
Part VI: New Era in U.S.-China Relations

What's at stake in the current Moscow-Peking negotiations

by Richard Cohen

In 1980, the strategic situation for China looked desperate. Its economy was thrown off stride and drastically overextended. The poverty of Chinese conventional capability had been demonstrated. After U.S. Defense Secretary Harold Brown's trip to Peking in January 1980, the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) found itself saddled with primary responsibility for aiding and defending a vulnerable Thailand against Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea across the border, although this task was hardly within P.R.C. capabilities.

Moreover, the Chinese leadership, particularly the surging Deng forces who were more comfortable with former Kampuchean leader Prince Norodum Sihanouk, found itself saddled with a world-renowned genocidalist, Pol Pot.

Also in Southeast Asia, the P.R.C. suffered a serious setback in early 1980 when India recognized the Heng Samrin government in Kampuchea. Then the Afghanistan invasion put massive pressure on China's western front, and particularly China's ally Pakistan.

Even while presenting its desperate common front against Moscow in 1978, the P.R.C. leadership acknowledged that a new world war could be deferred. By 1980 Deng declared that such a war was likely in the 1980s, but it would not occur in the East. Deng cited Western Europe, Southwest Asia, and the Persian Gulf as likely targets; in 1980 the P.R.C. leadership launched a frenetic campaign warning of imminent Soviet designs on the Gulf and Pakistan. While Carter's response to the Afghanistan invasion was the unenforceable "Carter Doctrine" for the Gulf and a reversal on a ban on aid to Pakistan, Pakistani Prime Minister Zia ul-Haq was slow to respond, recognizing the new strategic equation.

At the same time, China was entering into what would amount to a two-year fight with the United States over the question of Taiwan. By 1980 Moscow had surrounded China with a preponderance of hardware. China was weakened economically, yet forced to assume greater strategic responsibilities in Thailand and Pakistan.

Deng in ascendency

In the midst of overwhelming Soviet application of pressure, 1980 saw crucial shifts in the Chinese factional situation. In February, two significant developments occurred.

Based on the momentum Deng forces demonstrated in 1979, the former P.R.C. president considered the number-two man in the communist regime during the first 17 years of its existence—Liu Shao-Chi—was posthumously rehabilitated.

With this rehabilitation, the Deng forces had consolidated control, for Liu had been castigated during the Cultural Revolution as the greatest source of evil in China.

While Liu was rehabilitated, Deng's leading underling, Hu Yao-pang, was promoted to head a revived party secretariat, and by March, Hu had launched a stinging attack on China's economic performance under Hua. At the same time, criticism of Mao intensified, while the Deng group launched its first public assault on the forces of Chou En-lai protégé Li Hsien-nien in the party and Yeh Chien-ying in the military Central Command, accusing them of having a feudal mentality (i.e., opposition to economic reforms).

Then, in July, the Hua group was staggered by the posthumous public criticism of Kang Sheng, Mao's spymaster (and reputed illegitimate father of Hua). Several key Hua associates were purged.

At the same time, the Deng group masterminded a big attack on the "petroleum faction," as the Li-Yeh grouping was known, charging them with responsibility for the economic dislocation which wracked China starting in 1979.

By August, Hua had been replaced as premier by another Deng understudy, Zhao Zi-yang. The blitz to power by the Dengists climaxed in December 1980 with the show trials of the Gang of Four and the Lin Piao group.

Moscow hesitates

Sinologists in Moscow did not miss the significance of these changes. First, 1980 marked the year in which the P.R.C. leadership openly reported no further interest in intervening in Moscow's internal affairs. This was the final indication that Peking had opted to abandon the so-called ideological dispute with Moscow which Mao Tse-tung has started privately in 1958, and which then evolved remarkable mutations.

It could not be missed in Moscow that in 1980 the "Nine Comments" issued by Peking in 1963 under Mao's sponsorship to define the Sino-Soviet ideological dispute were now

being attacked in *Chen Ming*, a Hong Kong newspaper closely associated with Deng's views. Taking note of the rehabilitation of Liu, *Pravda's* I. Alexandrov (the byline for the Politburo) wrote in April and May 1980 that P.R.C. policy would now be to defer war. Alexandrov cautioned, however, that Liu's rehabilitation did not mean basic changes in Peking's foreign policy.

In short, Moscow would recognize that the Sino-Soviet dispute had long lost its ideological steam, and that the P.R.C. leadership would now have a keen interest in lowering tensions with Moscow from a position of geopolitical weakness.

While the U.S.S.R.'s 26th Party Congress, initiated on Feb. 23, 1981, showed no fundamental changes in China policy, a new geopolitical tack for handling Soviet policy from the Mideast in an arc to northern China was floated. Adding to his just-announced New Delhi proposal regarding a significant Soviet role in a so-called security pact for the Persian Gulf, Leonid Brezhnev urged talks with "all interested countries" in the Far East to discuss "confidence-building measures." Under this heading, Brezhnev slyly introduced a proposal to include the "international aspects of the Afghanistan problem," and even to deal with the Soviet military "contingent," but only once the catch-all quote "imperialist undeclared war against socialists in Afghanistan" ceased.

The U.S.S.R.'s new strategy

Fundamentally, Moscow was about to surface an extraordinary new phase of its strategic approach. The Soviets would first seek to consolidate global diplomatic recognition of the successful expansion of Moscow's outer perimeter accomplished during the Soviets' 1977-80 military "breakout."

Second and most important: Moscow would seek to build upon such a global confirmation of their imperial growth in an even more egregious fashion than they had used in the Committee on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) process, for the purpose of neutralizing strategically isolated non-aligned or pro-Western governments in the arc from the Middle East to Japan.

Most heavily targeted at this time would be the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, whose neutralization would also be aided by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in spring 1982, the subsequent Soviet commitment to the Syrian position in Lebanon, and by the Iran-Iraq war.

Also targeted, beginning in 1980, was Pakistan, and by 1983, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. High on Moscow's list as early as 1980 was the neutralization of ASEAN, where a vulnerable Thailand would be heavily pressured militarily while a Sinophobic Indonesia would be offered Soviet sweeteners, such as a fall 1983 Soviet statement that Indonesia would not be targeted by SS-20s. Finally, the Soviets would upgrade their tactics for the most important targets of their neutralization efforts in Asia: the P.R.C. and Japan.

While the 26th Congress of the Soviet communist party sent out signals of a new tactic in China policy, the P.R.C. in early 1981 began to witness a reaction to the 1980 Dengist

political blitzkrieg. In the spring of 1981 after the trials of the Gang of Four, a crackdown on liberal dissidents overlapped an army-inspired campaign against liberal-bourgeois and unpatriotic behavior.

Backlash in Peking

However, the momentum generated by Dengists during 1980 carried over into the Sixth Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, where in the summer, the P.R.C. leadership made a decisive step when acknowledging that Chairman Mao had made serious political errors since 1957. The anti-Maoist proclamation was only muffled when the more vociferous elements of the Deng group unsuccessfully demanded that some of Mao's errors since 1957 be identified as crimes. In addition, Hua, after being criticized for "leftist policies," was replaced as party chairman by Hu Yao-pang.

But by December several important members of the Deng group were forced to make self-criticisms, and in January 1982 Li openly urged a crusade against economic crime; this time the crime attacked was not the porkbarreling of a year ago, but unscrupulous profits made from Deng's economic reforms.

With the Li-Yeh group reasserting itself and a cautious Moscow maintaining a holding pattern in Sino-Soviet relations during the course of 1981, border tensions between the two countries resurfaced. During 1981 the P.R.C. launched a propaganda campaign against early-1981 Soviet probes claiming that Moscow's control of the strategic Pamirs was legal due to certain czarist claims. The P.R.C.-Vietnam border remained extremely tense, and a border spat with India emerged, after what appeared to be a successful visit to New Delhi by Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua.

In the midst of deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations, U.S.-P.R.C. relations during 1981 were also deteriorating around the Taiwan issue: Within the context of an anti-Deng backlash, the P.R.C. launched an extremely hard-line campaign on the Taiwan issue.

Moscow ups the ante again

In March 1982, two months after the death of Marxist-Leninist ideologue Mikhail Suslov, an arch-foe of China, the Soviets launched a major initiative toward China. This initiative keynoted a full-scale escalation of the China and Asia tactic suggested at the 26th Party Congress. By that time, former KGB head Yuri Andropov was being elevated to the important position of Secretary of the Central Committee while he and his Russian Empire backers gained preeminence in Soviet policy.

At the same time, Azerbaijani KGB head and close Andropov ally Geydar Aliyev—later to become a member of the Politburo—moved into the middle of Soviet China policy, in March the dying Brezhnev visited Tashkent in Uzbekistan. Finally responding to Peking's 1980 signals on willingness to drop ideological disputes, Brezhnev stated that while some of the P.R.C.'s foreign and domestic policies

were anti-socialist, China must be identified as a socialist country.

Playing on Sino-American tensions over Taiwan, Brezhnev openly rejected the idea of two Chinas and endorsed Peking's sovereign right to Taiwan. He urged renewed economic, scientific and cultural relations between the two countries, stating a willingness to reopen border talks at any time and negotiate "confidence-building measures."

Brezhnev's Tashkent proposal in turn coincided with a massive Dengist counterattack against the Li-Yeh group. In March 1982, Premier Zhao launched a renewed push for Deng's economic reforms. By May a reorganization of the State Council drastically undercut the power of the Li-Yeh group.

Then in September, at the 12th Party Congress, one month after a face-saving Sino-American joint communiqué on Taiwan, Hua was expelled from the Politburo. In October, Deng carried out a purge of the military. Bilateral talks between Moscow and Peking were formally reopened, and by the end of the year the Chinese media launched a major assault on "leftism."

The tactical agendas at the October Sino-Soviet talks revealed the geopolitical interest of both sides. The P.R.C. delegation immediately identified a series of preconditions that Moscow would have to fulfill prior to any normalization of relations between the two countries: Chiefly, a massive scale-down of Soviet force on the Sino-Soviet border, removal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, removal of Soviet support activities for the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea, and the eventual removal of Soviet military divisions from Mongolia.

Moscow, on the other hand, seeking the optimum of maneuvering room from its weak Chinese neighbor, sought only a general agreement stressing normal, friendly relations between the two countries, and a sizable increase in trade.

In short, the P.R.C. sought a pull-back of threatening Soviet and Soviet-sponsored force from its borders prior to normal relations, while Moscow sought normal relations first, as a political condition within which it could gain greater nuclear- and conventional-force flexibility and secretly assert its role as mediator and facilitator between its own Asian allies and Peking.

Intelligence reports from the October 1982 meeting suggest that China may have agreed not to dispute Soviet-based naval and air capabilities stationed at Cam Ranh Bay in exchange for a pledge to remove Soviet aircraft from Danang, where it more directly threatens the P.R.C., to Cam Ranh Bay.

Openly, both sides pledged to revive trade consulates and small-scale exchange programs. And the P.R.C. would, immediately after the October meeting, embark on an effort to broaden its ties with Eastern European countries.

In November, at Leonid Brezhnev's funeral, Foreign Minister Huang met privately with Andropov, and afterwards expressed "optimism" about the future of Sino-Soviet talks.

At this point sources close to the White House began to evince nervousness over the potential course of Sino-Soviet relations. Peking would try to parlay the pressure of these new Soviet relations to extract concessions from Washington—and use U.S. relations to extract concessions from Moscow.

Following George Shultz's trip to Peking in February 1983, Chairman Hu, visiting Yugoslavia in May, threatened renewed confrontation in Sino-Soviet relations unless the U.S.S.R. changed its Kampuchea policy. In response to the Chinese game, Andropov and Aliyev escalated.

Moscow tests Peking

First, they broke a tacit October 1982 agreement urging a moratorium on propagandistic attacks, when in April and May of 1983, Soviet journals assaulted the P.R.C. for not being forthcoming in the talks (on May 31 the Soviet military magazine chided China for refusal to talk with Vietnam), in the same breath that Moscow attacked the P.R.C.'s opposition to the Vietnamese proposed formula for discussions on Kampuchea.

More importantly, Moscow tested Peking's commitment to the entire process. When the Soviet-aligned government of Mongolia unexpectedly expelled 8,000 ethnic Chinese, a humiliated China was supposed to recall Vietnam's expulsion of large numbers of *Hoa* (Chinese nationals in Vietnam) in the spring of 1978. Unlike the 1978 reaction, China accepted this new humiliation quietly. By threatening confrontation, Andropov and Aliyev sought to quicken the pace of reconciliation.

And despite the building military pressure, by the spring of 1983 the Chinese leadership saw flexibility in the Andropov-led Politburo. But Peking's willingness to concede to Moscow's principal strategic objectives was still far away, if latent. The optimal signal of Chinese neutrality that Moscow sought—but could not obtain—would have been the reversal of China's Japan policy, so that Peking would strongly oppose Japanese rearmament.

In the aftermath of the March Sino-Soviet talks, the pace of negotiation quickened. While no headway was made on Afghanistan, Kampuchea, or the Sino-Soviet border issue, the two sides agreed to double trade and resume technical cooperation.

Symbolic of this development was an agreement to allow the U.S.S.R. to help modernize an old Soviet-constructed factory in Harbin, Manchuria. Despite China's desire for Western technology, it has pressured the West since early 1983 by pointing to the advantages of low-cost barter trade and savings on plant modernization as opposed to new plant construction, in their dealings with Moscow. In addition to the Manchuria technical agreement, China also agreed to reopen trade routes between Soviet Turkistan and Sinkiang.

The Chinese then invited the archduke of Soviet Orientalism, Mikhail Kapitsa, to Peking, while permitting the first Soviet tourists in decades to enter China. Trying to ignore the Mongolian provocation, Peking invited a Mongolian sports

team to China and later displayed a low-keyed reaction to the Soviets' August 1983 KAL-007 shoot-down.

Evidence of Moscow's commitment to push through its new China perspective was revealed by early 1983 in the public queasiness demonstrated by Moscow's allies in the region who have immediate security stakes in their own relations with China: Mongolia and Vietnam. In August, Andropov took to the pages of *Pravda* with the consoling formula: "We proceed firmly from the premise that Soviet-Chinese relations must be built in such a way that they do not hurt third countries. We expect the same from the Chinese side."

In the midst of Moscow's attempt to pacify and to reassure its allies in the region on the new China tactic, in late August, only five days prior to the KAL shoot-down, Andropov offered a limp overture in a public proposal aimed at Japan and China, which offered not to increase the deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles in the region. The ploy was to be differentiated from the January 1983 Gromyko statement which openly argued that SS-20s that exceed agreed-upon limits at any successful arms-control negotiation would be transferred to Siberia. The fraud was unveiled by the massive build-up of Soviet tactical nuclear forces in Asia during the course of 1982 and 1983, aside from SS-20s.

The third round of talks begins

Thus the Soviets had already set the parameters for the third round of Sino-Soviet talks to begin in 1983. They sought to increase the pace of negotiations by a sudden humiliation of Peking and Mongolia. A series of apparent Chinese "concessions" followed, while Moscow moved to secure several unnerved allies behind its game plan. This was accomplished while at the same time, through the KAL-007 shoot-down and the October Soviet-run North Korean massacre of the South Korean cabinet in Rangoon, Moscow had gravely threatened Reagan's fledgling Asia policy.

At the third round of talks, Soviet negotiator Leonid Llyichev proposed a "concrete confidence-building measure": that neither side hold maneuvers near the common border. Chinese negotiator Qian Qui-Chien reacted sharply, calling the proposal a "trap," and demanding that Moscow first reduce its troop strength on the border.

Despite these limits, Sino-Soviet negotiations had moved to a serious stage, one that intelligence sources could see developing—in the future—into an agreement modeled on the 1955 Yugoslav-Soviet accord (where both sides agreed to manage their disagreements).

By October, this momentum generated new life into the long-festering Sino-Indian border talks. The border dispute was first brought into negotiations in October 1981; there the talks stalled. However, at the end of October 1983, both sides would claim that significant progress had been made.

Then in November Geydar Aliyev attended the Fifth Conference of the Vietnamese Communist Party and took the occasion to label the United States as the central destabilizing

force in the region. Privately, Aliyev was said to have pressured Hanoi to become more forthcoming with Peking. Hanoi not only rejects Brezhnev's Tashkent declaration that China is a socialist state, but it argues that Peking—not the United States—is the major security threat in the region. Nonetheless, reports have persisted of limited back-channel discussions between China and Vietnam in 1983.

Demonstrating his commitment to the new Moscow line, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach happily reported on his meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wu at the October 1983 session of the United Nations. This, in addition to a toned-down assault on the P.R.C. in the Vietnamese press, initiated in October, was a notable signal.

And there are intelligence reports that in the late fall of 1983, China and Vietnam began a considerable withdrawal of troops from their common border. Le Duan, speaking in the presence of Aliyev on Nov. 9, did not even attack China by name, while recalling the importance of Chinese aid during the Vietnam war.

The Mongolian card

Immediately following the third round of Sino-Soviet talks in October 1983, an important Mongolian military delegation arrived in Hanoi. The trip, probably arranged by Moscow during the period prior to Aliyev's arrival in Hanoi, was targeted to signal unanimity among Moscow's allies in its new China policy. Yet Ulan Bator appeared to show increased resistance to the policy.

On the 34th Anniversary of Mongolian-P.R.C. relations, however, the Mongolian media launched into a harsh anti-Chinese attack, asserting that China had made "crude errors" during the Cultural Revolution and that China also refused to give up its "anti-Sovietism." These press charges re-emphasized that Sino-Soviet normalization "must not harm the national interests of other countries, while at the same time fingering Peking's early 1983 demand that Soviet troops be removed from Mongolia before Sino-Mongolian normalization can take place.

Whether this new assault on the P.R.C. emanating from Ulan Bator was cooked up in Moscow or not, Mongolia is probably Moscow's chosen whip in the negotiating process.

Then finally, after aiding the North Korean terror bombing in Rangoon in October—an act which not only torpedoed the front end of a new U.S. Asia policy but also threatened Peking's security by increasing tensions on the Korean peninsula—Moscow, according to intelligence sources, has sent clear signals to Peking and Washington that it is now interested in restraining Kim Il-Sung.

Any major military disturbance between North and South Korea would torpedo China's modernization hopes, cutting off its access to Japanese and American technology as a result of necessary P.R.C. material support for North Korea—support that under these circumstances would be necessary to offset what in Peking would be considered a deadly Soviet gain in Pyongyang.