Sino-Soviet Relations: The Road to Détente
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entry into the capitalist market to get the technology Comecon cannot supply and its own exports could not buy even if its workers worked harder to produce them. However, the Vietnamese party's experience is that it is through the ranks of one's biggest enemy of the moment that success is to be had; as a result, Hanoi has been playing up to Indonesia, more vulnerable from China than from Vietnam, to break an Asean solidarity that is chiefly beneficial to Thailand[13]. Visits to Hanoi by Indonesian leaders early this year, and the conclusion of the Indonesian army's commander-in-chief, Murdani, that Vietnam does not have further territorial ambitions after all, provide the most dramatic aspect of the 'turning-point' so far.[14]

All its aspects considered, therefore, the 'turning-point' has substance. Like the Chinese Communist Party since Mao, the Vietnamese revolutionaries are looking chastened by the experience of enlarged government responsibilities at home and abroad. Yet it behoves the rest of the world—and perhaps the Vietnamese peasants no less—to remain on the alert, for the party's sobered tone is a reaction to firm resistance on both fronts and might not outlast that resistance.

[13] For further background, see Leszek Buszynski, 'Vietnam's ASEAN diplomacy: incentives for change', *The World Today*, January 1984.

[14] Indonesia responded to the 1976 sabre-rattling by inviting Vietnam to join Asean, Radio Kuala Lumpur, 11 February 1976, SWB, FE 5183.

Sino-Soviet relations: the road to détente

GERALD SEGAL

SINO-SOVIET relations are at their best in 15 years—and they are likely to improve further. This fact may be discomforting to sceptics about Moscow–Beijing détente, but the trend is by now undeniable. To be sure, there remain serious problems in Sino-Soviet relations, and many in Moscow and Beijing encourage cynicism about further improvements in relations. But to emphasise only what is yet to be achieved, is to miss the important gains already made. The reweaving of the Sino-Soviet cloth has been patchy. Yet when analysing precisely those threads that were torn in the 1960s, the repairs in the cloth are most evident. Briefly, five such threads are most important.[1]

[1] This article is based on the author's forthcoming *Adelphi Paper* for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). He is grateful to the IISS for permission to use this material, as well as to various government and academic officials in China for discussing these issues in February–March 1984.

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The single most important one was China's abandonment of the Soviet 'road to socialism'. The decision to define a Maoist mode for China included the Cultural Revolution, with its main target of Soviet-style 'revisionism'. In 1980–1, China reassessed the meaning of Maoism, rehabilitating former President Liu Shaoqi (denounced as China's Khrushchev), emphasising the moderate and pragmatic elements of Maoist ideology and re-establishing party-to-party ties with west European Communist parties. In recognition of these changes, the late President Brezhnev accepted that China was indeed a 'socialist' state. However, by 1984, party-to-party ties between China and most of the Soviet bloc (severed in 1966 by China) had not yet been restored, as Moscow insisted on a broader state-to-state 'normalisation'. China was prepared to restore party ties with the east European parties apart from the Soviet one, but the Soviet Union blocked the way.[2]

Second, the military dimension of Sino-Soviet relations has improved in recent years. During the 1960s and 1970s both sides vastly increased military preparedness along the world's longest frontier. In 1969 the tension exploded in brief fire-fights that continued sporadically through the 1970s. The Soviet Union's threats of a surgical strike on China's nuclear weapons capability were followed by deployment of new Soviet SS-20 missiles able to strike at targets in China.

Yet, by 1981, the trend slowly began to follow the improvement of broader political relations.[3] To begin with, both states took unilateral moves to build up their armed forces and to give themselves greater confidence in meeting a potential threat. Neither side could negotiate with one hand tied behind its back. By 1984 neither side had reported a border incident in four years, and in 1982 China noted that tension was in fact declining. The Soviet Union spoke more openly about the need for cooperation against the growing American threat in east Asia, recalling that it was the United States that killed thousands of Chinese in Korea and still sells arms to a rebel part of China—Taiwan. Soviet appeals for cooperation included a reference to Soviet military aid in the 1950s, which included a nuclear umbrella for a vulnerable China. While China was less cheery about prospects for Sino-Soviet military détente, Beijing did now claim to see Soviet military power in Asia as primarily aimed at the United States and Japan.

Third, economic relations also took a marked turn for the better. From the middle 1960s, Sino-Soviet trade had fallen to miniscule levels. Not only were the massive levels of the 1950s economic cooperation not maintained, but the level of trade was low even for natural cross-border traffic.

In 1982 the trend turned upward and by 1984 Sino-Soviet trade had more than quadrupled in three years.[4] The new planned total of $1.2 billion is higher than at any time since the mid-1960s, even if seen as a percentage of

[2] *The Economist*, 26 March 1983. See also the Polish paper, *Nowe Drogi*, June 1983. This section (as well as others in the text) is based on interviews in China.

[3] Gerald Segal (ed.), *The Soviet Union in East Asia* (London: Heinemann, for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1983).

[4] *Beijing Review*, No. 9, 27 February 1984, p. 11.

each state's total trade. Both sides seemed confident that trade would continue to grow, even while broader political issues remained unresolved. As China's experiment with its western economic option ran into serious trouble in the early 1980s, the Soviet economic option began to take on new relevance. Certainly, the prospect of Soviet aid in renovating Soviet plants from the 1950s offered a cheaper, if less adventurous, route to China's four modernisations.

Fourth, the United States factor seems to cause fewer problems for Sino-Soviet relations than at any time in the past 20 years. In the early 1960s the Chinese opposed what they saw as the Soviet Union's 'capitulationist' policy of peaceful coexistence with the United States. By the early 1970s it was China that was colluding with the United States. The Soviet Union watched with growing horror as China seemed to play the part of Nato's 16th member.

The United States, of course, remains important for Sino-Soviet relations, if only because it is the Soviet Union's primary foreign policy concern, and China's second most important foreign policy problem. But, for the first time in nearly 20 years, both Moscow and Beijing have broad (if tacit) agreement on a mixture of cooperation and conflict with the United States. Neither Communist power seems prepared to play off the other against the United States in the great power triangle. Both accept the need to coexist with and combat the United States.

Fifth, Sino-Soviet conflict in the third world has considerably abated. In the 1960s Moscow and Beijing split the revolutionary movements. In the 1970s China blindly sided with western and 'reactionary' forces anywhere in simple-minded anti-Sovietism. Now China more often than not (tacitly) cooperates with the Soviet Union.

China's new pragmatism in the third world, including a new policy of arms sales, provides for equal opposition to both superpowers. In practice, China primarily denounces the United States while supporting movements and states aligned with the Soviet Union. In Central America, the Middle East, and most of Africa, these trends have been apparent for over two years. Only in Asia has the trend been different. In fact, it is in the Asian dimension that the most serious problems in Sino-Soviet relations persist.[5] Yet, even here, there is reason to believe that Moscow and Beijing are making progress in reducing tension.

The three main obstacles

Both the Soviet Union and China claim to want a 'normalisation' of relations. Unfortunately, neither side defines normalisation in the same way. For the Soviet Union, normalisation is essentially a reduction of tension along the frontier resulting from agreements on confidence-building measures. 'Normal' cultural, trade, diplomatic and party relations will then follow, including a reduction of tension with Vietnam, Afghanistan and Mongolia.

For China, normalisation is broader and more ambitious. Beijing sees

[5] The Sino-Soviet dispute in Asia has not worsened in all cases. In both the Sino-Indian and Sino-Korean relations there has been an evolution of Chinese policy leading to a greater coincidence of interests with the Soviet Union.

a more comprehensive Soviet threat, including troops along the frontier, support for Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea, and its own invasion of Afghanistan. These three dimensions to Sino-Soviet relations are seen as obstacles that must be removed prior to any normalisation. Thus, at the four rounds of 'consultations' on normalisation, China has held up speedy progress. China's insistence on Soviet concessions before serious talks not only defies normal negotiating practice, but undermines its claim to be as serious about Sino-Soviet détente as the Soviet Union.[6] China normalised its relations with the United States, tolerating American arms sales to Taiwan, but refuses to talk to the Soviet Union (it claims to be holding only 'consultations') until Moscow concedes Chinese demands.

The Sino-Soviet Frontier. China and the Soviet Union are in agreement that the level of mutual threat along their frontier is excessive. However, each blames the other for this state of affairs. From the Chinese point of view the most important obstacle to Sino-Soviet détente is the direct threat posed by Soviet troops. China now speaks less urgently about the 50 Soviet divisions it faces, but it still insists that normalisation cannot be achieved unless there are normal, i.e. peaceful, cross-border relations.

That requires a standing down of the most threatening forces, and at least a partial withdrawal of troops (and nuclear weapons) from both sides of the line. It remains unclear how many troops need to be pulled back—and how far. It also remains unclear whether China also insists on a recognition by the Soviet Union that it holds land beyond that acquired in the so-called unequal treaties as a precondition to normalisation. It seems the latter issue is less pressing. However, it does seem that China will allow the Soviet Union to retain the bulk of its present forces, so long as there are adequate confidence-building measures agreed in bilateral talks.

The Soviet Union shares the belief in the usefulness of confidence-building measures, but there are some problems of timing. Moscow is unwilling to withdraw (or agree to withdraw) any troops unless China does the same. That is straightforward enough. But the Soviet Union is also unwilling to pull out its five divisions in Mongolia without the latter's consent. Moscow claims those troops are only there at Mongolia's request and that summary withdrawal would adversely affect 'third party's interests'.

The Mongolian issue is, however, not so serious a problem. Moscow also claims that the troops in Mongolia need only stay to defend the frontier, and if there is a reduction in tension, then the defence needs are equally reduced and troops can be pulled out. In any case, China seems prepared to tolerate Soviet troops in Mongolia as a 'matter between sovereign states', so long as their numbers are reduced as part of a general confidence-building agreement.

[6] The United States and western Europe have been negotiating with the Soviet Union for decades without prior resolution of obstacles. China's present position is as if the west refused to negotiate mutual balanced force reductions (MBFR) or maintain normal diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union until the Soviet Union first reduced its troops in Europe, withdrew from Afghanistan, and stopped supporting Cuba, Nicaragua and Syria. Edwina Moreton and Gerald Segal (eds.), *Soviet Strategy Towards Western Europe* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

Thus, once again, the problem along the frontier is one of scale and timing. Mongolia itself seems acutely concerned that it not be 'sold down the river' for the sake of a Sino-Soviet deal. This concern no doubt explains the 1983 Mongolian expulsion of Chinese residents while Sino-Soviet talks were taking place.[7] But China seems to have appeased at least part of Mongolia's concern and the Soviet Union has also taken a cautious line.

Thus the deeper issue remains whether the Soviet Union and China are sincere in their desire to reduce tension on the frontier. The signs are largely positive. Not only have there been no reported border incidents for four years, but frontier crossing-points have been reopened and a great deal more local trade is taking place. So what then is holding up settlement of this issue?

The problems are real, but by no means insurmountable. Both sides are prepared to withdraw troops as part of a broader confidence-building programme. The modalities of such a withdrawal require negotiations, which cannot take place until China's other two obstacles are manœuvred out of the way. Thus, almost by definition, this first obstacle—the frontier—is in theory no longer a problem. Chinese officials admit as much in private. Yet they continue to doubt whether the Soviet Union would in fact be willing to build confidence along the frontier. Some Chinese see the entire Sino-Soviet détente process as little more than tactical détente in a broader strategy of conflict. These cynics need to be convinced before real movement can take place.

The Soviet Union could go a long way to proving its good intent by at least a token withdrawal of troops from, say, its own territory opposite Manchuria. While this would not in itself remove the obstacle to détente, it would demonstrate that more progress can be made at the negotiating table when the time comes. China recalls only too well how important it was for Sino-American détente when President Nixon symbolically withdrew the Seventh Fleet patrols from the Taiwan Straits.

Should the Soviet Union fail to take a similar placatory action, it runs the risk of confirming the views of the Chinese cynics, and making any further détente impossible. This would indeed be counterproductive from a Soviet point of view, for this issue of the frontier seems to be the most important of the three obstacles as well as the one that could most easily be eased.

Afghanistan. Before the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this insignificant state with its even less significant frontier with China leaned toward the Soviet side in the Sino-Soviet dispute. China accepted the Soviet Union's predominant voice in Afghan affairs, so long as it did not result in a sharply anti-China line, or threaten Pakistan. The Soviet invasion, as opposed to the 1978 pro-Moscow coup, changed all that.

In January 1980, China suspended its talks with the Soviet Union on the grounds that the Afghan invasion had made negotiations 'inappropriate'. China then insisted that Soviet troops had to leave Afghanistan before Sino-Soviet relations could be improved. But in October 1982, with no reduction in the 100,000-strong Soviet force in Afghanistan, China began 'consultations'

[7] *Far Eastern Economic Review,* 3 November 1983.

with the Soviet Union. However, Beijing did insist that relations could not be normalised until Soviet Union withdrew its troops.

The reason for China's apparent retreat is to be found in a two-fold assessment by Beijing. First, the invasion was not seen as primarily a threat to China, for it posed more of a threat to the west and its need for Gulf oil. Second, the Soviet army is bogged down in combating a guerrilla war, and thus the whole venture suggests more the weaknesses rather than the strengths of Soviet power. To be sure, this assessment is not without challenge in Beijing, but it does suggest three basic aspects of China's position.

First, it is not deeply concerned about Afghan events. In the ranking of China's three obstacles, it is a poor number three. Second, to the extent that China is concerned, it merely seeks a withdrawal of Soviet troops. China fears that Afghanistan will be added to the list of 'tame' Soviet republics, and provide another ring in the containment fence around China. Third, China is willing to tolerate a pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, so long as Afghanistan is an 'independent' state.

The view from Moscow is less accommodating. The minimum Soviet objective remains a friendly and stable regime on its southern border. The invasion was apparently designed to ensure both, and so far has achieved neither. For the Soviet Union, the Afghan issue is essentially not concerned with Sino-Soviet relations. That China tries to make it a component of their bilateral relations is viewed in the Kremlin as both unrealistic and unfair. The Soviet Union suggests it is just as much in China's interest as its own that a militant Khomeini-like Islamic regime in Kabul is avoided and a Marxist regime maintained in its place.

To the extent that there is any broader dimension to the Afghan issue for the Soviet Union (and there is very little), it is in relations with Pakistan and Iran which provide sanctuary for rebels. A Soviet-Pakistani pact on terminating support for the rebels could help to ensure a Soviet withdrawal and the stabilisation of a pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. As China is one of Pakistan's main allies, this would give the Chinese some say in the Afghan issue. But apart from this minimal involvement, China has no active role to play. Its military aid for the rebels is small, and in any case now passes through Pakistan.

While rumours of a Soviet-Pakistani deal periodically surface, no agreement seems imminent. The slow pace seems to be due to two factors. First, there is no urgency about this largely forgotten, small-scale war. Second, the combat has been inconclusive, with neither side yet ready to sue for a compromise peace. However, should an agreement be reached, then the issue will also disappear from the Sino-Soviet agenda. If no agreement is forthcoming, China may abandon its policy anyway, as it did in 1982 when it agreed to resume consultations suspended after the Soviet invasion. But in the final analysis, the Afghan problem is not a Sino-Soviet problem, and its resolution depends primarily on local Afghan events and Soviet-Pakistani relations. Thus, while the Afghan problem may be the least important of the three Sino-Soviet obstacles, it may also be the most long-lasting.

Vietnam and Kampuchea. Both China and the Soviet Union share at least one view of South-East Asia—that its politics are complex. Until the early 1960s, both were allies (if uneasy ones) in support of the Vietnamese Communists and other revolutionary movements. During the Vietnam war of the 1960s, China and the Soviet Union tacitly cooperated in support of Hanoi. Both Communist powers vied for influence in Hanoi, and despite repeated exasperating experiences, the Soviet Union won out.

The Soviet 'victory' was especially clear with the reunification of Vietnam in 1975. Hanoi not only appreciated the greater Soviet aid capability, but also needed a great power ally to deter threats from its Chinese neighbour. Similarly, triumphant Kampuchean Communists needed a Chinese ally to deter their Vietnamese neighbour. But China failed to prevent Kampuchea's aggressive attacks on Vietnam, or its lunatic domestic policy. Not surprisingly, Vietnam took advantage of the instability in Kampuchea. After Vietnam's conquest of Kampuchea in January 1979, China sought to 'punish' Vietnam in a three-week campaign in February–March 1979. China's failure to scare Vietnam into loosening its grip on Kampuchea only showed up Chinese military deficiencies, and encouraged greater Soviet aid to Vietnam.

Thus, by 1979, China had added a new condition for its talks with the Soviet Union—ending support for Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea. Not only had China failed to restrain its Kampuchean allies, but in defeat it was unable to provide the rebels with sufficient weapons to expel the Vietnamese.[8] Once the military option had failed, China was left with a weak political hand to play in attempting to force the Soviet Union to pull out the Vietnamese.

China's objectives emerged as two-fold. First, it wanted a Vietnamese withdrawal. While it would be best if this could also result in the demise of the Vietnamese-installed Kampuchean government, by 1984 it seemed this latter point was not a primary Chinese demand. Second, China also sought the withdrawal of Soviet bases in Vietnam and Kampuchea. However, this second objective now appears distinctly less important than it did in 1980. In the new atmosphere of China's opposition to both superpowers' bases, it acknowledges that Soviet bases in Asia are primarily anti-American, and therefore their presence will not block Sino-Soviet normalisation.

The Soviet Union is caught by several policy predicaments. Its commitments to Vietnam were made at a time when they were useful in the anti-China struggle. Now they block normalisation of relations with Beijing. The Soviet Union has always had an uneasy relationship with Vietnam, but it remains a useful point of pressure on China. Détente with China at Vietnam's expense is not in itself a problem, but it could be too costly if it meant losing important military bases in South-East Asia. Therefore what kind of a Sino-Soviet deal is likely?

First, neither Vietnam nor the Soviet Union desires a long occupation of Kampuchea. The Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime is not yet ready to

[8] Interview with Xinhua spokesman, London, conducted by Ann Gilks for the Economic and Social Research Council's project on China's military aid.

stand alone, yet it is far closer to doing so than the regime in Kabul. Of course the problem would be eased if the Chinese-supported rebels in the west of Kampuchea would cease to exist, but in any case they now seem to be only a minor military problem. Thus a Vietnamese withdrawal may not necessarily be imminent, but it may also not be for off. What is more, there are increasing signs that some South-East Asian states are prepared to live with Vietnam's new strength in the area, and China risks isolation if it prolongs regional tension.[9] As with the settlement of the Afghan issue, its resolution does not depend on Sino-Soviet relations, even though it does affect Sino-Soviet relations.

Second, China now appears willing to tolerate Soviet bases in South-East Asia, much as it tolerates American bases. This latter part of the deal is already in place, although China does not speak openly about its more moderate line. Neither does the Soviet Union publicise its willingness to reduce its support for Vietnam.[10] To do so might jeopardise its basing rights, without ensuring normalisation of Sino-Soviet relations. Thus the Vietnam-Kampuchea issue appears to be somewhat nearer resolution, with both Communist powers showing a flexibility born out of a recognition that they do not control South-East Asian politics.

The road to détente

The road to Sino-Soviet détente is paved with good intentions. At least both countries claim to desire normalisation, even if they see different pitfalls in their path. For China, there are three obstacles on the road. For the Soviet Union, there is only one: China's obstacles.

What is more, the issues are often complex. The order of importance of the three problems in the Soviet perspective is the frontier, Afghanistan and then South-East Asia. For China, the order of the last two is reversed. Yet for both Communist powers, the frontier is potentially the easiest issue to tackle, followed by South-East Asia and Afghanistan.

In the final analysis, both Moscow and Beijing see normalisation as a long-term goal. The speed of change hinges on the firmness with which China holds to its three preconditions, and the way in which local conflict in Afghanistan and South-East Asia is resolved. The latter is a process over which neither China or the Soviet Union has much direct control. The former is mostly in China's hands.

[9] *Far Eastern Economic Review,* 1 March 1984.

[10] See, for example, the Soviet snub to Vietnamese officials during M. Kapitsa's visit to Beijing, September 1983.