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## Part V: New Era in U.S.-China Relations

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# The strategic implications of the Sino-Soviet talks

by Richard Cohen

In October 1982 the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) initiated a series of bilateral discussions which are unique in the post-war history of the two countries. These talks are of primary strategic importance. They are being undertaken by both Moscow and Peking because each side sees them as holding potential advantages for the highest priorities of its national agenda.

### Soviet encirclement of China

On one level, the talks are a symptom of the collapse of the "China card" policy which had dominated Sino-U.S. relations during the 1970s, when it was an important factor in Moscow's geopolitical considerations. Given the clear failure of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and the resulting severe economic dislocation in the P.R.C., along with the proven obsolescence of their 1950s-vintage conventional military capability, the China card policy was doomed.

During the critical period of early 1978 and late 1979 the Chinese leadership would witness another clear demonstration of the impotence of American force, shown continuously in the wake of the 1977-80 Soviet military break-out in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Basin theatre. The break-out, which climaxed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979, had consolidated direct Soviet and Soviet-sponsored conventional and tactical nuclear superiority on every Chinese border. By early 1980, with the Soviet build-up at Cam Ranh Bay, the encirclement had stretched to the militarily important South China Sea.

That encirclement of the P.R.C. had ranked high among Soviet military priorities ever since the Maoist rejection of a *pro forma* Soviet truce offer following the late-1964 palace coup against the badly overextended Nikita Khrushchev which installed in power a combination of conservative Communist Party ideologues led by Central Committee Secretary Mikhail Suslov, the Red Army, and more pragmatic elements of Khrushchev's entourage led by Leonid Brezhnev.

### Not a new Sino-Soviet alliance

The October 1982 talks, occurring in the wake of the collapse of the China card and a successful 15-year Soviet

program of military encirclement of China, represented something other than what many in Western capitals fear—a new Sino-Soviet alliance. In no way do current Sino-Soviet negotiations resemble the kind of military and political alliance between Moscow and Peking that peaked in the early phases of the Korean War, or even the shallow political common front of Soviet imperial ambitions and Maoist Chinese imperial objectives that characterized the period from 1954 to 1957.

The talks certainly confirm that the days of Sino-American diplomatic and political collaboration, keynoted by former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's visit to Peking in May 1978 and climaxed with two staggering events—the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam—had ended.

The current talks also cancel any reversion to the earlier 1969-77 period of the Kissinger-directed China card, then principally aimed at pressuring Moscow into the *détente* process.

Finally, the current talks bear no resemblance to the period from 1958-69, dominated by Mao's manic drive for a total break with Moscow and his own Communist Party, which led to the Cultural Revolution.

### Moscow's objectives

For Moscow, the principal objectives of the talks were inspired by two early-1980 events. First was Ronald Reagan's assumption of the presidency of the United States. That entailed a threat to the very foundation of Moscow's strategic policy.

Reagan's stated objective of reversing the decline in U.S. strategic offensive capability—a decline first legislated in Kissinger's 1972 SALT I arms control agreement—and the President's later commitment to the most advanced strategic defense, reversing Kissinger's "giveaway" 1972 antiballistic-missile treaty, caused Moscow to escalate and concentrate its strategic pressure on the western front, Europe and the United States, and on the southern front, particularly the Persian Gulf, because of its leverage against Western Europe and Japan.

Moscow has also sought to weaken and push back U.S. influence in the Far East. First on Moscow's agenda in the region has been an attempt to subvert Reagan's intention to re-emphasize the strategic priority of the U.S.-Japan relationship.

Secondly, Moscow supported the North Korean October 1983 Rangoon terror bombing which eliminated a sizable section of President Chun Doo Hwan's South Korean cabinet. The Chun trip through Asia, which was to have begun in Rangoon, and Reagan's later November trip to Southeast Asia, both cancelled by Soviet and Soviet-supported efforts, were aimed at facilitating the re-emergence of the United States as a force in the Asian theater.

And in November 1982, following the death of Leonid Brezhnev, former KGB chief Yuri Andropov rose to the position of chairman of the Soviet Communist Party. Andropov then introduced into the center of China policy the new Politburo member and longtime KGB operative Gaidar Aliyev.

### **Moscow plays mediator**

The Andropov-Aliyev China program escalated immediately following the death of Mikhail Suslov in January 1982. While continuing to increase Soviet military pressure on China, the Andropov-Aliyev group sought to step up the pace of Sino-Soviet bilateral talks. The new China approach apparently gained the support of the Soviet military high command. Through the talks, Moscow would seek to promote itself as a "mediator" in disputes between Peking and Moscow allies Vietnam, Mongolia, and the Babrak Kamal regime of Afghanistan.

The Soviet mediator role undoubtedly played a part in creating the favorable climate for Sino-Indian border talks which took off in late 1983. There are strong suggestions from U.S. intelligence officials that when confrontation threatened on the Korean peninsula after the October terror bombing—an anathema to Peking, which fears any instability there—Moscow offered to help rein in North Korea. In addition to offering the U.S.S.R. as an impartial mediator (the typical posture of a hegemonic power), the Andropov-Aliyev plan sought to significantly increase Soviet trade with China as a means to increase its intelligence opportunities in the P.R.C. while developing levers of influence on the internal Chinese situation.

These two facts—the Reagan election and the Andropov-Aliyev succession—sped up Moscow's short-term program for creating marginal flexibility for Soviet and Soviet-allied conventional and nuclear force deployments. With the risks lowered in the Sino-Soviet theater, Moscow could enjoy hidden theatre nuclear and conventional reserves for application in either the western or southern fronts, while at the same time Chinese neutralization appears to lower the risks for Vietnamese-spearheaded operations against Thailand and Soviet-spearheaded operations against Pakistan.

### **Moscow warns of Chinese modernization**

In addition to this short-term objective, Moscow also has a long-term policy toward China. Since no later than the earliest public signals emanating from the Soviet journal *Kommunist* in 1975, all leading Soviet factions have paid homage to a consensus of Soviet Sinologists who emphatically warned that then-dominant Maoism would be quickly overridden by revived Chinese Communist Party and government institutions.

These forecasts identified the new Chinese ruling elite as a "self-stabilizing institutional oligarchy," and cautioned that anticipated reforms by post-Mao leaders would lead to a resurgence of the Chinese economy. A tightly controlled modern industrial sector, optimized around the creation of advanced military capabilities, would sit atop a low-yield, labor-intensive agricultural sector. The Soviet attack on those in China seeking economic modernization paralleled at that time the charges of the Maoist Gang of Four butchers, both

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*From a position of strength, Moscow hemmed in China militarily in the 1970s, but the Peking advocates of an industrially-based armed forces buildup gained greater leverage. The Sino-Soviet talks do not forebode any new strategic alliance.*

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warning of the rise of a new Confucianism embedded in an emerging Chinese "military bureaucratic dictatorship." By early 1976 the Soviet press would publicly compare this new leadership with the Nazis and Adolf Hitler.

Thus by 1975, Moscow had already adopted a basic long-term China policy which was now predicated on the necessity of subverting the internal modernization process within the People's Republic. Soviet Sinologists had projected that by perhaps the end of the century, China might reach what had been accomplished in the Soviet Union since 1964, with the proviso that dangerously, the P.R.C. unlike Moscow, would have above-board access to at least some advanced technology from the United States.

By 1979, the P.R.C. leadership had agreed that talks with Moscow, which Deng Xiao-ping would later promise to become a "marathon," were crucial in order to "buy time." Following the retributive Chinese invasion of Vietnam—pushed through the elite Chinese councils in November and

December of 1978 in response to what was assessed at the time to be the inevitability of a Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea (see Part IV, *EIR*, March 6)—Peking learned two hard lessons.

### **After Vietnam invasion failure**

The invasion was backed by an alliance of leading figures in the state party bureaucracy associated with Li Hsien-nien, all of whom, like Li, had survived the Cultural Revolution under the protection of Premier Chou En-lai, along with a number of military leaders located in the Central Command, typified by Yeh Chien-ying. The Li-Yeh group joined forces with followers of Premier Hua Kuo-feng and his faction, associated with the Maoist police networks.

The consideration of the urgent invasion plan was largely a response to the unparalleled series of Soviet-sponsored military moves in the Indian Ocean-Pacific Basin region initiated in late 1977 with the capture of the Horn of Africa as the booty of an Ethiopian victory in the Ogaden War. Efforts led by Deng to assemble an international common front aimed at deterring Moscow failed miserably in 1978.

For Peking, the most profound result of the Soviet break-out was the virtually complete military encirclement of the P.R.C. and a drastic negative shift in Peking's military position vis-à-vis Moscow, when compared to the early 1965 Moscow efforts to militarize the Sino-Soviet conflict.

Deng and his forces, however, rejected the invasion plan, arguing that the danger of direct invasion of the P.R.C. would come from "the north." Beyond this tactical argument with the plan, Deng raised two other points which later surfaced after the lackluster border invasion.

First, the invasion caused a grave diversion of resources away from the fledgling civilian modernization efforts; second, Chinese conventional equipment was shown to be wholly incapable of sustaining even a limited border war. By late 1979 the Soviets climaxed their break-out and encirclement efforts with the invasion of Afghanistan.

The intense tremors felt in Peking after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent "Brezhnev Doctrine" of "limited sovereignty" for socialist states were now intensified by the Soviet invasion of an ostensibly non-aligned bordering nation.

In October 1979, before the Afghanistan invasion, Moscow had opened long-dormant bilateral talks with an encircled Peking. The talks focused on Sino-Soviet frontier problems. Peking chose this format for a change in Sino-Soviet relations, while in early April 1979 deciding to abrogate the Sino-Soviet friendship treaty.

The abrogation and the preliminary jockeying leading to the October border talks occurred just after uncontested large-scale Soviet naval maneuvers in the South China Sea during the Sino-Vietnam war, and unprecedented Soviet military maneuvers on China's northern border immediately following that war.

### **Factional battles in Peking**

One month after the abrogation, the Deng forces were mounting a major counterattack on Hua's Maoist police faction. By June 1979, at the National People's Congress, Hua—operating under pressure to make an historic ideological concession to the Deng-led anti-Maoist factions in the party—announced that there were no longer any antagonistic classes in China. The opposite contention had been standard Maoist doctrine, the principle upon which the Maoists could justify attacking their less radical political opponents as "class enemies." This insanity reached its height in the Cultural Revolution.

Then in September the Maoist police apparatus was publicly attacked as adherents of a "whatever" faction—whatever Mao says must be true.

Therefore, the initial surge of the Deng forces' attacks on their enemies had revealed their true target: the legacy of Mao Tse-tung. By the end of September, Yeh, speaking for the Central Military Command as well as Li Hsien-nien's forces, was forced to publicly admit that the Chinese Communist Party had made serious errors.

With Hua and the Yeh-Li forces under attack, the Soviet-China border talks began, in October 1979.

Based on the lessons learned in the crippling Chinese invasion of Vietnam, Deng and his allies were on the verge of reviving a long-dormant foreign-policy package circulated in 1962 by Mao's staunchest opposition—then-President Liu Shao-chi, his close political ally Peking mayor Peng Chen, and Deng himself, then Communist Party General Secretary. Nineteen sixty-two also marked the period of Mao's greatest weakness in the aftermath of the abysmal failure of the 1958-60 economic Great Leap Forward.

### **Reviving the 1962 foreign policy bid**

The foreign-policy package was adapted to the highest priority on the agenda of Mao's opposition—the modernization of China's economy. Indeed, it was in 1962 that the economic blueprint of the post-Mao leadership—the so-called Four Modernizations—was first voiced by Premier Chao En-lai.

The program secretly urged what amounted to a total break with Maoism—an opening to the West in order to gain access to Western high technology. In addition, the plan urged "easing of tensions" with Moscow, leading to a normalization of relationships. This, it was believed, would give China breathing space to modernize in a non-hostile environment. And thirdly, while maintaining a strong diplomatic position within the Third World, the plan urged a severe cutback in China's Third World aid, particularly aid to guerrilla movements.

The 1979 invasion of Vietnam bitterly proved the necessity of maintaining peaceful borders if China is to develop and also proved the necessity for conventional military modernization. Both the Deng group and the Li-Yeh group

emerged quickly after the 1976 ouster of the Gang of Four as proponents of conventional military modernization, while the Hua forces still lingeringly upheld the late chairman's commitment to the concept of "people's war."

In 1978, Peng Te-huai, the P.R.C. defense minister who in 1959 had openly challenged Mao on the basis of the gross failure of the Great Leap and Mao's neglect of conventional military modernization (for which he was surreptitiously ousted) was posthumously rehabilitated.

With the drastic weakening of Hua forces in 1980, the central debate in the Chinese leadership has centered on the question of conventional military modernization, and the arguments on both sides have decisive import for China's foreign policy.

### Quick fix or industrial build-up?

Cheered by the more radical Hua supporters and leftists, elements of the central military command typified by Yeh have argued for a race-against-time policy in conventional modernization.

They have argued for increased selective weapons purchases from the West for the purpose of quickly adding to the deterrent credibility on China's borders. The cheering radicals would also like to direct this new hardware as a threat against Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The elements of the Central Command supporting this quick-fix approach have received support from economic planning ministries close to Li. Li's forces—who have based the economic planning profile on a 1950s Soviet-style complete emphasis on heavy industry—found a natural ally in supporting an increased conventional military build-up; Li's heavy industry base overlaps military hardware production.

But the Deng forces have successfully argued that a quick-fix race against time to deter Moscow will fail, and instead, China must now buy time. They argue vehemently that China's badly needed foreign exchange cannot be squandered on short-term weapons systems, but must instead be used to build China's industrial base. They insist that only upon such a base can China modernize its armed forces to the point of representing a credible deterrent to Moscow.

The Deng forces thus see the "marathon" talks with Moscow as a means of stalling or stopping Moscow-instigated border challenges. Clearly this will be a very tricky game for Peking to play, since it cannot allow its talks with Moscow to be perceived in the Soviet Union as lowering the risk from redeployment of Soviet hardware. They argue that the quick-fix approach of the Li-Yeh group would, like the invasion of Vietnam which Li and Yeh supported, torpedo essential modernization.

Nonetheless, by the end of 1979, the U.S.S.R., riding on a wave of strategic momentum, made a firm decision that it could afford to cashier both the June 1979 SALT II agreement and the October 1979 Sino-Soviet border talks in favor of the invasion of Afghanistan. Indeed, following the invasion, both the agreement and the talks were cancelled.

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