

The evolution of Soviet strategy in Asia, 1969-1991

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of Soviet foreign policy in Asia from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. It argues that, unable to contribute much economically, Moscow had had to rely on its military posture to project power in the region. In the 1960s-70s, the main Soviet preoccupation in Asia was the containment of China. To this end, the Soviet leaders pursued regional alliances with India and Vietnam while seeking to engage the United States and Japan in a broad anti-Chinese front. These efforts had mixed results. While the Soviets made impressive gains with India and Vietnam, Soviet-Japanese relations stalled over Moscow's unwillingness to compromise on the territorial issue, while the US capitalized on the Soviet fears of China in order to play the two Communist countries against one another. Soviet policy began to change in the early 1980s when, in view of the Soviet Union's growing international isolation, Moscow attempted to re-engage with China. The painstaking process of the Sino-Soviet rapprochement led to full normalization by 1989, opening the stage to a closer relationship between the two countries, which continues to the present day. Meanwhile, Mikhail Gorbachev positively responded to South Korea's normalization probes. Even Soviet-Japanese relations, though still stalled over territorial problem, experienced a degree of revival. However, Gorbachev's tendency to de-emphasize military power led to the decline of Moscow's regional influence, which continued through the 1990s. Renewed investment in power projection under Vladimir Putin has brought Russia back to the table in Asia as a generally unloved but respected Asian player.

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Introduction

This article reviews Soviet foreign policy towards Asia from 1969 to 1991. For much of the Cold War the focus of Moscow's foreign policy agenda was actually in Europe. This was because the Soviet Union was primarily a European power, and the Soviet leaders regarded themselves as historically and culturally "European." Moscow's relationship with Asia was historically that of a European imperialist power, and the legacy of this experience was that the Soviets wanted to shape Asia, perhaps even to lead in Asia, but they certainly did not see themselves as a properly Asian player. They have always been on the outside looking in. Asia's cultural "otherness" was compounded by Soviet security concerns. By the 1960s – as a result of the Sino-Soviet split – China emerged as the most significant threat to the USSR in the East. Dealing with this threat became the key preoccupation of Moscow's Asian policy for much of the period under discussion.

The article shows how Moscow coped with China in the 1970s – early 1980s, including by leveraging its relations with other regional players like India and Vietnam. This policy underwent change in the 1980s, primarily because of the Soviet Union's international isolation and tensions in Soviet-American relations. The article then explores the continuities and change and Gorbachev's approach to Asia, including his overtures to Japan and South Korea. The conclusion outlines how Moscow's Asian policy changed since the collapse of the USSR, and in which ways it stayed in the same.

The 1970s

In March 1969 the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China fought a brief but intense war over their disputed border. Tensions had been building up for years. Beijing and Moscow had spent the better part of the decade trading recriminations: the Chinese accused their erstwhile

allies of betraying revolution; the Soviets responded in kind. By the late 1960s, however, these quixotic concerns had been supplanted by apprehensions of a more traditional type: the amassment of forces on both sides of the border, which in short order became the most militarized frontier in the world.

It is difficult to say in retrospect who was more justified in their fears. The Chinese leadership were certainly not wrong to draw attention to the lamentable Soviet record of overseas adventures. Moscow's August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia jumped readily to mind: could China, too, fall victim to the Soviet habit of imposing their preferred version of socialism by force? But nor were the Soviets unjustified in considering China a major threat. No one in Moscow could make sense of the Cultural Revolution but its "anti-Soviet" character was there for everyone to see. The Soviet Embassy had been under attack by raging mobs. Chairman Mao Zedong had claimed that much of Siberia had been unfairly annexed by the tsars, and that China had still to present a bill for these past sins. The Soviet leaders were keenly aware of their lack of strategic depth in Siberia, where a single railroad, within a striking distance of the border with China, perilously connected sparsely-populated outposts.²

The skirmishes of March 1969 were thus a logical consequence of a deepening security dilemma and the growing mutual mistrust between Moscow and Beijing. But the clash set in train events that would reshape not just foreign policies of China and the Soviet Union but the global political landscape as such.

As the Sino-Soviet conflict escalated, the Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin tried to reach out directly to the Chinese leadership. His call to his Chinese counterpart Zhou Enlai was not put through: the telephone operator

2. See Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: the Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

turned out to be an ideologically agitated Red Guard but, like the Soviets, the Chinese were very keen on avoiding a large-scale war. Beijing's worrying only increased when in August 1969 the Soviets initiated a border skirmish along the western section of the Sino-Soviet frontier, and then obliquely hinted at a pre-emptive nuclear strike against China. No evidence has emerged thus far that would indicate that the senior Soviet leadership seriously considered a pre-emptive strike but there is still much that remains classified and beyond reach. In any event, arrangements were promptly made for a meeting between the two premiers. Kosygin stopped by in Beijing to talk with Zhou Enlai on September 11, 1969. They assured one another that neither side wanted a war. Of course, neither really believed the other. But the exchange paved way for the resumption of Sino-Soviet border talks, which dragged on for years with little effect.

China's fear of the USSR was what drove Beijing to embrace the United States.³ Initial probes in 1969-70 were followed by Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China in July 1971, which in turn paved way to President Richard Nixon's ground-breaking visit in February 1972. The Soviets had long suspected China might close ranks with the United States but they were still taken aback when it finally happened. The Sino-American rapprochement and continued hostility in Sino-Soviet relations helped reconfigure Moscow's approach to Asia. The Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev redoubled his efforts to deepen relations with China's neighbours, in particular with Vietnam and India, both of which responded positively.

Moscow's relationship with North Vietnam had experienced ups and downs, partly as a consequence of the Sino-Soviet split (Hanoi took the Chinese side in the ideological debate of the early 1960s) and partly because of the militant policies pursued by the North Vietnamese leaders towards the South, which irritated the Soviets who hoped to avoid a conflagration in Southeast Asia. But when the conflict escalated – which overlapped with

Brezhnev's consolidation of power in the top Soviet ranks – the General Secretary felt duty-bound to offer political, economic, and military support to Hanoi even at the risk of undermining positive tendencies in US-Soviet relations. Relations between North Vietnam and the Soviet Union slowly warmed, undoubtedly helped by the growing Soviet involvement in the war effort and Hanoi's realization – especially after the failure of the Tet Offensive – that China-inspired militant strategy was simply not delivering.

The growing rapport between Moscow and Hanoi also owed much to the sharp deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations. The North Vietnamese leaders came to resent what they called Beijing's great power arrogance, and felt ever less inclined to defer to China, especially after America's defeat. Hanoi thus sought reassurances from Moscow, and the Soviets – seeing a strategic opportunity to entrench themselves in Southeast Asia – offered political support and, crucially, economic aid for Vietnam's ambitious plans of socialist development. In 1978 the USSR and Vietnam signed a treaty of alliance, which was effectively directed against China. Hanoi offered naval facilities to the Soviet Union (the old American base in Cam Ranh Bay), enabling Moscow to project power in Southeast Asia in ways it never could before. The Vietnamese, with Moscow's backing, sought to shape the regional order in Indochina, which led them to invade Cambodia to chase out the brutal dictator Pol Pot, who had relied on China's support. China retaliated in February 1979, launching a short but bloody invasion of Vietnam. These developments brought Sino-Soviet relations to new lows.⁴

Soviet relations with India, by contrast, grew ever closer.

3. The best treatment is still Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2000): 21-52.

4. Morris, Stephen J. *Why Vietnam invaded Cambodia: Political culture and the causes of war*. Stanford University Press, 1999.

India had been important to Moscow's strategy in the "third world" since 1955, when Nikita Khrushchev made his maiden voyage to that country. Under Jawaharlal Nehru, India pursued non-alignment but that did not preclude procurement of Soviet economic aid (for example, for the construction of a massive Bhilai steel plant). Moscow maintained neutrality in the Sino-Indian dispute in 1959 and (albeit with vacillation) in 1962, which in effect indicated a pro-Indian position, since as China's supposed ally, it should have come out in Beijing's support. In the mid-1960s, the Soviets were involved in mediation efforts between India and Pakistan but when relations between the two severely deteriorated (during the 1971 war), Moscow effectively sided with India. The two countries signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation in August 1971, which became an important victory for Soviet foreign policy in South Asia.⁵

The biggest foreign policy concern for the Soviet leadership in the 1970s was how to prevent China and the United States from forming an anti-Soviet coalition. The announcement of Nixon's visit to China led to soul-searching in Moscow and led in short order to an all-out embrace of détente. Brezhnev promptly invited the American President to Moscow, overriding objections from critics that wining and dining Nixon at a time the United States were ferociously bombing North Vietnam was not in line with Marxism-Leninism. The General Secretary did not care. His broader purpose was to reframe the Soviet-American relationship in a way that would allow these two superpowers to manage global affairs without stepping on each other's toes. He also wanted an entente of a kind, directed against China. Neither of these propositions went very far with the Nixon administration but, following the May 1972 Nixon-Brezhnev summit, there was a brief blossoming of détente. This was much to Mao Zedong's chagrin: the Chinese leader made no secret of his disdain for détente and suspected that it was a Soviet ploy that would help Moscow cope with China.

Détente proved short-lived. Tensions were there from the beginning, for neither the Soviets nor the Americans were particularly inclined to suspend their geopolitical rivalry. This was particularly evident in the Middle East, where the Soviets suffered a setback when their client, Egypt's Anwar Sadat, betrayed them, turning the United States instead. There was another set-back in Chile, where a potential Soviet client, Salvador Allende was ousted in a coup by the reactionary general Augusto Pinochet. By contrast, in Africa, the Soviets made gains at American and Chinese expense, for example, in Angola, where their client regime (with generous Soviet and Cuban support) prevailed in a brutal struggle against its rivals. Another Soviet client, Ethiopia, triumphed in a brief war against Somalia, helping entrench the Soviets in the Horn of Africa. Soviet adventures in the Third World helped undermine support for détente in the United States. Jimmy Carter, who became President in 1977, had vowed to uphold human rights in US foreign policy, which upset and annoyed the Soviets, since they found themselves on the receiving end of Carter's criticism. Most ominously, the US appeared willing to overlook China's appalling human rights record, and not just normalized relations with Beijing (in January 1979) but brought themselves into a tacit anti-Soviet alliance with the Chinese.

Meanwhile, the Soviet leadership reached out to Japan.⁶ Soviet-Japanese relations had languished for years, despite having been normalized in 1956. There were two reasons for their stagnation. First, Japan fully integrated itself into the US security system in Asia, and the US-Japanese alliance was of course directed against Soviet interests in East Asia. Second, Moscow and Tokyo continued to

5. Mastny, Vojtech. "The Soviet Union's Partnership with India." *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 12, No. 3 (2010): 50-90.

6. For an overview, see Brown, James D.J. *Japan, Russia and their territorial dispute: The northern delusion*. Routledge, 2016.

squabble over territory, with the Japanese insisting on the return of four Southern Kurile islands as a condition for signing a peace treaty, which the two countries still did not have.

Brezhnev sought to change this situation. He had two considerations on his mind. First, Japan appeared to be on an upward trajectory. An industrial powerhouse, it was playing a bigger and bigger economic role in the Asia Pacific, and so came to figure prominently in the Soviet leader's strategy for developing Siberia. For instance, Brezhnev expected Tokyo to jump on opportunities to invest in the mining of coal and the extraction of oil and gas in the USSR. To help transport these riches out of the depths of Siberia, the Soviet Union would build another railroad, the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), which would have an additional strategic benefit of being much further removed from the Sino-Soviet border than the existing railroad, built in the tsarist times. Brezhnev even believed Japan might contribute to the building of a railroad. The second consideration was of geopolitical character. At a time China loomed large as a security concern, Japan provided a useful counterbalance to Beijing's hostility.

However, the Soviet-Japanese rapprochement – such as it was – stalled over the unresolved territorial dispute. When Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei visited Moscow in October 1973 for talks with Brezhnev, he found the Soviet leader completely unreceptive to giving up the Southern Kuriles. Part of the problem was Brezhnev's overestimation of just how much the Japanese desired economic opportunities in the USSR. He thought their interest would trump any territorial aspirations. This turned out to be a mistake. To the extent that Tokyo was interested in economic opportunities in the socialist world, China presented much more interesting opportunities. Relations between Japan and China were normalized in 1972, and then in 1978 the two countries concluded the treaty of peace and friendship, which contained the so called anti-hegemonic clause (widely understood to be directed against the USSR).

The 1970s thus brought important breakthroughs for the Soviet standing in Asia – but also certain setbacks. The key gains were Vietnam and India, the former becoming a Soviet client, the latter – a key partner. Both relationships had anti-Chinese connotations, and both provided the Soviets with new opportunities for projecting their power in South and Southeast Asia. But these gains were more than offset by the insecurities arising from the Sino-Soviet conflict. Beijing remained implacably hostile, while growing closeness between the United States and China – especially in the late 1970s, just as *détente* in East-West relations withered and waned – added to the list of Soviet grievances.

The transition

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 marked a turning point in Soviet foreign policy in general and in Asia in particular. The United States and China both viewed the invasion as indicative of Moscow's grand strategy aimed towards the South, the "warm seas," and the oil reserves of the Middle East. Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski saw Soviet meddling along an arc of crises, extending from the Horn of Africa all the way to Afghanistan. The Chinese came up with another analogy. Deng Xiaoping argued that Moscow pursued a barbell strategy of expansion, with the emphasis on the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the two geostrategic theatres being connected by a bar – the Malacca Straits. Much in these creative interpretations was groundless speculation.

The actual reason for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was considerably more banal but also reflective of Moscow's insecurities. They worried that the Communist leader of Afghanistan and Soviet client Hafizullah Amin would turn the country over to the Americans, betraying them much as Sadat did in Egypt some five years earlier. So, the Soviets resolved to overthrow Amin and replace him with

a more pliable client. The decision was taken by a small group of individuals – KGB head Yuri Andropov, Minister of Defense Dmitrii Ustinov, and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko – and was imposed on ailing Brezhnev, who signed off, perhaps without fully understanding what he was committing himself to. It became clear soon enough that the invasion was a costly mistake.⁷

The United States condemned the occupation and imposed economic sanctions on the USSR. Carter also shelved the nuclear arms control treaty, SALT-2, which he had painstakingly negotiated with Brezhnev (it was never ratified by the US Senate). He successfully prevented US athletes from taking part in the summer 1980 Moscow Olympics. In later years, President Ronald Reagan extended significant support to the anti-Soviet mujahedeen in Afghanistan, much of which was channelled through Pakistan. The Chinese, too, contributed by training and supplying anti-Soviet insurgents.

Reagan's anti-Soviet rhetoric was met with growing apprehension in Moscow. The American President called the USSR an "evil empire," and argued for meeting the Soviet challenge through the build-up of American power. He ramped up anti-Soviet sanctions in the wake of the declaration of the martial law in Poland in December 1981 and tried to sabotage the construction of the gas pipeline from the USSR to Western Europe – actions that did not endear him to the Soviet leadership. The decision to deploy Pershing-2 missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles in Western Europe added to Soviet fears of a pre-emptive nuclear strike, while NATO's Able Archer command and control exercise in November 1983 seemingly put the Soviet leaders on the edge: they may have believed it was a cover for an actual attack on the USSR. The Soviet nervousness was evident also in the tragic decision to shoot down KAL007 when the South Korean airliner lost its bearing and flew into prohibited Soviet airspace on September 1, 1983. This incident caused significant damage for Soviet-Japanese relations, since many of the civilian victims were

Japanese. It goes without saying that it did not benefit Soviet relations with South Korea, which were in any case extremely limited at this time.

Amid deepening Soviet isolation, the Kremlin began to rethink its foreign policy. The process was not straightforward, since policy making, in the absence of strong steering from the General Secretary, was given to entrenched bureaucratic interests. General Secretary Brezhnev was on his last legs in 1982, a shadow of his former self who had pushed for a breakthrough in Soviet-US relations. But it was Brezhnev who in March 1982, during his visit to Tashkent, announced a programme of improving relations with China. It was as yet a very modest programme but it was a start. Moreover, it was noticed in Beijing, where Deng Xiaoping, too, had been pondering the future direction of Chinese foreign policy.⁸

There were several reasons for Deng's decision to reciprocate. For one thing, the general state of Sino-Soviet relations – a drawn-out military stand-off – was out of line with the priorities of the Chinese leader's economic policy. Reform and opening required a peaceful foreign policy environment, Deng believed. In addition, he had revised his earlier prognosis for Soviet expansionism. Now that the Soviet "polar bear" appeared stuck in the Afghan quagmire (to which China had of course contributed), it no longer appeared quite as threatening as it did some years before. Finally – and this was perhaps the crucial reason – Deng felt that the Sino-American relationship was not delivering what he had expected. The Reagan Administration had attempted to sell advanced fighter aircraft to Taiwan, causing frictions with China, while also denying sensitive

7. For a recent discussion of the reasons for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan see Tom Blanton and Svetlana Savranskaya (eds.), "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979: Not Trump's Terrorists, Nor Zbig's Warm Water Ports", NSA briefing book 657 (January 29, 2019), <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/afghanistan-russia-programs/2019-01-29/soviet-invasion-afghanistan-1979-not-trumps-terrorists-nor-zbigs-warm-water-ports>.

8. For details see Sergey Radchenko, *Unwanted Visionaries: the Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

technologies to Beijing. Although relations stabilized by the fall of 1982 – no small thanks to Vice President George H.W. Bush’s skilful diplomacy – the Chinese leader decided that he would henceforth try to maintain a more even-keeled foreign policy. This (partial) reorientation set the stage for Beijing’s reengagement in a dialogue with the Soviets. This dialogue was painful and slow, since Deng set conditions on normalization: the Soviets first had to withdraw from Afghanistan and Mongolia (where they had maintained an army since the late 1960s), de-escalate along the Sino-Soviet frontier, and, oddly enough, apply pressure on Vietnam to pull back from Cambodia. In any case, by the time Mikhail Gorbachev took the reins of power in March 1985, the process of Sino-Soviet normalization was already well underway.

Gorbachev

Mikhail Gorbachev inherited a country that suffered from international isolation, that was engaged in protracted counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan, that suffered from unsustainable commitments to support far-flung clients in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and that still officially adhered to a revolutionary ideology that few in Moscow took seriously. Gorbachev set out to transform this grim environment, and Asia played a key role in his vision of a new and better world. The early emphasis of Gorbachev’s approach to Asia lay with India. He developed a comradely relationship with India’s Prime Minister, the dynamic Rajiv Gandhi. In November 1986 Gorbachev and Gandhi signed the Delhi Declaration on a nuclear-free and non-violent world. It was a part of Gorbachev’s broader initiative to rid the world of nuclear weapons by year 2000, which had a certain propagandistic element and reflected the Kremlin’s aspiration to recapture moral leadership from the United States. Gorbachev also attempted to develop economic relations with India, though he was much less

successful here. The two economies were not particularly complimentary. By late 1986 – early 1987 the Indian dimension of his foreign policy was beginning to fade against the backdrop of a growing engagement between Moscow and Washington.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev made an important overture to China in his Vladivostok speech of July 1986, which became something of a turning point for Moscow’s Asia policy. By then Sino-Soviet relations had already mellowed considerably from their deep freeze of the early 1980s. There were regular visits and consultations, some at a relatively high-level. For example, in December 1985 Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Li Peng met with Gorbachev in Moscow, telling him that while China was in favour of improving relations, it would never again become a “younger brother” to the USSR.⁹ To Gorbachev’s credit, he responded that the Soviet Union had no such plans. One must in fact credit Gorbachev with precisely this: his willingness to dismantle the mental framework of subordination, which the Soviet Union had imposed on its clients and allies. Within this framework, China was seen as having erred, and had to renounce its sins before being welcomed back under the protective Soviet wing. Gorbachev entertained no such illusions.

Another reason for improving Sino-Soviet relations was Gorbachev’s positive signalling on the “three obstacles”. Early into his tenure, the General Secretary decided that the war in Afghanistan was a “bleeding wound” and had to end. It took a while to leave Afghanistan (the Soviets did not completely withdraw until February 1989), in part because Gorbachev worried about the loss of credibility from abandoning a client to its fate. But even partial, phased withdrawal, helped alleviate Chinese concerns – as did the partial Soviet withdrawal from Mongolia. The Vietnam

9. Ibid., p. 160.

“obstacle” was not so easily resolved, since the Soviets justly objected to being required to pressure a third country into doing something for the improvement of Sino-Soviet relations. But eventually progress materialized on this front as well. With the exception of Afghanistan, the obstacles were not yet overcome when in May 1989 Gorbachev visited China to preside, together with Deng Xiaoping, over the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations, in Deng’s words, “to close the past and open the future.”

When Gorbachev visited China, the country was in the grip of student unrest. The crackdown that was subsequently unleashed by the Chinese government against the pro-democracy protesters led to a sharp deterioration in relations between China and the West. Gorbachev, although personally horrified by the bloodshed, did not resort to sanctions and in fact saw in China’s isolation an opportunity for furthering Sino-Soviet rapprochement while bringing India into the triangle as an important third player. This strategic outlook was in many ways a precursor of subsequent Russian advocacy of the multipolar world order, and it constitutes an important element of Gorbachev’s legacy. Indeed, rapid improvement of Sino-Russian relations in the 1990s (despite China’s dissatisfaction with political reform that led to the Soviet downfall) was in itself a mere continuation of policies pursued by Gorbachev in the late 1980s.

If the Sino-Soviet rapprochement became a success story, Moscow’s relations with Japan did not advance very far on Gorbachev’s watch – or since. Tokyo was slow to recognize changes in the pattern of Soviet behaviour and firmly insisted on the “inseparability of politics and economics,” which was the euphemism for Soviet territorial concessions as a precondition for improvement of relations, including in the economic field. Gorbachev – much like Brezhnev in his time – was very interested in the economic side of the relationship but seemed unwilling to make the required political concessions. It was not until 1989 that the dialogue between Moscow and Tokyo began in earnest. Still, Gorbachev seemed much more interested in

ending the Cold War than with satisfying Japan’s territorial pretensions.

Interestingly, even as he was desperate to secure external credits to keep the struggling Soviet economy afloat, Gorbachev refused to countenance exchanging territory for Japanese cash. In the spring of 1991, he rebuffed an effort by the LDP politician Ozawa Ichiro to iron out a deal that would see the disputed islands transferred to Japan for approximately \$26 billion.¹⁰ His April 1991 visit to Tokyo and meetings with Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki also proved futile. At the time, many of Gorbachev’s own advisors were in favour of territorial concessions to the Japanese. It is not clear, however, that surrendering these islands would have necessarily produced a dramatically different outcome for Soviet-Japanese relations than what was achieved simply through the intensification of the bilateral dialogue. There were important reasons for the lack of Japanese economic interest in Siberia and the Far East – under Brezhnev, in the 1970s, much as under Gorbachev, in the 1980s (and these still remain in place today). These include political uncertainties, an opaque regulatory and taxation framework, and logistical difficulties. This is not to say that there was no progress in the relationship. Although the peace treaty was not signed, there was a substantial growth of economic and political ties, as well as people-to-people exchange.

Modest improvements in Soviet-Japanese relations contrasted sharply with a real breakthrough for Moscow’s relationship with South Korea. The initiative for rapprochement came from Seoul. The Soviets had long recognized South Korea’s growing economic importance, but they were constrained by their relationship with Pyongyang, which began to improve in the mid-1980s after

10. Radchenko, Sergey, and Lisbeth Tarlow. “Gorbachev, Ozawa, and the Failed Back-Channel Negotiations of 1989–1990.” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2013): 104–130.

more than a decade of relative estrangement. Gorbachev had even promised to the North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung not to ever recognize South Korea – a promise that flew in the face of the supposedly pragmatic de-ideologized foreign policy that he purported to pursue. Kim did not trust these promises, however. He was particularly perturbed by the Soviet intention to participate in the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul.

Kim had a good reason to be worried. We now know from the documentary record that it was during the Games in South Korea that first channels were established that would lead in under two years to a meeting between Gorbachev and the South Korean President Roh Tae-woo. The two met in San Francisco in May 1990, at which point the Soviets moved rapidly to recognize South Korea. In April 1991 – just when Gorbachev visited Japan for what turned out to be an unproductive attempt to break the deadlock in Soviet-Japanese relations – he also stopped by South Korea, meeting with Roh Tae-woo on the island of Jeju, where he obtained a promise of significant financial aid from South Korea for the struggling Soviet economy. The relationship with South Korea developed rapidly thereafter, very much at the expense of Soviet standing with Pyongyang.

Kim Il Sung was predictably outraged by what he perceived as Gorbachev breaking his promise not to recognize South Korea. When Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze visited Pyongyang to inform Kim of the Soviet decision to establish diplomatic relations with Seoul, Kim refused to receive him. Shevardnadze was, however, read out a litany of North Korean complaints draped in defiant rhetoric of resisting imperialist ploys. Shevardnadze was also told that now that the Soviet Union was abandoning North Korea, Pyongyang would seek to obtain the nuclear deterrent (in all fairness, however, it has covertly pursued nuclear research for many years). The Soviet Union's collapse at the end of 1991 further undermined Moscow's relations with Pyongyang, both because Russia – itself in desperate economic straits –

had no interest of subsidizing a difficult client as the Soviet Union had done, and because the new Russian leadership pursued an ostensibly pro-Western policy, in which North Korea simply did not fit.

Conclusion

Surveying Soviet foreign policy in Asia between 1969 and 1991, one cannot help but notice considerable continuities. One defining continuity is of a geo-economic character. The Soviet Union found itself in Asia but not of it. Because its key industrial and population centers were (and remain) closer to Europe than the Asia Pacific, the USSR found itself largely on the side-lines of the great economic transformation of Northeast Asia. It struggled to develop Siberia and the Far East and looked to foreign investors – mainly the Japanese but later also the South Koreans – for help with what remains a daunting task. Moscow's Asian policy had always been constrained by the hard reality that the only thing that made the Soviet Union a great power in Asia was (indeed, remains) its military power. Throughout this period, it was present in the region mainly as a threat that had to be addressed or contained. It is little wonder, then, that when the USSR under Gorbachev sought to lessen regional tensions (which included mainly reducing Moscow's own military posture in Northeast Asia), it was rapidly reduced to irrelevance. The 1990s saw Russia's once mighty Navy rust away in grim docks, even as Russia opened its border to East Asian trade, resulting in an influx of cheap clothes from China and used cars from Japan. In recent years, Russia has upgraded its war-fighting capabilities in the region, playing the one card it knows how to play: military power.

There is, however, an important discontinuity – the role of China's in Moscow's Asian policy. At the outset of the period under discussion, China was the main threat to Soviet interests, and most other aspects of the Kremlin's

approach to the region were tailored to cope with this threat. Moscow built up its relationship with India and its alliance with Vietnam in large part to counter China, and although Brezhnev's effort to mend fences with Japan had important economic underpinnings, there was also a strategic rationale, directed against Beijing. What the Soviets were not willing to do was to apply the same logic to South Korea (for fear of Kim Il Sung's reaction) or to Taiwan (even though there was a secret back channel between the Soviet leaders and Taipei). This policy of containment of China (for lack of a better word) began to change only in the early 1980s, largely due to the failure of détente and Moscow's own growing international isolation. With Ronald Reagan raining vitriol and threatening new sanctions to punish Moscow for Afghanistan and Poland, the Chinese did not seem so bad after all, especially that Mao was long dead, and Deng Xiaoping appeared interesting in lessening tensions with the USSR so that he would exercise greater leverage vis-à-vis Washington and pursue economic reform at home.

This important shift in Sino-Soviet relations in the mid- to late-1980s (which owed much to Gorbachev's new outlook) produced a wholly new situation by the mid-1990s. Russia, under Yeltsin's leadership, cashed in on the benefit of Sino-Soviet normalization to develop close, even comradely relations with the People's Republic.¹¹ This was despite Boris Yeltsin's embrace of the West early in his presidency. Of course, tensions in Russian-Western relations, such as were occasioned by the West's criticism of the war in Chechnya, neo-imperialist rhetoric in Moscow, and NATO's enlargement to the East, helped propel the Russians and the Chinese towards an entente, which was only developed and strengthened by Vladimir Putin in recent years. China and Russia did not become allies. They agree to disagree on a range of issues (and there are also subtle tensions between the two over Central Asia) but by and large they learned the lesson of the 1960s-70s: it does not serve the interests of their two countries to quarrel. Further to political entente,

China has become Russia's key trading partner, importing oil and gas from Siberia, and thus frustrating Western hopes of using trade leverage to extract political concessions from Moscow on the account of its human rights violations, the annexation of Crimea, or the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

The upswing in Soviet relations with China was not matched by similar progress in Soviet-Japanese relations. The key reason was Moscow's refusal to countenance territorial concessions to the Japanese, and Tokyo's resolve to secure the return of the four islands before the peace treaty is signed. This situation persists to this day but the chances of Japan ever obtaining the so called "northern territories" remain as slim as ever. It was easier for Brezhnev to make such concessions to Tanaka if he wanted to, for he was completely in charge. But Gorbachev already had to keep an eye out for the nationalist sentiment at home. Ozawa Ichiro's misadventures in Moscow (when he angered Gorbachev by trying to broker an explicit islands-for-cash deal) point both to pressures the Soviet leader faced domestically, and his acute sensitivity to any hint of a "sell-out". The same was true of the Presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Although on one occasion (during his November 1997 summit with the Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro), Yeltsin came very close to giving away the islands, in the end he did not. The reason for this was the likely nationalist backlash produced in Russia by such a move, something that Yeltsin (even his mental and physical health declined in the late 1990s) knew only all too well. Nor was any progress achieved under Presidents Putin and Medvedev, for exactly the same reason.

However, Tokyo practically abandoned the policy of non-separability of politics and economics. Soviet-Japanese

11. Wishnick, Elizabeth. *Mending fences: The evolution of Moscow's China policy from Brezhnev to Yeltsin*. University of Washington Press, 2014.

economic relations developed significantly from the late 1980s, and the current state of these relations make Japan one of Russia's key trading partners in Asia – without, it might be added, any progress whatsoever on the territorial issue. Indeed, it is doubtful that the situation would much improve if the peace treaty were signed tomorrow, simply because economic ties have their logic and do not always depend only on the political climate. In other words, Russia may well have done well not to have made the crucial concessions when it was desperately in need of Japanese cash (as in the late 1980s – early 1990s). It is far from clear what it could have or would have gained. Now that China has become a serious menace to Japan, the feeling in Moscow is that it is rather in Tokyo's interest to move on the question of the peace treaty. Russia's strategic position is in this regard far, far better than it what it had been in the late 1960s.

Finally, after abandoning North Korea to its fate in the 1990s, Moscow reengaged with Pyongyang in the early 2000s. There is little it can offer to the North Koreans, and its political leverage is limited. Its economic relationship with the broken state is certainly not even close to what Moscow currently enjoys with South Korea. Nevertheless, the Russians managed to stay relevant, and their standing with Pyongyang, such as it is, is better than at almost any time since the 1960s. In the 1970s the North Koreans leaned more on China than on the USSR, frustrating Soviet efforts to enlist them in the general anti-Chinese front. In the mid- to late-1980s, the relationship briefly blossomed only to fall apart as Gorbachev pursued normalization with South Korea. But since Putin's ascent to power Moscow has tried to maintain a more even-keeled position on the peninsula, and the North Koreans, grateful for any political support they have from their northern neighbour, have not done anything to derail the relationship.

Overall, then, Russia's position in Asia remains better today than at any point in the 1970s. Not only has Moscow managed to stay relevant despite its economic

insignificance in the broader picture of Northeast Asian economic development, but it has also leveraged its ties with China and India, its relatively problem-free relationship with North and its constructive partnership with South Korea, and its intransigent but generally courteous ties with Japan to assert its influence and defend its interests. It remains a player in Northeast Asian politics, and this in itself is an impressive result for a county that is still trotting uneasily in its horse-drawn cart along the super-highway of Asia's 21st century.

The evolution of Soviet strategy in Asia, 1969-1991

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of Soviet foreign policy in Asia from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. It argues that, unable to contribute much economically, Moscow had had to rely on its military posture to project power in the region. In the 1960s-70s, the main Soviet preoccupation in Asia was the containment of China. To this end, the Soviet leaders pursued regional alliances with India and Vietnam while seeking to engage the United States and Japan in a broad anti-Chinese front. These efforts had mixed results. While the Soviets made impressive gains with India and Vietnam, Soviet-Japanese relations stalled over Moscow's unwillingness to compromise on the territorial issue, while the US capitalized on the Soviet fears of China in order to play the two Communist countries against one another. Soviet policy began to change in the early 1980s when, in view of the Soviet Union's growing international isolation, Moscow attempted to re-engage with China. The painstaking process of the Sino-Soviet rapprochement led to full normalization by 1989, opening the stage to a closer relationship between the two countries, which continues to the present day. Meanwhile, Mikhail Gorbachev positively responded to South Korea's normalization probes. Even Soviet-Japanese relations, though still stalled over territorial problem, experienced a degree of revival. However, Gorbachev's tendency to de-emphasize military power led to the decline of Moscow's regional influence, which continued through the 1990s. Renewed investment in power projection under Vladimir Putin has brought Russia back to the table in Asia as a generally unloved but respected Asian player.

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