

The Russians gaze at unwilling Asia

by Mary McCourt Burdman

The Soviet Union stepped up its attempts to break into the Asian-Pacific region by dispatching Yevgeni Primakov, a top policymaker for the Middle East and Asia, to the region during October. But Asian nations are not proving quite so susceptible to Soviet cajoling and bullying as Europe and the United States.

Moscow's economic-diplomatic drive into Asia was launched in July 1986 with a speech by General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov enunciating the "Vladivostok doctrine"—the Russian assertion that it, too, is an "Asian power." Soviet desires for a foothold in the East were expressed again by Gorbachov on Sept. 16 of this year from Krasnoyarsk, the site of the huge Soviet anti-ballistic missile defense radar.

The problem Moscow faces is that, although the Soviet Union has massively built up its Pacific military deployment over the last decade, it is widely understood throughout Asia that, economically, Moscow has nothing to offer. Moscow has sustained a long-term trade deficit even with impoverished India.

In an effort to circumvent this problem, in May of 1986, Yevgeni Primakov, director of Moscow's Institute of World Economics and International Relations (IMEMO), announced in *New Times* the formation of the Soviet National Committee for Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation. Indicating Moscow's desire to organize economic bailouts from the Asian dynamos such as Japan and South Korea, Primakov noted, "The economic problems of recent years have become especially manifest in the Soviet Far East."

But the problem was glaringly apparent at a conference, "Asia Pacific Region: Dialogue, Peace, and Cooperation," the Russians held at Vladivostok Oct. 1-3. It was *glasnost* only for the weekend, when the "fortress city" was opened to a few selected foreigners for the first time in 55 years.

U.S. participants at the conference included Richard Holbrooke, who was Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Carter State Department and now with Shearson Lehman Hutton; and Richard Scalapino of the University of California at Berkeley "Asian mafia." Both

have close ties to the U.S. State Department.

While most of the world press coverage of the conference focused on the "peace" talks, the Soviet focus was economics. As reported in the *Hindustan Times* Oct. 3, "It was suggested that optimum economic benefit through mutual cooperation among the countries of the region could be reaped by the Soviets' providing the market, the Japanese technology, and others, including China and India, the manpower. It was agreed at the instance of the Soviets to underline that the cooperation would have to be on the basis of the principle of reciprocity."

Japan 'far beyond Soviets'

One prominent Soviet participant was heard admitting that Japan has moved so far beyond them, economically and technologically, that Japan no longer "has to deal" with the U.S.S.R. for resources or for trade. The Russian "market" is nil: The Soviet Pacific coast population is about 1% of the Asian population. Moscow has turned to "importing" Chinese labor, starting with 10,000 workers from impoverished northeast China, to work in Soviet factories and farms.

"The Soviet Union is a Eurasian state and we wish to see our country serving as a reliable bridge connecting two great continents in the economic, cultural and humanitarian fields," said Gorbachov in his message of greetings to the conference. Yet, there were only ethnic Russians in Vladivostok.

The only enthusiastic response that even the Soviets themselves reported on the conference came in the statements by Indonesia's Imron Rosyadi to the Soviet foreign affairs weekly *New Times* (No. 42, 1988), but even Rosyadi stated it was "still too early to convene a meeting of foreign ministers of the region."

Among other responses:

- Former Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman simply noted that "a number of the initiatives put forward by Gorbachov are interesting."
- Chinese delegate Pu Shan of the Chinese Society of World Economy, while citing the increase in Sino-Soviet trade and border "activity," stuck to the P.R.C.'s unaltered conditions for relations with the Soviets, calling Kampuchea "the most urgent problem in the region."
- Philippines delegate, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Leticia Shahani, while pushing the Russian-promoted "nuclear-free zone," also asserted that "the Helsinki model cannot be applied to the Asian-Pacific region." A meeting of Pacific foreign ministers would require "extensive and serious preparation" and "considerable time," she said.

Focus on Japan

The results of the Vladivostok conference were at best "inconclusive," as participants reported upon return. But in a further bid to roust up some trade with Japan, Moscow dispatched Primakov to Tokyo Oct. 24 to speak at a symposium sponsored by the Research Commission on Security of

Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Primakov was accorded high-level meetings with Foreign Minister Sosuke Uno, LDP General Secretary Shintaro Abe, and former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone.

However, despite Primakov's numerous blandishments, Japan refused to back down on its demand that the Soviet Union return the four Kurile Islands it seized from Japan in the final hours of World War II, or take steps to return them, before any serious negotiations on Japanese contributions to Soviet domination of Asia take place. The Kurile Islands are strategically important for the Russians, because the straits between them could be sealed in wartime to bottle up the Soviet Pacific Fleet in the Sea of Okhotsk or cut off Vladivostok.

Primakov appeared ready to offer everything but the Kuriles. Despite Soviet retrenchment in Afghanistan over the previous week, Primakov declared that "the Afghan model can be regarded as one effective model for solving regional conflicts" in Kampuchea, South Africa, and the Korean peninsula, according to Kyodo news service. It is important to get all the participating players together to resolve disputes, he declared, but admitted that the Soviet Union could not support Republic of Korea President Roh Tae Woo's recent proposal for a six-nation conference on the Korean situation unless Soviet ally North Korea agrees.

He attempted to apply the "regional deal" method to the Kuriles as well. Japan should not be intransigent: "China also has territorial claims over Japan," he said. "Certainly that issue [the Kuriles] cannot be used as a premise for dialogue." Despite Soviet *perestroika* in foreign policy, Japan must join in the dealing, he said. "If the situation is a hostile one and the counter-party is anti-Soviet, we cannot change our policy."

The Japanese daily *Asahi Shimbun* had reported that Primakov "hinted" it was impossible for Moscow to discuss the return of all four islands to Japan, but did not rule out the possibility of negotiations on two of them, Habamai and Shikotan. Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita told Japanese reporters the next day that Japan remains unchanged on the issue of the four islands, and that any potential Soviet "return of two islands" was incompatible with the Japanese stance.

In his meeting with LDP General Secretary Abe, Primakov dropped the mask. Primakov pointedly talked up the Russians' interest in expanding trade with South Korea. Then, criticizing the Japanese for "often thinking they are 100% in the right," he charged that Japan's stance of applying constant pressure on Moscow is counterproductive. Said Primakov, "While Japan boasts that public sentiment for the return of the islands runs strong nationwide, Tokyo ignores the significance of public sentiment [!] in the Soviet Union," Kyodo reported. "If a referendum were held in his country, the majority of people would say that there should be no readjustments of borders fixed at the end of World War II," Primakov said.

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