period can be explained by this motive. Unfortunately, the Kremlin has always reasoned that the best defense is a good offense, thus its military deployments in Asia have been overtly threatening to its neighbors. Yet in Soviet eyes the Red Army's massive presence in the Far Eastern portions of the Soviet Union is for the defense of Soviet territory. However, the Soviet Navy is not deployed in Asian waters to defend its homeland. Instead, most of the Soviet Far East Fleet is devoted to ballistic missile submarine operations against the United States. A remote second purpose is to protect the Soviet Far East. Only residually, so far, does the Soviet Navy take as its mission the projection of Soviet power into distant Asian waters. However, the Soviet Union has always exhibited a tendency to over-garrison its borders, once again giving the impression of aggressive intent. It is the disjunction between initial Soviet

motives and the deployments made in their name that provides the impetus for the spiral of threats and fears that, since the mid-1970s, has driven relations between Moscow and the various Asian capitals.

The demonstration of its superpower status is Moscow's second interest in Asia. Because Asia is there and the Kremlin considers itself to be a global superpower, Soviet decision-makers feel the need to convince those in Asia and elsewhere that Moscow must be a participant in every situation in every sub-region in Asia. It follows that the Soviet Union would wish to construct a Blue Water navy in Asia, to provide itself with a conventional projection capability there and to put to use, in times of crisis, its Siberian-based force merely by flexing its military muscles. Yet it is one thing for Moscow to attempt to convince others that they play a role in Asia and another to attain that goal. Moscow is continuously frustrated in its quest for Asian status, for it cannot directly employ the one instrument of policy available to it for that purpose--the military. The danger for Asia is that, in some crisis or situation, the Soviet Unions may insist on being taken into account and deploy, or even use, force to back up their verbal policy. The question would then be the extent to which the Soviets would be willing to go before their bluff was called.

The third Soviet interest in Asia is the spread of Marxist-oriented revolutionary movements. In recent years, this interest has been negatively expressed as the right to "defend the gains of socialism," which essentially means assuring the territorial and political integrity of established Leninist regimes in Asia--Vietnam, North Korea, Mongolia, and (more recently) Afghanistan. Soviet policy in the case of Afghanistan is a classic instance of imperialism in the name of defense. But the Kremlin appears to recognize the obvious limits to full exploitation of this interest, for very little is

left of the Marxist revolutionary impetus in Asia (with the perhaps significant exception of the Philippines.) In no non-Leninist Asian state (again, with that previous exception) is there a significant indication that any remotely Marxist-Leninist revolution will succeed. Thus, these Soviet interests are reduced to the defense of its Asian allies against putative threats. Moscow has done this thrice--twice in Vietnam (against the United States during the 1964-73 period and against China in 1979) and once to justify its aggression in Afghanistan. Part of its policy toward North Korea can also be justified in these defensive terms; selling military equipment to Pyongyang is ostensively done as a counter to American transfer of similar equipment (e.g., Mig-23s for F-16s) to Seoul. To the extent that Moscow engages in such activities, its policies take on a balance of power-like qualities. Indeed, the Kremlin has been careful, at least in the case of North Korea, not to encourage aggression against the South, and has done so by withholding for many years the kind of equipment that might prompt Pyongyang to go forward. However, Moscow had been less cautious regarding Vietnamese expansionism in Cambodia in 1978, thus demonstrating that "defense of the gains of socialism" can have an imperialistic quality as well. In that instance, the Kremlin reasoned that neither America nor China would counter. Only the Soviets assumptions about the Americans were correct.

On balance, taking into account the entire range of Soviet policies and agents of action, the history of the last two decades seems to indicate that the Soviet Union, under normal circumstances, has not been an imminent threat to Asian states in any manner that could not be handled by the opposing forces in the region. But Moscow could become a serious threat (short of a Third World War) in two possible circumstances. The first would emerge should Moscow continue its "defensive" buildup against China, America, and Japan in

Northeast Asia. This aggression would be apparent if they permanently stationed Backfire bombers at Camn Ranh Bay; if they increased the range of their commitments and volume of military supplies to North Korea or Vietnam much beyond levels obviously related to defense purposes; if they heightened the frequency and severity of thier scare tactics in the air and on the sea against Japan; or if they increased their violation of Philippine air space. Any one of these could, and probably would, lead to stepped up military deployments and closer military cooperation between the United States, Japan, China, and perhaps others as well (e.g., ASEAN), resulting in an increasingly tense military situation in Asia. Therefore, a prudent Soviet Union would therefore limit its plans for further military deployments, cease needless provocations against Japan and the Philippines, cooperate with the United States and relevant Asian countries concerning air transport safety, and actively join in the search for peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and in Southeast Asia.

The second circumstance in which the Soviet Union could become a threat in Asia would emerge if Moscow succumbed to the temptation of fishing in troubled Pakistani waters under the guise of "protection" of Afghanistan. Pakistan has enough difficulty keeping itself politically whole, to say nothing of continuation for almost four decades of the dispute with India. Moscow must therefore eschew the twin temptations to conduct air attacks against Pakistani-located Afghan refugee camps and to conspire with India in furthering social tensions in Pakistan, overthrowing the Rawalpindi government and, ultimately, dismembering the country.

Are there actions that the other Asian countries, as well as the United States, can take to keep the Soviet Union in bounds? The most appropriate activity appears to be the continuation of the various programs for military

improvement, economic development, and political unity. With these programs, Asia will continue to be too tough for the Kremlin to crack. Beyond that, it is desirable for the Asians to encourage Moscow to relax about them and to give it no real cause to conclude that Americans and Asians are conspiring to undo the Soviet position there by some joint action, sudden and surprising. One way to break the vicious cycle is to encourage Moscow to enter into tripartite U.S.-Sino-Soviet arms control talks concerning Northeast Asia. Perhaps a useful first step would be a conference of scholars from the three countries, later opening into full-scale consideration of the regional security situation. Topics for discussion should include the overall structure and direction of the regional balance of power; prospects for Japanese rearmament; the Korean military situation; enhanced cooperation regarding control of civil aircraft movements; and prior notification by all nations of military maneuvers and major flights or sailings. The virtues of such talks (negotiations is too strong a term, atleast initially) are obvious. The probability of strategic surprise in Sino-Soviet relations is minimized. Japanese rearmament might be slowed. The overly tense Korean military situation might be diffused. Repetition of KAL 007-type incidents might be avoided. The Soviet Union could be brought into Northeast Asian matters on a peaceful basis. Also, the other parties could encourage all-around economic growth, with strong Soviet participation as a replacement for Soviet-initiated military confrontation.

Soviet Asian policy can perhaps be reduced to a Chinese-like aphorism: three waitings and two prepares. Moscow is waiting for opportunities to arise in Asia. So far, few have come up. Moscow is waiting for the American position in Asia to weaken or even fall apart. So far, that has not happened. And Moscow is waiting for China to modify its anti-Soviet stance and

compromise its differences with the Kremlin. So far, that has not happened either. While it is waiting, the Soviet Union prepares its position in two ways. First, it continues to strengthen its military forces in Asia for an ever-broader range of contingencies. Unfortunately, nowhere else can Moscow place its Asian-earmarked resources, since its diplomatic, economic, and cultural policies are of little utility. Secondly, Moscow seeks to strengthen its domestic power base by developing Siberia and the Soviet Far East economically. This is a very long process, the ultimate success of which is still in question. In sum, the Soviets are not a "threat" in Asia in any manner other than militarily, and most likely their military threats to, and in, the region can be dealt with by existing forces already in place or others that will be constructed during the next several years. The Kremlin is capable of wreaking much damage in Asia. Its policy proclivities are largely negative. Both local and American resources are available to counter Soviet mischief-making. America's job is to use its political leadership to organize these resources for the common good.

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Geographically, the Soviets see a somewhat better picture. Until the recent past, Russia/USSR has been a physical part *of* Asia but not a major player *in* the region. With a relatively small population base, very unfortunate weather, a marginal agricultural base, little developed industry, and tenuous transportation arteries, Siberia and the Soviet Far East could not provide the domestic foundation alone for an active involvement in Asia. That has been changing in recent decades. Transportation has dramatically improved with the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline railroad and introduction of the heavy-lift helicopter. Communications are much better due to the large jet aircraft, the earth satellite, and a more efficient radio and telephone network. Moreover, a million troops have been encamped east of Lake Baikal for a decade and a half, creating a logistical base for long-term survival. Equally important, the development of the Siberian minerals base, with its rising importance to European Russia, has brought much investment and a flow of people (still small) to areas heretofore uninhabited. The consequence is

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