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STRATEGIC ASPECTS OF ASIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN THE 1980S, (U)

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⑩ Guy J. Pauker

⑪ January 1981

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The Soviet Union tried, without success, to strengthen her strategic position by the Asian collective security arrangements suggested by Brezhnev in June 1969.

China, in turn, started in 1970 to offer the United States an accommodation formula that led gradually, over a decade, to normalization of relations with the United States, with the obvious though not acknowledged purpose of compensating for its military weakness by the creation of an "anti-hegemony" united front against the Soviet Union.

In retrospect it appears that the capacity of the so-called Sino-Soviet bloc to alter the power balance and the geopolitical situation in Asia in the 1950s and 1960s had been greatly overestimated. When the 1950 alliance collapsed due to the Sino-Soviet split, China was able to retain control over the major factions of most Asian Communist parties, but had little success in translating that covert relationship into effective political influence through subversion.

Lacking political, economic, or diplomatic sources of leverage, the Soviet Union became increasingly dependent on military strength as the sole basis for its super-power aspirations. Its relentless force expansion in East Asia during the 1970s gave credibility to threat assessments that could have been dismissed during the preceding two decades as Cold War exaggerations.

In 1968 the Soviet Pacific Fleet asserted for the first time its capability to sustain a presence in the Indian Ocean. Coming at a time when Great Britain had proclaimed her intention to retrench her military presence "East of Suez," that Soviet action induced an American strategic reaction, namely the extension of the reach of the Seventh Fleet into the Indian Ocean, the gradual development of Diego Garcia as a support facility, and the ill-fated policy of building up Iran as a regional military power.

Following the Sino-Soviet armed clashes in March 1969 on the island in the Ussuri River known as Damansky in Russian and Chenpao in Chinese, the Soviet Army in the Far East, deployed primarily along the Chinese border, was built up to its present strength of 46 divisions with 500,000 soldiers, 12,000 tanks, 12,500 armored fighting vehicles, and 5,000 artillery pieces. The Soviet Pacific Fleet was increased

to 80 attack submarines, 75 major surface ships and 300 combat aircraft. Soviet Air Force units stationed in the Far East received some 1,200 aircraft, including long-range Bear, Bison, and Backfire bombers. The Soviets also deployed increasing numbers of nuclear missiles in the Far East.

Although American naval and air assets in the Western Pacific can be quickly reinforced, forces presently stationed in the region are modest compared to those locally available to the Soviet Union: the Army's 2nd Division in South Korea and the Marine 3rd Division in Okinawa, with some 135 tanks, 240 armored fighting vehicles and 120 artillery pieces, the Navy's 35 major surface ships, about 10 attack submarines and 165 combat aircraft, as well as 300 Air Force combat aircraft, including long-range B-52 bombers.*

American ground, air, and naval forces in the Western Pacific have available a great variety of nuclear warheads. The weapons systems deployed in the Western Pacific are the most modern and sophisticated in existence. But during 1980 the aircraft carrier battle groups of the Seventh Fleet were detailed most of the time to the Indian Ocean area and the capability of available United States forces to carry out their mission in case of conflict with the Soviet Union in the Pacific was drastically reduced.

The United States will continue to play a major strategic role in Asian power relations, despite its relative military weakness in the region. The region's national leaders, security managers, and policy analysts are fully aware of the fact that the enormous industrial potential of the United States remains their major safeguard against Soviet attempts to dominate. They remember how the United States mobilized after Pearl Harbor. There is no doubt in Asian minds that the United States had lost the will, not the capacity, to win in Indochina in the early 1970s. Consequently, the strategic aspects of Asian-American relations in the 1980s will be determined by how Asian leaders assess the determination of the United States to counterbalance the expansion of Soviet military power in the region and to oppose the direct and indirect use of that growing power for the extension of Soviet control.

* U.S. and Soviet force numbers derive from *The Military Balance*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and from the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

Since the summer of 1969, when President Nixon announced on Guam a policy of military disengagement from Asia, doubts had been growing in the region about the willingness of the United States to maintain the balance of power. Doubts turned into concern as Soviet geopolitical gains became ominous indications of a changing strategic situation. In the last three years, the Soviet Union had started using the former American bases of Cam Ranh Bay and Danang, from where the carrier Minsk went into the Gulf of Siam and TU-95 long-range reconnaissance planes flew over the Philippines. It had also stationed substantial combat forces in the Kurile Islands taken from Japan in 1945, developed a military alliance with Vietnam, expanded military aid to India, occupied Afghanistan and established a military presence in the Arabian Sea.

Meanwhile, the United States had been humiliated by Iran which had turned from ally to bitter enemy, had scored only limited success as peacemaker in the Middle East, and had given only token support to Thailand against the threat represented by the deployment of 200,000 Vietnamese troops in occupied Kampuchea, who engage in occasional forays into Thai border areas.

From 1975 when the Communists triumphed in Indochina until 1981, American strategic countermoves in East Asia were limited to urging a reluctant Japan to increase her defense capabilities and to the successful renegotiation of base agreements with the Philippines. No serious attempt was made to help the five ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) to achieve military balance with Vietnam in Southeast Asia. Military assistance to the People's Republic of China was ruled out. With regard to the security of South Korea, the temptation to open channels to Pyongyang seemed to compete in Washington with the need to assert that the protection of Seoul continues to be in the interest of the United States.

As it is unlikely that the Soviet Union will abandon its global forward thrust in the current decade, the countries of Asia will be confronted with policy options determined primarily by American policies.

If the United States demonstrates determination to maintain a power balance in the Asia-Pacific region, not only by declaratory

policies--although these are important--but particularly by the commitment of adequate resources to the strengthening of her force posture and of those of her allies and friends, the 1980s could be a period of international stability permitting significant economic progress in the region.

A strong American military presence in the Western Pacific, reaching also into the Indian Ocean, would certainly reduce and probably eliminate the propensity of Asian and Pacific nations to provide for their national security by new arrangements, including in some instances closer ties with either the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China, a development which could create a dangerous new Cold War in Asia.

There is little enthusiasm in Asia for such arrangements of last resort, but confronted with a passive United States policy and resulting power vacuum, some Asian countries, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, who perceive China as a greater long-term threat than the Soviet Union, may become willing to accept a Soviet presence as a countervailing factor. Others, such as Japan, Singapore, and Thailand, view the Soviet Union as the major threat now and in the foreseeable future. They would seek closer security ties with China in the absence of a credible American commitment to the containment of Soviet expansionism.

But, unless and until the Soviet Union demonstrates intent to conquer and dominate in Asia on a larger scale than has been evidenced by her present role in Indochina and by her occupation of Afghanistan, a major coalition or grand alliance will not materialize.

Despite repeated exhortations from Beijing that the United States, Japan, ASEAN, Western Europe, and everybody else, should form a united front with China to oppose Soviet hegemonism, perception of a clear and present danger will continue to be lacking.

The circumstances which eventually created the major coalitions that defeated Napoleon and Hitler may hopefully not develop in the 1980s. But the Asia-Pacific region will be dangerously polarized in the 1980s if the Soviet Union and China succeed in establishing networks of security arrangements against each other with various Asian countries, while the United States continues to retrench her military forces from the region as has been done in the last decade.

Alternatively, superpower relations on a global basis would be dangerously exacerbated if the United States would take a leading role in creating a military coalition against the Soviet Union in Asia. Fear of China is a genuine security concern in Moscow. If the industrial power of the United States and perhaps that of Japan and Western Europe would accelerate considerably China's military modernization, this might trigger irrational Soviet defense reflexes.

Therefore, [→]the soundest basis for Asian-American security relations in the 1980s is the proverbial middle road: an increase in the visible military presence of the United States in the Western Pacific and in the Indian Ocean, a strengthening of defense cooperation with Japan, meaningful levels of bilateral military assistance to the five countries of the ASEAN group, emphatic assertion of the special relationships with the Philippines and South Korea, and sustained efforts to help China modernize without becoming a threatening military giant. In the setting created by such policies, Soviet hegemonial aspirations or Vietnamese regional delusions of grandeur will not be able to blossom.

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