

Gorbachov: Russia is an Asian power

by Konstantin George

On July 28, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov, during a tour of the Soviet Far East, delivered a landmark address in Vladivostok, the principal port city on the U.S.S.R.'s Pacific coast and headquarters of its Pacific Fleet. The day before, Gorbachov marked Soviet Navy Day by appearing at a celebration, flanked by Adm. Vladimir Chernavin, commander-in-chief of the Soviet Navy, and Pacific Fleet commander Admiral V. V. Sidorov.

For the first time ever, members of a North Korean Navy delegation, led by that navy's commander, Adm. Kim il Chol, were the guests of honor at Navy Day in Vladivostok. In June, the Soviet carrier *Minsk* and other Pacific Fleet vessels visited North Korea. Such visits were non-existent until last year—Gorbachov's first in power—when the first Soviet fleet visited North Korea. Thus, Gorbachov's July 28 address was preceded by signals that North Korea is solidly in the Russian camp.

The Soviet-Chinese condominium

On foreign policy, Gorbachov's speech inaugurated an era of Soviet soundings toward China for a strategic rapprochement that would leave the Asian mainland carved up into Russian and Chinese spheres, and gray areas of shared assets. China has always been eager to reach an understanding with Moscow for a joint condominium over Asia, but has set three pre-conditions for serious talks: 1) pull-back of Soviet forces from Outer Mongolia and troop reductions along the Chinese border; 2) phased withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan; 3) an end to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia.

Gorbachov's speech was the first time a Soviet leader has addressed these terms. He announced that after Soviet-Mongolia "consultations," Moscow was considering withdrawal of "a considerable portion" of its 70,000 troops stationed there, as a goodwill gesture. He added, "The Soviet Union is prepared to negotiate with the People's Republic of China, concrete steps towards a proportional reduction in the level of ground forces."

Regarding Afghanistan, Gorbachov's announcement that Russia will remove six regiments this year was nothing more than a propaganda stunt—seen by itself. Three of the regiments are SAM missile anti-aircraft units, of no value against

rebels who have no air force. And, even as Gorbachov spoke, the Soviet military had just concluded three of the bloodiest offensive sweeps of the war, along the border with Pakistan and against rebel-held cities.

The Soviets are simultaneously attempting to politically splinter the disparate rebel forces. Gorbachov offered talks with rebels aimed at broadening the Kabul government to include rebels "based abroad." This offer was repeated July 29, on a Radio Kabul broadcast by Najibullah, Afghanistan's former KGB head and new communist party leader. Behind the fig leaf of token troop pull-outs, Gorbachov's policy is thus to escalate attacks on rebel-held areas, while raising the level of bribes to recruit tribes away from the resistance.

As for China's third demand, he said the Chinese-Vietnamese frontier should become a "border of peace," with China and Vietnam as friends and good neighbors. Gorbachov did not mention the high-level Soviet-Vietnamese talks of recent weeks, first when Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov attended the funeral of Vietnamese party leader Le Duan, then with the arrival of Le Duan's septuagenarian successor, Truong Chinh, for a late-July "vacation" in Moscow.

Gorbachov emphasized Russia's "common interests" with China, asserting that both countries are in the midst of huge efforts to modernize and expand their industries. He offered Soviet economic aid for China's modernization program, and a joint project to build a railway between Chinese Sinkiang (northwestern China) and Soviet Kazakhstan in Central Asia.

The Soviet party chief discussed the United States as a "Pacific" power, not an "Asian" one; he confined his remarks on the United States to offshore Asia and the South Pacific. He plugged the idea of neutrality to be pursued by the four major non-mainland U.S. allies in the Pacific: Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand (which, under David Lange, no longer calls itself an ally). Hoping to bring "Finlandization" to Asia, Gorbachov called for an Asia-Pacific peace and security conference echoing the 1975 Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

He promised trade and economic deals with Japan to develop the Soviet Far East—provided, of course, Japan breaks with the United States. The Soviet media have churned out violent denunciations of Japanese defense spending and willingness to participate in the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Gorbachov also baldly offered the U.S. a "horse trade" over the Philippines, with a promise that, were the U.S. to abandon its military bases in the Philippines, this "would not go unanswered" by Moscow. He also expressed "hope" for better relations with Australia and New Zealand, and supported New Zealand's proposal for a "South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone."

Taken in total, Gorbachov's speech was a declaration that Russia is an Asian and Pacific power, which has embarked on the path of strategic rapprochement with China, for joint rule of the most populous region of the Earth.