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Strategic Trends in Asia: U.S. Policy Toward Regional Communist States

Martin L. Lasater

A basic national interest of the United States is to prevent the domination of the Eurasian landmass—the so-called heartland—by one hostile state or group of states. This objective is important to U.S. survival because a hostile government controlling this vast region would have the resources to isolate and perhaps eventually destroy the United States.

Since World War II, the nation most likely to attempt to dominate the Eurasian landmass has been the Soviet Union. Moscow pursued this objective after World War II as it expanded its control over Eastern Europe and entered into alliance with the newly formed People's Republic of China. Faced with what seemed to be a serious Sino-Soviet threat to dominate the heartland, the United States adopted a national security strategy of containment to prevent the further expansion of Soviet and Chinese influence.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, a development of immense strategic importance occurred: The breakup of the Sino-Soviet alliance. The Sino-Soviet dispute led to armed confrontation between Beijing and Moscow in 1969. Throughout the 1970s, the Soviet Union built its own ring of containment around China, eventually deploying about one-third of its armed forces around PRC borders.

From the U.S. point of view, the Sino-Soviet dispute was a strategic gift of immense proportions. It made Soviet domination of the heartland an impossibility. As China asserted its independence from Moscow and resisted Soviet domination of Asia, the United States began to include the PRC as a key element in its containment strategy against the Soviet Union. This became firm policy following the U.S. opening to China by President Richard Nixon in 1969-1972.

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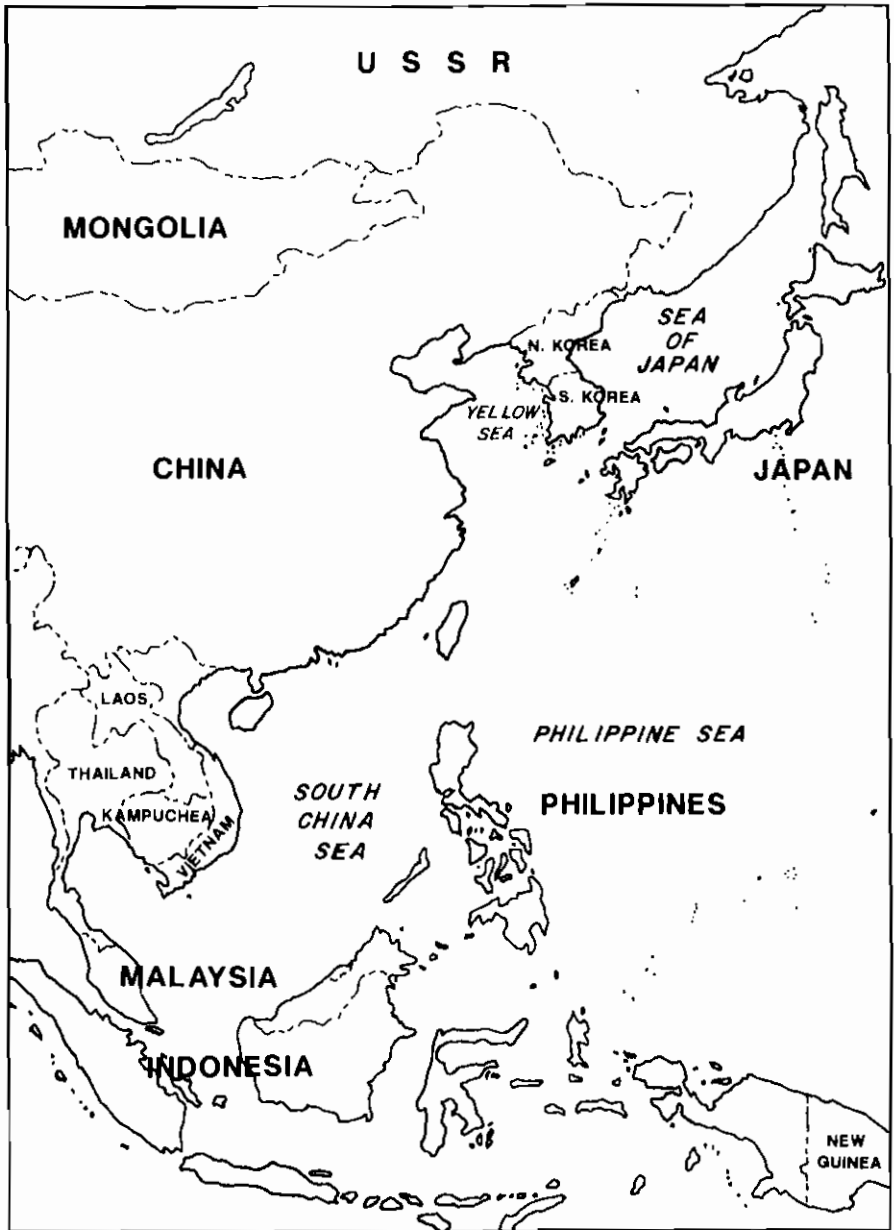
There were three broad levels of U.S. strategic interests served by the Sino-Soviet split. First, at the most vital level, China's defection from the Soviet bloc helped to prevent the Eurasian landmass from coming under the control of the Soviet Union. Second, hostility between Moscow and Beijing contributed to the PRC decision to normalize relations with the United States in 1979. This served important U.S. diplomatic, political, and economic interests, including enhanced regional stability in East Asia. And third, Chinese fear of a Soviet attack resulted in Beijing perceiving Moscow, not Washington, as China's principal enemy. This resulted in both the United States and China reducing their military assets targeted on each other and led, from 1978, to parallel policies being pursued on important regional issues such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, and the prevention of war on the Korean peninsula.

Largely as a result of the Sino-Soviet confrontation, the United States reversed its policy of containing China and adopted a policy of supporting PRC efforts to build a strong, secure, and modern China. This dramatic change in policy occurred gradually during the 1970s. The strategic importance the United States attaches to its relations with China is reflected in its current national security strategy. A major U.S. objective is "to foster closer relations with the People's Republic of China."¹

Given the importance of China to U.S. national strategy, it is significant that in the late 1980s a major change began to occur in Sino-Soviet and Sino-Vietnamese relations as both Moscow and Hanoi took steps to improve relations with Beijing. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan and some forces from Mongolia, while the Vietnamese began a withdrawal from Cambodia. China responded in a positive way by indicating that normalization of relations with the Soviet Union and Vietnam were indeed possible.

Warming relations between the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam create a new strategic environment for the United States in Asia. Whereas the decade of the 1980s began with an environment characterized by Sino-Soviet and Sino-Vietnamese hostility, the 1990s may be a period of normalized and cooperative relations between these communist states. Nonetheless, there are fundamental differences in national interests between the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam which will continue to restrain their cooperation.

A key question for U.S. policymakers is how improved relations between Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi might affect U.S. national security policy. The implications are enormous because U.S. policy for the last decade has been predicated upon Soviet and Vietnamese threats in Asia and Chinese cooperation to contain those threats. In this article we will consider the implications for the United States resulting from improved relations between these communist countries as each undertakes major domestic and



East Asia and the Western Pacific

foreign policy reform. We will also consider the role of the U.S. military in East Asia in the wake of these developments.

Improving Sino-Soviet Relations

The trend toward improving Sino-Soviet relations began in 1982 when both Moscow and Beijing signaled their desire to end the hostility that had characterized their relations since the early 1960s. For its part, the Soviet Union wanted to eliminate the possibility of China forming an alliance with the United States, Japan, and Western Europe. For China, the possibility of improving relations with the Soviet Union fit into Deng Xiaoping's plans for the modernization of the PRC, which required a peaceful international environment in which China could devote her limited resources to economic development as opposed to military confrontation.

While responding positively to Brezhnev's calls for improved relations, Beijing set as a precondition for the normalization of relations the reduction of certain threats to China's security. These "three obstacles" to normalized Sino-Soviet relations were:

- Soviet troops deployed along the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian borders;
- Soviet troops in Afghanistan; and
- Soviet backing of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia.

At the same time that Beijing announced its willingness to improve relations with Moscow—subject to removal of the "three obstacles"—China embarked on an "independent" foreign policy of nonalignment with either superpower. Although surprising to Washington at the time (Deng had called for strategic cooperation between China, the United States, Japan, and Western Europe in 1978-1979), China's more independent course was consistent with PRC objectives to be a world power in its own right and to create a peaceful environment for its modernization.

Nonetheless, during the 1982-1986 period the Soviet threat to China continued in the form of the "three obstacles," an expanding and modernizing Soviet Pacific Fleet, the Soviet military presence in Cam Ranh Bay, and a growing military relationship with North Korea. From China's point of view, the Soviet Union had said nice things about improving relations with the PRC but in fact had done little to reduce its threat to China's security. In view of this, Beijing moved slowly in increasing contact with Moscow while pursuing parallel policies with the United States in Afghanistan, Indochina, and the Korean peninsula.

A qualitative improvement in Sino-Soviet relations began in 1986, however, following General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's July speech in Vladivostok. A central theme of that speech, in which the Soviet leader announced his intentions to expand Soviet participation in Asia-Pacific affairs, was the need to improve relations with China.

Although initially skeptical of Gorbachev's intentions, the Chinese by now have concluded that Moscow's apparent desire to improve Sino-Soviet relations is sincere. This conclusion was reached as the Soviet Union began to remove most of the "three obstacles" to China's security.

Since the Vladivostok speech, the Soviet Union has promised to withdraw most of its troops from Mongolia, has expressed a willingness to discuss mutual troop reductions from along the Sino-Soviet border, is conducting serious negotiations to resolve border disputes, has withdrawn from Afghanistan, and has publicly pressured Hanoi to withdraw its troops from Cambodia. As a further indication of improved Sino-Soviet relations, Vietnam (at Moscow's urging) is also seeking improved relations with Beijing.

The reduction of the Soviet threat to China is occurring simultaneously with Gorbachev's attempts to implement far-reaching economic reforms. Many of these measures parallel those instituted by China since 1978, including more open commercial relations with the West. The success of Gorbachev's reforms requires a peaceful international environment. Hence, the sincerity of Gorbachev's desire to improve relations with China is substantiated by actions to reduce Soviet threats to China's security, to encourage improved Sino-Vietnamese relations, and to introduce Soviet domestic reforms which require nonconfrontational relations with both Beijing and Washington.

These steps have so impressed the Chinese that they told Secretary of State George Shultz during his July 1988 visit to China that a major improvement in Sino-Soviet relations was likely, including a summit meeting between leaders of the two countries, now scheduled for May 1989. The Secretary replied that the United States would welcome such a development as contributing to overall peace and stability in the region.²

It seems clear, therefore, that Sino-Soviet relations are improving significantly and that they likely will continue to do so. If Vietnam withdraws from Cambodia, there is a strong possibility that Sino-Vietnamese relations will improve as well. But will these relations improve to the point where U.S. interests will be adversely affected? What, if any, changes in U.S. policy might be required as a result of improved Sino-Soviet and Sino-Vietnamese relations? Answers to these questions require a brief review of current U.S. policy toward Asia.

U.S. National Security Policy

The United States has many national values and interests at stake in the Asia/Pacific region.³ Basic values include democracy, individual freedom and human rights, and the free enterprise economic system. As events in the Philippines, Republic of Korea, and Taiwan during 1986-1988 demonstrated, freedom and democracy are expanding in the Asia/Pacific

region. Moreover, the free enterprise system has helped to produce astounding economic growth rates in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere in Asia. These successes in turn have persuaded Beijing and Moscow, and perhaps Hanoi in the near future, to introduce more market mechanisms into their stagnant economies.

The United States has many important national security interests in the Asia/Pacific region. Four of the five major power centers of the world, the United States, Soviet Union, China, and Japan, compete in Asia, and many of their interests collide. In addition to security, other U.S. interests in Asia include the promotion of American values, fair and open international trade, the security and well-being of friends and allies, mutual understanding, peaceful resolution of disputes along lines favoring U.S. interests, and reduction of armaments in a way consistent with U.S. interests. It is also in the U.S. national security interest to oppose the expansion of influence, control, or territory of nations hostile to the United States, its allies, or its interests.

As in other areas of the world, the Soviet Union is the major threat to U.S. interests in the Asia/Pacific region. Since Mikhail Gorbachev's 1986 speech in Vladivostok, the Soviet Union has placed a much higher priority on Asian/Pacific affairs. The region has been subject to an intense "peace offensive" in which Moscow has tried to improve bilateral relations with all Asian countries and thereby expand its political and economic links to the region.

Moscow's political and economic presence pose a problem for the United States in Asia, but it is its military threat that is formidable. The Soviet Union deploys roughly one-third of its military assets to Asia. The Pacific Fleet is the largest Soviet fleet, and over 50 Soviet divisions are deployed along the Sino-Soviet border. Air force and missile deployments are exceptionally strong in the region. All of these military forces are being modernized with the most advanced Soviet weapons systems.

The Soviet threat to U.S. interests in Asia is increased by Moscow's military and economic ties to North Korea and Vietnam. In exchange for Soviet assistance, P'yongyang has given the Soviet Union important overflight rights and allowed port visits at Wonson. Vietnam has allowed Moscow to build its largest overseas naval deployment base at Cam Ranh Bay. This major facility enables the Soviet Union to establish a continuous military presence in the South China Sea and to extend its wartime reach over East Asia's sea lines of communications. The base also presents a threat to U.S. bases in the nearby Philippines.

The basic aims of U.S. strategy for East Asia and the Pacific are to strengthen the natural political and economic ties that link the United States with regional states, to evoke greater participation by regional friends and allies in their own defense, and to proceed steadily with the necessary

modernization of U.S. military forces deployed to the area. The economic growth of Japan, the rapid development of newly industrialized nations along the Asian rim, and the modernization of China serve these strategic aims.

To share the costs of security, the United States maintains bilateral defense agreements with Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia. Less formal military ties are maintained with most other noncommunist Asian nations. U.S. efforts to maintain stable and cooperative relations with China, including a limited military relationship, should be seen as part of overall U.S. strategy in this regard.

U.S. Foreign Policy toward Asia

U.S. foreign policy in the Asia/Pacific region centers on bilateral relations, although some regional and subregional initiatives are maintained as well. The key word that describes the role the United States seeks to play in Asia is "partner" to progressive countries in the region.⁴ Four basic principles underlie this role.

First, U.S. policy is one of respect for the interests and prerogatives of Asian peoples. The United States is not attempting to build an empire in the Asia/Pacific region, nor does it seek to dominate regional affairs. The United States does not interfere in the internal affairs of Asian countries, but is willing to accept the responsibility of regional leadership when necessary. Our objective is to foster greater cooperation among Asian/Pacific nations through regular consultations and mutual understanding.

Second, the United States supports the establishment of democratic institutions and processes in the Asia/Pacific region. We support democracy because it is an American ideal. But more importantly, such institutions promote political stability and economic strength. These conditions are necessary if regional peace is to be maintained and cooperation between Asia/Pacific nations is to be strengthened.

Third, the United States believes that common prosperity can best be promoted through the expansion of free trade and investment. Protectionism and excessive state regulation harm the common prosperity of the region. The United States promotes freedom in the marketplace and assists those countries seeking to develop their economies through competition and free enterprise.

Fourth, the United States believes that the best way to ensure regional peace and stability is to address the specific sources of tension. Rejecting grand schemes of regional security cooperation, such as proposed by the Soviet Union, the United States prefers to solve tensions through direct negotiations between the parties themselves.

By following these principles, the Reagan administration achieved several notable successes in its Asian policies over the past eight years. These include major political reforms in the Philippines, Taiwan, and Korea; the rapid growth of U.S. trade with the region; deterrence of any large-scale conflict in the region; the emergence of international condemnation of North Korean terrorism and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia; the strengthening of U.S. credibility in the region; and the maintenance of a strategically important relationship with the PRC.

Political proof of the success of the Reagan administration's policies toward Asia was shown by its lack of confrontation over Asia policy in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential campaigns. This has not always been the case. Asia policy played major roles in Presidential debates during the 1948-1972 campaigns and again in 1980.

Challenges for the New Administration

The new Administration of George Bush, who assumed office in January 1989, will find a strong U.S. presence in Asia. The United States is the strongest military power in the Asia/Pacific region; its presence is valued as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union; U.S. markets are considered crucial to the economic development of most Asian nations; U.S. technology and investment are much sought after; Washington participation in the settlement of most regional issues is thought essential; American culture has wide appeal; and American ideals such as democracy, individual freedom, and personal property have become popular goals.

Despite these strengths and the proven success of existing U.S. policy, there are a number of major trends underway in Asia which will challenge the current Administration. These include greater political and economic sophistication on the part of the Soviet Union in Asia; the continued unpredictability of North Korea; the threat to U.S. bases in the Philippines and the uncertain future of the Aquino government; perceptions of a decline in American power in the region; and the potential spread of nuclear free zones. Other significant trends include the rise of Japan as a regional political and military power as well as an economic superpower, and the emergence of additional newly industrialized countries, such as Thailand, which may further exacerbate U.S. trade tensions in the area.

These and other trends create enormous challenges and opportunities for the United States in Asia. But no challenge is more fundamental than adjusting to the monumental changes that are now underway in regional communist states. Initiated by China, but now followed by the Soviet Union and perhaps later by Vietnam and ultimately North Korea, regional communist nations are reforming their political, economic, and social structures in ways thought impossible at the beginning of this decade.

Domestically, these reforms include the separation of communist party and government functions, some broadening of political participation, the decentralization of much of the economy, the introduction of market incentives, some reduction of military forces and budgets, some change in military doctrine and strategy, and greater social and cultural toleration.

In the area of foreign policy, these changes have included less direct aggression abroad, less support for communist insurgencies in the Third World, more constructive participation in the international community, more active and sophisticated diplomacy, the search for Western investment and technology, expansion of trade with the West, and more cultural exchanges with Western countries.

These policy changes necessitate a reassessment of our basic assumptions about the behavior of certain communist states. It was assumed until very recently, for example, that the Soviet Union would not give up its position in Afghanistan nor pressure the Vietnamese to get out of Cambodia. The Soviet presence in both countries was viewed in Washington (and Beijing) as part of Moscow's attempt to encircle China and to compete globally with the United States. Hence, most American strategists believed hostility would characterize Sino-Soviet relations and that the PRC could be counted on to cooperate with Washington on many security issues.

Another assumption was Sino-Vietnamese hostility. Few analysts believed Vietnam would pull out of Cambodia because establishing an Indochinese federation was seen as a fundamental goal of Hanoi's foreign policy. The importance of Cam Ranh Bay to the Soviet Union led most observers to conclude that Moscow would never pressure Hanoi to withdraw its troops from Cambodia.

It is clear from the scope of domestic and foreign policy reform in China, the Soviet Union, and perhaps Vietnam that a highly significant change is underway in the communist world. From the point of view of U.S. national strategy, the most important change is improved relations between China and the Soviet Union.

As previously discussed, the United States has benefited enormously from the Sino-Soviet conflict, particularly since 1978 when Washington and Beijing pursued mutually supportive policies on regional issues such as pressuring the Soviets in Afghanistan, making untenable the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, and dissuading North Korea from attacking Seoul. Now that Sino-Soviet relations are moving toward normalization, some consideration must be given as to how that development will affect U.S. security interests.

Parameters of Improved Sino-Soviet Relations

Improved Sino-Soviet relations could seriously harm U.S. interests should China and the Soviet Union once again enter into a military alliance or

cooperate in placing the Eurasian landmass under communist control. This, however, is improbable because of the severe constraints upon friendly Sino-Soviet relations.

Because of geographical features, demographic factors, marked cultural differences, and a long history of territorial conflict, the nature of Sino-Soviet relations is one of long-term distrust. The history of the relationship between the two countries, more particularly between their respective communist parties, has been more competitive than cooperative.

China will pursue its independent interests, which include preventing Soviet domination of the heartland. The stronger China becomes, the more independent its foreign policy will be. It is, therefore, extremely unlikely that China will join the Soviet Union in an alliance as long as China does not perceive its survival threatened by the United States. This gives Washington great flexibility in its relations with Beijing, but also gives the PRC flexibility in its dealings with the United States. It means that while Sino-American relations are durable, the "atmosphere" of the relationship can be subject to considerable fluctuation because of individual issues such as Taiwan.

As with all states, the most fundamental PRC interest is national survival. From Beijing's point of view, that requires an ability to deter both superpowers. China entered the Sino-Soviet alliance in the 1950s because it believed its survival was threatened by the United States. Beijing toyed with the idea of an alliance with Washington in 1978-1980 because the Soviet Union threatened to completely surround China. The immediate American and Soviet threats no longer exist. Therefore, there is little possibility of China becoming allies with either the Soviet Union or the United States. The "China card" is completely useless as a diplomatic ploy for either Moscow or Washington.

Between the two polarities of a Chinese alliance with the Soviet Union and a Chinese alliance with the United States, there is an immense range of possible relations between China and the superpowers. Some of these might be harmful to U.S. interests, such as Soviet military assistance to Beijing, but the United States should not find its interests vitally threatened. Current trends suggest that for the foreseeable future, both the Soviet Union and the United States will seek friendly relations with China and that Beijing will respond positively.

The key variable in the Washington-Beijing-Moscow triangular relationship will be relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although it is difficult to assess accurately, Gorbachev appears sincere in seeking to reduce international tensions. Thus, Soviet-American relations might well improve over the next few years. For the first time in history this creates a U.S.-U.S.S.R.-PRC strategic triangle characterized by friendly relations on all sides as opposed to antagonistic bilateral relations.

Should this occur, a more stable environment in Asia will probably emerge. Such an environment would increase the utility of political, economic, and informational instruments of national policy. Also, such a development would weaken the bipolar aspects of the international system and enhance its multipolar characteristics. This would increase the relative power and influence of China and Japan in Asia, as well as that of the newly industrialized countries (NICs) in the region.

Other Implications

The implications of reform within China and the Soviet Union, and perhaps eventually Vietnam and North Korea, are indeed profound. Not only have the reforms led to improved Sino-Soviet and Sino-Vietnamese relations, but also to improved Sino-American and Soviet-American relations. Further, the international system in Asia and elsewhere cannot help but be influenced in ways both challenging and fortuitous to the United States. There are, for example, both positive and negative sides to the greater priority being placed on economic development by the reforming communist states.

On the positive side, with higher priority being placed on economic development and less on overseas adventure, the communist reform movement should contribute to peace and stability in the Asia/Pacific region. Further, there is the possibility that more open communist markets in the region will stimulate trade and economic growth. China's reforms certainly have had this effect. At the most optimistic level, communist reforms may fundamentally alter the nature of communism itself, somehow enabling these societies to live at peace with their capitalist neighbors and to focus on improving the quality of life of their own people. Even if the reforms fail, some would argue, communism has become completely discredited as a viable political and economic system.

But just as there are positive sides to the success or failure of reforms in communist countries, so there are potential negatives sides. If the reforms succeed, the Soviet Union, China, or Vietnam may become a stronger enemy of the United States in the future. At minimum, these countries will have an expanded economic base from which to modernize their armed forces and to pursue their political objectives in Asia.

Yet another potential negative effect of the reforms is the creation of a major shared interest between regional communist states: the reinvigoration of socialism. The lowering of threat perceptions between the communist countries, plus a common ideological objective to reinvigorate socialism, may lead to a stronger international communist movement in the future. Such a movement may not be dominated by the Soviet Union, as

in the past, but rather involve a socialist partnership similar to the Free World partnership existing between the United States and its friends and allies. This could pose a sophisticated challenge to U.S. interests in the Asia/Pacific region.

There is also potential danger for the United States if the reforms fail. Currently, the Chinese and Soviet reforms are running into major difficulties over such issues as price reform and the role of communist cadre in factories. Both countries face enormous problems in convincing a reluctant bureaucracy and industrial labor force to implement reform. Certain problems which arise in conjunction with mixed planned and market economies, such as inflation and vast differences in standards of living, are politically sensitive issues which conservative opponents attempt to use to slow down reform.

If the reforms do fail or grind to a halt, there is a possibility that China and the Soviet Union might return to a highly centralized economy for the purpose of greater "efficiency." This might mean less trade with the United States and more Sino-Soviet trade on a commodity exchange basis. There also are important foreign policy implications because of the close relationship between reforms and improved relations with Washington. Both Beijing and Moscow consider a peaceful international environment as essential for the success of their economic reforms. This requires friendly or at least a nonconfrontational relationship with the United States. In the event that the reform program cannot go forward, the rationale for maintaining friendly relations with Washington loses some of its appeal. Thus, in the case of reform failure, the United States might face a more hostile foreign policy on the part of either or both communist countries.

Perceptions of Communist States

When one considers the wide range of U.S. interests involved in relations with the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and North Korea, it becomes apparent that a major policy review may be required as these countries change their domestic and foreign policies. This may be done on a country-by-country basis, perhaps following the example of the evolution of U.S. policy toward China after 1978. But there is one factor which suggests that a more thorough review might be necessary.

The United States is not merely reactive in pursuit of its interests. A fundamental goal of U.S. foreign policy is world freedom, that is, a world composed of free, sovereign democracies resolving their differences through arbitration and international law rather than through brute force. The Reagan administration was highly active in the promotion of world freedom, as evidenced by the substantial support given to noncommunist guerrillas seeking to overthrow certain communist regimes. Whereas the liberalization

of communist systems is in the U.S. interest and hence a justification for cooperative relations with Beijing, Moscow and Hanoi, the goal of the United States is not to strengthen their communist systems, but rather to encourage their evolution toward greater freedom.

The United States needs to approach its relations with the reforming communist states with both realism and principle. Realistically speaking, it is in the U.S. interest to encourage reform within China, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and North Korea. In most cases, these reforms tend to reduce international tensions and improve the lifestyles of their citizens. As in the case of China, the United States should be responsive to Soviet, Vietnamese, and North Korean initiatives for improved relations.

But also, realistically speaking, the United States must remain objective about the ultimate result of the reforms. No one knows whether the reforms will succeed or be continued beyond the current leadership. No one knows whether the reforms, if they do succeed, will result in a shift in communist capabilities or intentions away from those harmful to U.S. interests. Since there is no conclusive evidence to dispel these doubts, they should be considered healthy from the viewpoint of an American policymaker responsible for the security of the United States and the well-being of its people.

In terms of principle, the United States must adhere to its goal of world freedom. This is expressed through support for democracy, free enterprise, human rights, impartial justice, and rule by law. The goal of world freedom requires both U.S. support of reforms within the communist world, as well as adherence to an ultimate objective that encourages a change in the nature of communism into a system which respects individual freedom and the right of personal property. In the past, such a transformation would have been an impossible contradiction. But since communist leaders are in the process of redefining communism to meet actual conditions, such a change might be possible if these leaders are convinced that national interests would be served thereby.

It is necessary for U.S. leaders to keep in mind the goal of world freedom for two reasons. First, there is risk that communist reforms might result in a greater threat to U.S. interests in the future. Second, there is danger that communist reforms might be used as justification to reduce American military forces in the Asia/Pacific region. This is dangerous not only because of the possibility of more hostile policies in the future from the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam or North Korea, but also because of the destabilizing effect such a reduction would have on Asian affairs.

Importance of U.S. Military Presence in Asia

U.S. forward deployed forces, along with attendant military bases and alliance structures, provide the essential security framework within which

stability, peace, and commerce are maintained throughout the Pacific basin. The United States has played this role since World War II, and it cannot be delegated to Japan or other regional powers because of traditional rivalries within Asia.

U.S. forces counterbalance other military presences in the region, including those of the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and Japan. Japan, of course, is not an enemy of the United States, but most Asian nations want the United States to prevent a reemergence of Japanese militarism. U.S. forces also deter aggression in critical locations such as Thailand, Taiwan, and Korea; they protect vital trade routes linking the Persian Gulf with Northeast Asia and the U.S. West Coast; they demonstrate the strength of the American commitment to the Asia/Pacific region; and they prevent an erosion of Asian commitments to the United States.

Although the U.S. political and economic presence in Asia is strong, American military forces provide a degree of stability and confidence in the region which cannot be duplicated by other means of national power. The U.S. military presence is the primary proof of American credibility and commitment.

As long as the United States is perceived to be strong and committed to the region, most Asian nations will maintain cooperative relations with Washington. A reduction in the U.S. military presence would be viewed as a decreasing commitment to the region and likely would result in reduced U.S. influence in regional affairs; less U.S. access to military facilities in the Pacific basin; and the expanded influence of U.S. competitors in Asia, including the Soviet Union, China, and Japan.

The next century has been described as the "Pacific Century," meaning that the center of world growth has shifted to that region. Already, the United States conducts more than 35 percent of its total trade with East Asia/Pacific nations—far higher than the 25 percent of its trade with Western Europe. Since by fate of geography the United States is a Pacific as well as an Atlantic power, it would not be in the U.S. interest to weaken its position in the Asia/Pacific region at the very time the importance of the region is growing.

As part of its review of U.S. foreign policy, the new Administration will no doubt consider whether American policy toward Asia should change in a substantial way. One factor influencing that decision will be the many changes that have occurred in the region since 1981, particularly the reform movements underway in China and the Soviet Union and which eventually may be attempted in Vietnam and perhaps North Korea.

These reforms have lowered tensions in the Asia/Pacific region and led to improved relations between China and the United States, and improving relations between Washington and Moscow. But the reforms also have

contributed to a major improvement in Sino-Soviet relations and might lead over the next few years to improved Sino-Vietnamese relations as well. Although it is too early to predict with confidence, there are grounds for believing that U.S.-Vietnam relations likewise will improve. On the far horizon there is a possibility that North Korea may follow the reformist route.

The reduction of tensions in the Asia/Pacific region and the moderation of policies within regional communist states are in the U.S. interest. But the changes that are occurring within the communist states are altering the strategic environment in which the United States must formulate its policy. Some adjustment of the Reagan administration's Asia policy might be required, although the success of that policy strongly suggests that most of its elements should be preserved.

What is crucial in this policy review is a clear grasp of what U.S. objectives are in its foreign policy toward reforming communist nations. Since the stated purpose of the reforms is to strengthen socialism, not to abandon it, it is important for the United States not to dismiss ideology as a continuing factor in communist intentions toward the United States, nor should the United States give up its own commitment to world freedom. The U.S. foreign policy goal should be the encouragement of continued reform within the communist nations of Asia to the point where they no longer pose an ideological threat to U.S. interests. A specific objective should be the systemic change in the nature of communism toward a system respecting individual freedom, personal property, and a diversified international order.

Although there are unparalleled opportunities for the United States during this era of communist reform, there is also considerable danger. If the reforms succeed and ideological intentions are not changed, certain communist states may become more of a threat to the United States in the future. If the reforms fail, communist leaders may return to more hardline policies both at home and abroad.

The greatest potential danger to U.S. interests in Asia comes from domestic demands to reduce the U.S. military presence in response to perceived lower threats from the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and North Korea. The danger here is twofold: A reduction of American forces could leave the United States exposed to a reversal of communist policy in Asia, and such a reduction could weaken American credibility in the region, probably leading to a significant shift in the regional balance of power. At minimum, the United States would lose influence in the Asia/Pacific region at precisely the moment when the Pacific rim is gaining importance to the United States.

Thus, even if the immediate threat from Asian communist countries is reduced somewhat as a result of their domestic and foreign policy reforms,

it is vital that the United States maintain a strong, forward deployed military presence in the region. That presence ensures that the United States will continue to exercise significant influence in the region, and it gives Washington flexibility and confidence in dealing individually with each reforming communist state.

Notes

1. *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington: The White House), January 1988, p. 4.
2. Don Oberdorfer, "Shultz, in China, Urges Talks on Curbing Spread of Missiles," *The Washington Post*, 15 July 1988, p. A15; 21 July 1988, p. A18.
3. The following discussion of U.S. national security policy toward the Asia-Pacific region has been summarized from *FY 1989 Annual Report to the Congress of the Secretary of Defense* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1988); *United States Military Posture for FY 1989* (Washington: The Joint Staff, 1988); *National Security Policy of the United States* (Washington: The White House, 1988).
4. This discussion of U.S. political policy toward Asia has been taken from Dr. Gaston J. Sigur, Assistant Secretary of the State, East Asian and Pacific Affairs Bureau, "East Asia and the Pacific: The Road behind and the Road Ahead," Speech, Philadelphia World Affairs Council, 6 June 1988.



With the help of the hundreds of veterans whom I have had the opportunity to interview, I have written three books on the Vietnam War (*Battle for Hue*, *Into Laos*, and *Death Valley*). Presently I am beginning research on another book, this one to study the techniques, tactics, and human cost of the war of attrition in Vietnam by focusing on Operation Buffalo along the DMZ (2-14 July 1967), which involved 1/3, 2/3, 1/9, and 3/9 Marines, and supporting units. I would greatly appreciate hearing from any veteran of Operation Buffalo for the purpose of arranging an interview. Write: Keith William Nolan, 220 Kingsville Court, Webster Groves, Missouri 63119 or telephone (314) 961-7577.