

Asians sceptical of Soviet 'peace' bids

by Linda de Hoyos

Speaking from Manila March 28, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Rogachev said the Soviet Union is "in favor of a drastic reduction of the foreign military presence in the region." For this reason, the U.S.S.R., he pointedly noted, "would follow very attentively" the negotiations between Manila and Washington for the renewal of the agreement permitting U.S. bases on Philippine soil. Rogachev's five-day "routine visit" comes only days before the April 5 beginning of a bilateral review of the bases agreement, which expires in 1991, between Philippines Foreign Minister Raul Manglapus and U.S. Ambassador Nicholas Platt.

During the festivities in Manila, Rogachev was seconded by the Soviet embassy minister counsellor Alexander Losyukov, who claimed that Moscow is prepared to cut down its nuclear weapons, carrier ships, and submarine fleets in the Pacific and Indian Oceans if the United States will but remove its strategic bases in the Philippines. The Soviets, on the other hand, insist that they have no bases in Vietnam, and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in February decried what he called the "bases syndrome" in Asia. Soviet control and use of Cam Ranh and Danang as bases is, however, a well-known strategic factor in the region.

Rogachev's visit to Manila was part of a Southeast Asian tour, with stops in Hanoi, Singapore, Indonesia to open the session of the U.N. Economic and Social Commission For Asia and Pacific, and onto Thailand.

Issue of bases

The Soviets are particularly anxious to intervene into the regional debate on the retention of the U.S. bases in the Philippines. The Philippines appears divided on the issue, although the anti-American talk coming from Foreign Minister Raul Manglapus and other Philippine leaders may be designed to force a well-deserved increase in the rent the U.S. pays for the bases, to Philippine rates on a par with rent payments to Turkey and Spain.

Within ASEAN, although only the Singapore government of Lee Kuan Yew has come out publicly for maintaining the bases, it is widely known that all the ASEAN countries believe that the removal of the bases would destroy the balance of forces in the region, and permit Beijing and Moscow to rapidly fill the vacuum.

Japan has also stated its concern that the bases remain as a vital point in the strategic defense of the region. Shigeto

Nagano, the former chief of staff of the Japanese Defense Forces and now member of the House of Councillors, stated that Japan is even considering contributing to the U.S. bases compensation, because Asia needs the military installations in the region. "We're very concerned," General Nagano told reporters while visiting Manila. "The bases are very useful for peace, not only for the Philippines, but for the whole of Asia."

Meanwhile, from Moscow, Soviet radio and press are tooting about "anti-bases" agitation in the Philippines, which is being led by the same leftist-style groupings that coalesce around the National Democratic Front of the New People's Army and its ultra-liberal supporters.

Peace pitch

The Soviets are also concerned with filling the economic-diplomatic vacuum left in Southeast Asia by the U.S. policy of "malign neglect" toward its loyal ASEAN allies. While the United States is imposing protectionist measures on the region's growing economies, the Soviets announced March 28 that it has set up a new economic body—the National Committee for Asian-Pacific Cooperation—to strengthen trade ties with countries in the region. Yevgenii Primakov, director of the Institute of World Economics and International Relations and former director of the Oriental Institute, will be the new organization's chairman.

Moscow has also announced that it wants to join the Asian Development Bank.

Primakov is set to visit Thailand May 12-13 to attend an international roundtable on the trends and implications of ASEAN-major powers relations, according to the *Bangkok Post*. All this is part of a "program for Far East regions," according to Soviet ambassador to Thailand Anatoli Valkov. The U.S.S.R., he said, has worked out a comprehensive economic and social development program for Asia, and Thailand "could" take part in this "endeavor," he told the Thai press. Thai Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond's upcoming trip to Moscow in early May, he said, will make Thai-Soviet economic, cultural, and technical cooperation a "two-way street."

But Moscow may be in for a surprise. Despite the diplomatic niceties accorded to the Muscovites, Soviet-backed Laotian incursions into Thailand in February which caused major fighting between the two countries, has not gone unnoticed. In a rare statement, Prime Minister Prem on March 30 warned of "increasing" Soviet activities in the region. Moscow has a major military base in the region, and is increasing its naval activities, the Thai Prime Minister said. "The base is growing and that is why countries in Asia and the Pacific should be vigilant, if they don't want to lose regional peace. Thailand wants Asian and Pacific countries to pay close attention to the Soviet Union's movements, particularly where they concern its military base in Vietnam," Prem said.