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## A New Soviet Beginning in East Asia

The Soviet Union will probably succeed in normalizing relations throughout East Asia within the next few years, according to Donald Zagoria. "It is clear that the Soviet Union is stepping up its efforts to improve relations with all of the countries of East Asia," particularly with China, but also with Japan, South Korea, and others. Zagoria, a Hunter College specialist on Soviet relations with Asia, remarked that while there is no "euphoria" in the region about Gorbachev, his initiatives already have had a marked impact. The prospects for future improvements in Soviet-East Asian relations seem strong.

Is this newly conciliatory attitude toward East Asia just a tactical maneuver by the Soviets, or does it represent a more fundamental transformation in thinking? The answer has significance beyond the boundaries of Asia. Zagoria suggested that a close analysis of Soviet behavior in the Pacific Rim sheds light on the implications of their "new thinking" toward the rest of the world. Speaking at a Harriman Institute luncheon January 24, 1989, Professor Zagoria discussed recent Soviet changes and their probable motives.

### Signs of Change

Indications of the Soviet Union's desire to better its relations in this area are "considerable." Recent Gorbachev speeches have shown a determination to improve his country's poor image in the region. He has asserted that he wishes to lower the level of military activity in the Pacific, to help resolve regional tensions, to improve relations with all the countries there, to advance multilateral cooperation, and generally to foster a healthier atmosphere. Gorbachev has also said that he is prepared to consider alternatives if Soviet proposals are found to be unacceptable.

These encouraging words have been reinforced by actions. Among the more tangible signs of change are a new diplomatic flexibility, frequent official visits, the agreement

to remove SS20s from Siberia as part of the INF treaty, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, pressure on Vietnam to pull out of Cambodia, a drive for better trade links, and an effort to join Asian economic organizations.

### Motives for Change

In Zagoria's view, there are a number of easily identifiable Soviet motives for improved relations with other Pacific nations. The most important among these is the Soviet Union's "domestic economic and social crisis." Gorbachev is determined to reverse the USSR's downward trends. "To reverse them requires bold reform measures at home, and to undertake those measures requires a stable international environment." In addition, as the most economically expanding region in the world, East Asia figures prominently in Soviet hopes for revitalizing its own economy.

Another motive for change is a growing realization that past policies were "hugely counter-productive." Brezhnev's positions in the 1970s and early 1980s led to the creation of "what could fairly be called an Asian anti-Soviet alliance," and stimulated Japanese and American arms buildups. As a result, Professor Zagoria noted, the Soviet Union's strategic position in the Far East deteriorated substantially. When Gorbachev came to power, he found the Soviet Union on the defensive. "There was a formidable combination of power arrayed on his eastern frontier and moreover the Americans, with their new maritime strategy and theory of horizontal escalation, were positioning themselves to exploit this growing Soviet vulnerability in Asia in an effort to compensate for conventional Soviet superiority in Europe."

The transformation of the old bipolar world into a multipolar one created the final major motive for change in the Soviet Union's Asia policy. The growth of East Asian economic power inevitably means an increase in its military



weight. New centers of influence are emerging, and many are located on or close to Soviet borders. "So the Soviet Union has powerful new incentives to negotiate with the East Asian countries." They can no longer afford to treat this region "as Gromyko did: as if most of the countries in it were either insignificant or stooges of the United States." Zagoria estimated that dealing with these growing powers will constitute a "formidable new challenge" for the Soviet Union in the decades ahead.

## China, Japan and Korea

Improved Sino-Soviet relations is perhaps Gorbachev's "biggest single success" in Asia. The upcoming summit meeting between the two is just one measure of how far they have come. Gorbachev has worked toward meeting China's stated "three obstacles" to normalization: he accepted the Chinese position on their border dispute, he is withdrawing from Afghanistan, and he is pressuring the Vietnamese to pull out of Cambodia. China and the Soviet Union are discovering a common identity as reforming socialist states. In sum, "the deep freeze in Sino-Soviet relations has ended." Both sides have strong motives for sustaining this thaw, but it can only go so far. An "intimate, trusting" relationship, such as that between the US and Canada, is unlikely between China and the USSR. China has more to gain from the West than it does from the Soviet Union. There is still a major imbalance of military power between the two countries, and their geopolitical rivalry in Asia is unlikely to subside in the near future.

Japan and the Soviet Union are beginning to achieve a "modus vivendi," and both sides have strong incentives to reach a compromise. The Soviet Union wants to enter the Pacific economy and they need Japanese support. They also want access to Japanese capital and technology for developing Siberia. For both political and economic reasons, the Japanese do not want to be left out of a potential world-wide rapprochement with Gorbachev. But this relationship, too, will be limited. In addition to constraints which include a long-standing territorial dispute, there is a legacy of mistrust between Japan and the Soviet Union that will be difficult to overcome in the short run since "these two countries have been at odds for most of the twentieth century."

On the Korean peninsula, the Soviets are motivated by a desire to "get back into the game," having been "frozen out" of both North and South Korea for the past several decades. Gorbachev is in effect pursuing a "two Koreas" policy, attempting to improve relations with both simultaneously. His overtures are meeting with some success. The South Koreans in particular have strong motives for improving relations with the Soviet Union, which include liberating themselves from the appearance of excessive dependence on the US and prodding North Korea into negotiations.

Soviet prospects for close ties with the non-Communist countries of Asia, however, will be limited. Compared to Japan and the US, the USSR has little to offer these nations economically.

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