

# Is a transformation coming in Sino-Soviet relations?

by Mary McCourt and Linda de Hoyos

The extended visit of Soviet First Vice-Premier Ivan Arkhipov to Beijing has raised eyebrows in capitals around the world. At issue is the possible transformation of Sino-Soviet relations in the weeks following Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov's July 28 speech on Soviet foreign policy toward Asia in Vladivostok.

Arkhipov, who was the Soviets' chief adviser to China in the 1950s, at the height of the Sino-Soviet alliance, was reportedly in Beijing from July 27 on—that is, before Gorbachov's speech—in order to receive acupuncture treatments. However, according to the French press agency AFP on Aug. 19, Arkhipov has managed to find enough time to meet with “one of China's most influential new leaders, Vice Premier Qiao Shi.” According to Western diplomatic sources cited by AFP, the meeting is of special significance because Qiao is a member of both the Politburo and the Secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as a possible successor to China's most powerful leader, Deng Xiao Ping. Arkhipov also met with Vice-Premiers Yao Yilin, WanLi, and Li Peng.

The effect of Gorbachov's Vladivostok Doctrine speech—in which he put forward new concessions to China—has been to turn all eyes in Asia toward the northeast. A full Sino-Soviet rapprochement would have a drastic impact on the correlation of forces between East and West, and place a Sino-Soviet imperial condominium over most of the nations of Africa and Asia.

The impetus for this rapprochement has come primarily from the Soviet side. *Pravda* stated shortly after Gorbachov's speech: “The Soviet Union is ready *at any time and on any level* to discuss with China in the most serious manner ways of creating an atmosphere of good-neighborliness in order to strengthen and promote the obvious improvement in our relations which has taken place in recent years [emphasis added].”

On Aug. 5, Chinese leader Deng Xiao Ping tentatively reciprocated, telling visiting Japanese leader Susumu Nikaido, “It seems to me there are some positive elements in the Gorbachov speech.”

Gorbachov's offers to China included initial steps to settle outstanding border disputes in China's favor. “We do not, for example, want the Amur frontier to be a water obstacle. May the basin of this mighty river be a means of uniting the efforts of the Chinese and Soviet people to exploit the very rich resources and water engineering installations there, for

common benefit. . . . The official border could pass along the main channel”—implying that Beijing would retain the Ussuri River island of Chenbao, under Chinese occupation since 1969. Gorbachov also related that the U.S.S.R. is preparing to cooperate on the construction of a railway linking the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China to the Soviet Kazakhstan. The U.S.S.R. has also proposed cooperation in space, “which could include training of Chinese cosmonauts,” Gorbachov noted.

The Soviet strategy is to make concessions to China on the northern border, without losing momentum in the Soviets' growing hegemony on the Pacific rim encircling China, from Afghanistan through Indochina to North Korea.

The Soviet objective is twofold. First, to secure the Russian “back” as the military prerequisite for a final showdown with the West. This requires at least Chinese neutrality. Second, replace the West—and most emphatically Japan—as China's premier economic partner. For Moscow, Japanese economic intervention into China is dangerous—just as it was dangerous in the period that led to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 and thereafter. Moscow would prefer that Japanese business and technology be focused on the development of Russian Siberia.

## The three obstacles

To fulfill these purposes requires that Moscow induce China to accept neutrality and implicit partnership with the Soviet Union, without jeopardizing military gains in Asia already achieved. But military withdrawal is the crux of China's posed “three obstacles” to full normalization of relations: Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea, and Soviet withdrawal of troops and missiles from the Sino-Soviet border. Where do these points stand?

1) Afghanistan: Gorbachov reported in his July 28 speech that the Soviet Union had ordered the withdrawal of six full regiments from Afghanistan. However, this was soon revealed to be no more than a propaganda ploy, when Afghan leader Najibullah declared early in August that the Afghan army continued to be plagued with desertions and that efforts at recruitment had fallen flat. In U.S.-sponsored talks in Geneva between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Soviets indicated that the best they could come up with was a four-year timetable for withdrawal.

2) The Sino-Soviet border: The U.S.S.R. has not indicated any motion on the issue of Soviet deployment within its own borders. On the 4,500-mile Sino-Soviet border, the longest land border in the world, 500,000 Soviet troops with the most modern weapons face some 1.5 million ill-equipped Chinese troops.

However, Gorbachov announced that the Soviets would execute a "significant withdrawal" of troops from Outer Mongolia. The announcement appeared to pave the way for a fast succession of diplomatic moves between China and the Soviet satellite state to its north. On Aug. 9, China signed a consular agreement with Mongolia, after a visit by Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Shuqing, the highest-ranking Chinese official to visit the Mongolian capital of Ulan Bator in two decades, to discuss "bilateral and some international issues."

3) Indochina: Motion on this front began in the fall of 1983, when Politburo member Geidar Aliyev visited Hanoi and made the statement that an effort should be made to improve relations with China. New Vietnamese Secretary-General Truong Chinh, who had such strong ties to the Chinese Communist Party that he was nicknamed "Long March," visited Moscow Aug. 12 for discussions on the Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese conundrum over Kampuchea. The Soviet news agency TASS, reporting on Truong Chinh's meeting with Gorbachov, stated: "The Soviet Union and Vietnam reiterate their readiness to normalize relations with China, which would be very significant to improving the situation in the Asian-Pacific region and consolidating universal peace."

Upon Truong Chinh's return, the Indochinese foreign ministers met and issued a communiqué stating that the Indochinese countries will "strive persistently for the normalization of relations and re-establishment of good neighborliness" with the people of China. Echoing the earlier *Pravda* article, Radio Hanoi reported Aug. 18 that the countries were prepared to meet "at any level and anywhere" to normalize relations with China.

For their part, the Chinese have proposed that the Khmer Rouge cut down its armaments to the levels of its non-communist partners, the forces of Son Sann and Norodom Sihanouk. The Chinese hope to force the Khmer Rouge into adjustments that might make the Pol Pot genocidal force acceptable in a coalition government with, not only Son Sann and Sihanouk, but also the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin government in Phnom Penh. So far, the Khmer Rouge has rejected the proposal.

### **China welcomes proposals**

While China has not given up its "three conditions," it has left the door open for far greater collaboration with Moscow. In the three weeks since Gorbachov's speech, Beijing's response has warmed. On Aug. 7, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Yu Zhizhon noted that Gorbachov had "made some new remarks on the improvement of Sino-Soviet rela-

tions that have not been made before." Six days later, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wu Xeqian met with the Soviet chargé-d'affaires in Peking to discuss Sino-Soviet affairs.

For the first time, Wu said, "China attaches importance to the [Vladivostok] speech, and expresses its welcome to the proposals."

Much remains to be negotiated, of course. Wu emphasized that the Chinese "were not satisfied" because Gorbachov's speech evaded, in particular, the question of the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, the obstacle to improved relations China considers most important.

However, Wu ended his discussion with the Soviet attaché, the Xinhua news agency reported, by stating: "The Chinese side sincerely wishes to see early normalizing of Sino-Soviet relations, and hopes that the Soviet side will earnestly consider the views of the Chinese side."

Even before Gorbachov's speech, Moscow's chief negotiator, Viktor Karpov, at the U.S.-Soviet arms talks in Geneva stopped in Beijing for "an exchange of views." On the economic side, the first Chinese trade fair in 33 years opened in Moscow, with 5 Chinese ministries and 22 trading firms represented. Earlier in July, a group of Chinese trade unionists visited Moscow for the first time in 20 years.

On the cultural side, Mrs. Raisa Gorbachov, a board member of the newly created Soviet Cultural Foundation, paid a rare social call to the Chinese embassy in Moscow in early August, to attend a Chinese fashion show. "This was quite an event," a diplomatic source told the *London Times* Aug. 11. "This sort of thing hasn't happened in 20 years." Mrs. Gorbachov's visit follows a cultural exchange between Beijing and Moscow worked out by a visiting Chinese delegation to the U.S.S.R. in mid-July.

In September, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa will arrive in Beijing, allegedly in response to a Chinese invitation issued last year. Soviet First Deputy Prime Minister Talyzin will also visit China this fall, according to a July 31 wire from the Japanese news agency Kyodo. Talyzin, Kyodo stressed, is a more important figure than Arkhipov, since he is Moscow's economic planning chief. In October, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and China Foreign Minister Wu are expected to meet in New York during the United Nations General Assembly.

There are also strong rumors that East German leader Erich Honecker will visit Beijing, as part of a scheduled trip to North Korea. This would be the first time an Eastern European head of state has visited China in over 20 years. The selection of Honecker for this honor is not without significance. Honecker also played a role in negotiating North Korea's return to the Soviet fold; an East German-North Korean friendship treaty signed in 1985 paved the way for the delivery of Russian MiG-23s to North Korea and the Soviets' increasing sponsorship of North Korean diplomacy.

*To be continued.*