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The Pacific Basin: Dilemmas and Choices for American Security

Richard H. Solomon

We have all heard the rhetoric in recent years—Administration officials, economists and trend forecasters are developing the perspective that America's dealings with the Pacific Basin are overtaking our traditional relationships across the Atlantic. Some disparage this notion. They point to our high levels of political commitment, investment and trade in Europe. Foreign affairs analyst William Pfaff, for example, wrote an article some time ago in the *International Herald Tribune* expressing skepticism about America's new infatuation with the countries of the Pacific. He noted that Sweden alone produces more steel than all the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations put together. We have more men under arms in Europe than anywhere in Asia. American multinational industries have greater investments in Europe than in all of the Pacific region.

Is Pfaff right? Yes, our social and economic bonds with Europe are older and more developed than with the Pacific. Our alliance relationships are far more elaborate and are backed up by more firepower. Europe remains the pivotal region in the global balance of power; the keystone between the East and West. America's interests are, and will remain strong in Europe. Yet, Pfaff is missing a critical point. The issue is not where we are, but where we are going; not the reality of the present, but the opportunities of the future.

All the trend lines point toward greatly increasing U.S. involvement with the countries of the Pacific Basin. Already our trade with the Pacific surpasses that across the Atlantic. The Japanese economy is poised to surpass the Soviet Union as the second largest economy in the world, and our investment is steadily growing throughout the region.

Perhaps the crucial feature of the Pacific Basin is that its leading lights—Japan and the newly industrialized economies of South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore—are the dynamic edge of development. Even the People's Republic of China, for three decades locked into the socialist approach to modernization, is looking to the West for solutions to its development difficulties.

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Unlike the Europeans, who are wrestling with structural economic problems, including high levels of unemployment, unmanageable social overhead, and outdated industries, the growth-oriented countries of the Pacific are adapting to new challenges and moving out. They know the value of a free and open trading regime (even if they complain of the competition) and are working with us to resolve existing issues; maybe not as fast as we would like, but they are still working the problems. They also know full well the importance of political and military stability to their development, and here, too, they are working with us.

The point I wish to make is *not* that Asia is overtaking Europe, nor that Asia's growing importance somehow suggests we will "turn our backs" on our European allies. Rather, it is that Asia is emerging as an increasingly important factor in our global strategic thinking and planning. It is now an integral part of a worldwide pattern in our economic, political and defense activities, linked to the West. Interestingly enough, the deployment of Soviet SS-20s in the Far East has helped to highlight the growing interrelationship between Asia and Europe in matters of national security and arms control strategy.

The last three wars in which the United States was heavily involved all began in Asia. World War II and the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts are fresh in the memories of Asian leaders, if not our own. The lessons of preparedness, a firm response to aggression, and the need for a vital economic foundation have been well learned. And even if the states of Asia do not all seek to establish alliance relationships with the United States, they understand full well the critical American role in regional—and global—security as well as in economic development.

The Soviet Military Buildup in the Asia-Pacific Region

The United States is not alone in its preoccupation with Asia and the Pacific. The Soviet Union's interest and involvement in the region are also visibly growing. We cannot assume that the Pacific will remain a kind of American lake.

As the Soviets increase their investment and development of resources in Siberia and the Far Eastern provinces, they will naturally seek to expand their influence and trade in the Pacific region. And their security concerns are diverting a growing share of Moscow's defense assets to the region. It is now estimated that the Soviets commit as much as one-fourth to one-third of their total ground and airpower in the Far East. The continuing Sino-Soviet tensions, Soviet support for North Korea and Vietnam, and a desire to undermine the American position in the region are leading Moscow—with its still modest economic and political links to Asia—to rely primarily on military measures in this contest for influence.

To protect *our* growing interests in the region and the concerns of our allies and other friendly countries, a strong security role for the United States is indispensable. In concert with our defense partners, we must give Moscow every reason to understand that threats, intimidation, the fomenting of instability, and economic infiltration in support of political objectives will not succeed in projecting Soviet influence into the Pacific region.

If the leaders of the Soviet Union were to have their way, the next war involving the U.S.S.R. would be fought on terms of maximum advantage to Moscow. This means a quick, decisive invasion of Western Europe, a war scenario most desired by Soviet military planners. Success on the battlefields of Europe's central front has been the *raison d'être* of Russian armies since the time of Peter the Great. Moscow will not want to be diverted from all-out, rapid achievement of this goal.

A fundamental objective of our defense planning, I believe, must be to counter this strategy. At the very least, the Soviets must understand that a war in Europe will involve the United States, that it will encounter determined and protracted resistance, and that such a conflict will not be confined to a battlefield of Soviet choosing. We must be prepared to open a second front in Asia. In the words of the former CNO Admiral James Watkins, "We must dilute [Soviet] efforts, divert their attention, and force them to divide their forces."

The Soviets must also realize they cannot successfully strangle our sea lines of communication which are vital to U.S. efforts to sustain the defense of our allies and our own military capabilities in Europe and the Far East. In a word, we should bring our maritime strategy to bear on our defense planning—first, as a deterrent to Soviet adventurism; second, to frustrate Moscow's goals if deterrence fails and, finally, to prevail in combat. Naturally, our primary effort goes to making certain that deterrence does succeed.

What are we up against in Asia? What is Moscow's strategy in the region? To begin with, the Soviets have long felt very vulnerable in the Far East: the Mongol invasion, the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, Imperial Japan in the 1940s, and the Sino-Soviet feud all have made Asia a source of threat to the Russians. Their particular fear has been a two-front conflict in which they have to divide forces and sustain operations in a distant Far East over tenuous lines of communication.

Since World War II, the Soviet strategy for minimizing its two-front security problem has evolved in response to changing events and technological innovations. The Communist victory in China's civil war in 1949 seemed for a time to have resolved Moscow's two-front dilemma. The Sino-Soviet alliance of 1950 created a friendly "buffer" state for the U.S.S.R. in the Far East, and a two-front security challenge for the United States. However, the breakdown of this alliance in the summer of 1960 and China's subsequent raising of border issues along the 4,650-mile Sino-Soviet frontier—as part of a

broader political challenge to Soviet influence in Asia—reopened Moscow's concerns about the security of its Far Eastern provinces. It was in this context that the Brezhnev leadership in 1965 initiated the first, quantitative phase of its Asian military buildup, increasing ground force divisions in the Siberian, Transbaykal, and Far East military districts from less than twenty to more than fifty today.

Military clashes along the disputed Sino-Soviet frontier in 1969 further deepened the Moscow-Beijing feud, ultimately impelling the Chinese leadership to improve relations with the United States, Japan, and Western Europe to avoid international isolation and build political counterpressures against the mounting Soviet threat. This militarization of the Sino-Soviet conflict, in concert with Moscow's anticipation of China's normalization of relations with the United States and Japan, led the Soviets to initiate a second phase in their Asian military buildup in 1977. This second phase was designed not only to encircle China, but also to prepare for the possible formation of a U.S., Chinese, and Japanese security coalition against the Soviet Union.

Thus, in 1978 Moscow created an independent theater command for its Far East forces at Ulan Ude in the Siberian Military District. Simultaneously, it accelerated the expansion of its Pacific Fleet (now the largest of the four Soviet fleets), and began to deploy its most modern aircraft and armor to the Far East. Hanoi's victory in the Vietnamese civil war in 1975, and the rapid deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations after 1978, enabled Moscow to acquire use of the former American naval and air bases at Cam Ranh Bay. Thus ensconced in Southeast Asia, the Soviets have been able to advance their military encirclement of China and project air and naval forces south from Vladivostok to the Straits of Malacca and into the Indian Ocean.

This most recent phase of the Soviet Asia-Pacific military buildup has also involved the nuclearization of Moscow's military forces. With initial deployment of the SS-20 intermediate-range "theater" missile in 1977, and the deployment of the medium-range Backfire bomber, Moscow created a qualitatively new threat to the U.S. 7th Fleet, to U.S. bases in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, and to a broad range of military and economic targets in China and other states throughout the Western Pacific.

Moscow's Far Eastern nuclear buildup presents a political as much as a military challenge to the Asian region. A Soviet nuclear threat has existed in the Far East since the 1960s—in ICBMs, in the short-range SS-4 Frog and SS-5 Scud missiles deployed against China, and in the Tu-16 Badger bombers and tactical strike aircraft also deployed along the Sino-Soviet frontier. The new longer range and more accurate mobile nuclear missiles and aircraft now located throughout the region seem designed as much for political intimidation, as for deterring attacks on the Soviet Union's still lightly populated Far Eastern territories.

As demonstrated by Moscow's concurrent SS-20 missile buildup in the European theater, the heightening of a visible nuclear threat has been used by Soviet leaders—in conjunction with indigenous peace movements—to raise fears among America's allies about the decoupling of the U.S. strategic deterrent from the defense of Europe. It has been designed to stimulate public anxieties about the possibility of nuclear conflict; this as a means of undermining the political foundations of NATO and to build pressures on the United States to enter into disadvantageous arms control agreements.

Moscow now seems to be pursuing a similar strategy in Asia. Its unabated military buildup has been paralleled by a series of political initiatives designed to heighten public anxieties about a regional arms race, yet it seeks to convince people that Soviet intentions are benign. These political initiatives include Leonid Brezhnev's 1969 proposal for an Asian Collective Security organization. This has recently been reformulated in Mikhail Gorbachev's 1985 call for an all-Asian security conference, his July 1986 proposal at Vladivostok for an Asian "Helsinki"-type security conference, a series of proposals to the Chinese since the late 1960s for nonaggression treaties, and a range of more recent proposals for nuclear-free zones, confidence-building measures, and agreements for the no-first use of the nuclear weapons Moscow has been steadily deploying to the region.

The Military Balance in the Asia-Pacific Region

Any net assessment of the regional military balance will conclude, despite the major Soviet buildup and Moscow's new political activism, that the situation in Asia is still rather favorable to the United States. We have strong allies in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, the Philippines and Australia—although we face current difficulties with New Zealand in view of the recent dissolution of ANZUS. Our friends in the region are being helpful, as well. Lee Kuan-yew, the leader of nonaligned Singapore, told reporters several months ago that he actively supports port calls by ships of the 7th Fleet. Asked by a journalist if he did not think U.S. ships would attract Soviet threats, Lee said that the Soviets will not threaten Singapore. Asked why not, he replied, because of the presence of the 7th Fleet.

Our recent force augmentation in the region—the presence of Tomahawk cruise missiles aboard U.S. warships and the decision to deploy F-16s in Japan—builds on the presence of our carrier battle groups and air bases, giving us an effective deterrence through an offensive capability. The Soviets thus know we have the capability to open a second front in the Far East, especially if war breaks out in Europe. We can protect our allies and friends, and we can secure sea lines of communications in support of a conflict in Southwest Asia.

But we cannot be complacent. As in Europe during the 1970s and early 1980s, the Soviets are trying to use their military capabilities—especially

their nuclear forces—for the political purpose of disrupting our alliances. Moscow continues to play on antinuclear sentiment in the region, all the while probing for openings (as in North Korea, Vietnam and the South Pacific) to project Soviet influence and military presence.

Things could go wrong for us. Just think how the power balance in Asia would have looked had the political crisis in the Philippines evolved differently than it did last February. With the Soviets operating from Cam Ranh Bay, and the United States unable to deploy forces from Clark Field and Subic Bay, the “correlation of forces” in Southeast Asia would have shifted dramatically.

We and our friends and allies were fortunate, as were the Philippine people, that things worked out as they did with the end of the Marcos era. But we still face serious challenges. The Soviets are doing what they can in the South Pacific to fan antinuclear feelings in the region and to drive a wedge between us and our allies and friendly states. We have to expect much more of this sort of activity. General Secretary Gorbachev has called for the “activization” of Soviet foreign policy, and it is clear that Asia and the Pacific will be an important focus of his efforts. We can anticipate that the Soviets will combine veiled and not-so-veiled threats with high-sounding proposals for arms-control agreements in order to build public political pressures against security cooperation with the United States, and to hobble our ability to act in the region.

Implications and Choices for the United States in Pacific Defense

What does all this mean for management of our security relationships in the Pacific? As we look across the Pacific, we view East Asia in a global context. But this perspective is not always shared by the states of the region. Our global approach to the Soviet Union and its allies, especially the two-front challenge, often conflicts with the more focused regional approach of our allies and friends. Some will express the concern that our two-front approach to the Soviets unnecessarily risks dragging them into conflicts that seem quite distant from their interests.

Managing our alliance relationships in Asia thus promises to be an increasingly difficult task. The Europeans, who live in the shadow of a very visible Soviet threat, pose constant challenges to our diplomacy. Maintaining public support for defense cooperation with the United States will also be a continuing challenge in Asia because of increasingly sophisticated Soviet approaches to exploiting popular fears of nuclear weaponry and arms competition.

Part and parcel of our global view of Asia and the Pacific is the management of regional developments. It is critical to our national security that we foster conditions that will maximize political stability and economic growth. In the Philippines, the popular desire for democracy and the rule of law proved more powerful than the forces behind the former regime. The

Administration is now working diligently with the Aquino government to encourage the reestablishment of democratic institutions and a lively, growing economy that are the bulwark of real stability.

In Asia, the Soviet threat is less apparent than in Europe, and the relatively broad support for relations with us should not lull us into complacency. Our current impasse with New Zealand is a useful reminder of problems we could encounter down the road. South Korea is not the Philippines, despite some superficial similarities. In Korea, in addition to the social and political developments taking place domestically, there is the enduring threat from the militarily powerful, aggressive and unpredictable North. Our support for democratic institutions in South Korea remains undiluted, but we need to be careful not to risk losing everything to a hostile and predatory enemy as we encourage democratization. Security is still a fundamental requirement on the Korean peninsula.

As we work to create conditions for long-term stability in Asia, we must also work with our friends to raise the costs of aggression by the Soviets and their proxies. In Indochina, Vietnam's Soviet-supported occupation of Cambodia has united the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the common cause of opposition to Hanoi's occupation. We are following ASEAN's lead and supporting the Cambodian resistance. Afghanistan is another case of Moscow's use of military force to project its influence. Such regional aggression must be viewed from a global perspective. But we may not always be lucky enough to have allies and friends who will see relatively small-scale Soviet adventurism for what it is: part of a much larger Soviet pattern of encircling adversaries and projecting an intimidating influence through military power.

The instruments we have to sustain American influence and to shore up our partnerships are in some danger of being seriously weakened. I have in mind the cuts in our bilateral assistance program mandated by the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings bill. In 1984, U.S. bilateral assistance to countries in Asia and the Pacific was increased 14 1/2 percent to \$728 million. In 1985, another increase of 12 1/2 percent was achieved, to \$820 million. But in 1986, foreign assistance to the region was slashed 23 1/2 percent, to \$663 million. For 1987, we are requesting \$858 million, most of which will be devoted to helping the Philippines in its time of crisis. In Congress, however, resolutions to lower that figure by 20-25 percent are on the floor, and final figures may be still lower.

This is no way to manage our global responsibilities. It is much more cost-effective for the United States to administer assistance in order to prepare its friends' defenses and stabilize their societies, than it is to pay the costs of instability or containing the expansion of Soviet influence and aggression.

Naturally, when talk turns to helping other countries, it also raises the issue of what they are doing to contribute to the common good. Here the talk of trade wars is particularly unhelpful. We have trade problems, and they are

serious, but we have to keep our commercial disputes in perspective and tensions under control. The fact is, our trade problems are a direct result of the dynamism of the market economy states of East Asia as well as of our own economic vitality. Such "problems" reflect the strength of our societies; they are an implicit repudiation of the sluggish socialist approach to development.

We should not let irritating trade disputes cause us to lose sight of this fact. Rather, we have to redouble our efforts to manage such problems constructively. The MOSS talks with the Japanese on opening specific market sectors are a good example of responsible tension management. By putting the right people together to talk about specific issues, we are gradually clearing away the remaining barriers to trade. Secretary Baker's work to reduce overvaluation of the dollar is also helping to restore our competitive economic position in a constructive way.

Any assessment of future U.S. opportunities in Asia must include the issue of China and our relations with Beijing. China is slowly acquiring the economic momentum and political stability to give weight to the geographical and cultural components of its would-be role as a major power. We have made some useful first steps in developing a defense relationship with the PRC, but much more could be done to deal constructively with the Chinese to counter the growing Soviet military challenge. We need to find ways to increase cooperation with Beijing to advance our common interests, but without threatening the interests of our Asian friends and allies.

China's current policy of foreign policy "independence," and its desire to avoid international tensions in the interest of concentrating on domestic development, are factors which limit U.S.-PRC security cooperation. Yet developments in Korea, Indochina, and in South and Southwest Asia call for some measure of policy coordination if we are to attain shared objectives. Economic cooperation alone will not realize the substantial potential of normal Sino-American relations; nor will it enhance our common security concerns.

So where does this leave us in our deliberations on security in the Pacific Basin? The United States is well-positioned in Asia, and the general state of the region is quite favorable to our interests. But our adversary is relentless, and his capacities for mischief-making are real. We cannot be complacent. And to recall the points I made at the outset: Our stake in Asia is now on a par with that in Europe, and Soviet interests and military resources are inexorably shifting eastward. Our job then is to examine ways we can better integrate our regional policies and problem-solving efforts into a global strategy that will enhance deterrence and give greater play to the tremendous economic growth and social development that we have witnessed in East Asia in the post-World War II era.

This article is a version of a lecture delivered to the 1986 Current Strategy Forum at the Naval War College.