

Soviet Initiatives for Asia-Pacific Security and India*

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On Jul 28, 1986 at Vladivostok on the Pacific coast, Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev spelt out Soviet perspectives on Asia-Pacific security. This speech interpreted Soviet 'new' thinking on international relations as it related to the region and was a distinct departure from Brezhnev's proposal for collective security in Asia enunciated in 1969. In a follow-up measure to the first proposal, Gorbachev made another important speech on Sep 16, 1988 at Krasnoyarsk in Soviet Siberia.

These proposals have an importance and an impact that cannot be ignored. Not only because they are made by a super power which is becoming increasingly conscious of its Asian identity; but also because these are followed by actions that compel a response. Simultaneous diplomatic initiatives have given these proposals a momentum from which there can be no withdrawal. Asian nations are now beginning to respond to these initiatives and adjust to the changes that they will bring forth. India too must watch the emerging developments carefully and assess their impact on its own security. Opportunities as they arise should then be exploited and adverse implications countered where required.

To understand the background of the Vladivostok initiative it may be pertinent to briefly look at developments in Asia in the early 1980's from a Soviet perspective. Sino-US relations had by then acquired a growing strategic parallelism. Close strategic consensus appeared to develop between these two countries which had security connotations obviously adverse to Soviet interests. Simultaneously a military axis seemed to be growing between Washington - Tokyo - Seoul, which could not but cause concern to Moscow. A Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed between China and Japan in 1978 with a prominent anti-hegemony clause directed primarily against the Soviet Union. In Southeast Asia, from where the USA had reduced its commitments substantially in 1975, it now made a comeback. The Soviet forces in Afghanistan were engulfed in a war from which there seemed to be no likelihood of an early disengagement. In West Asia Moscow's role had been marginalised.

*This Article was written in January 1989 and updated till April this year. A post-script has been added including major developments during Gorbachev's visit on 15-18 May 1989.

There were serious shortcomings internally within the Soviet Union. The Party machinery had become decrepit, the bureaucracy was sloth and economic and agricultural production shortfalls reflected structural limitations. There was stagnation and simmering discontent with major deficiencies of consumer products. The first part of the Vladivostok speech highlights this aspect of life in Siberia. It was to address these issues both in the external and internal environment that Gorbachev introduced his 'new' thinking. The basic formulation of which as it relates to security issues are discussed below:

- * With the interdependent nature of the world no country can enhance its security at the expense of others.
- * A nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought leading to a change in the military doctrine from being prepared to fight a nuclear war if imposed upon to the necessity of eliminating the nuclear threat.
- * A non-nuclear world is not only a desirable goal but politically feasible.
- * Changing the traditional Soviet pursuit of 'equal security', which only led to higher levels of armaments and competition to 'reasonable' or 'sufficient' security, where 'parity' at every level of weapon system was not required.
- * The concept of 'glasnost' (openness) can be extended to the military sphere without endangering national security. This opens up a new area of intrusive on-sight inspections that allow disarmament to be much more effective.
- * The new emphasis on the primacy of political means, as opposed to military in ensuring national security.¹

Another significant element of the 'new' thinking in the USSR is in relation to the United Nations. Gorbachev has expressed his firm faith in the UN and is determined to give it a pre-eminent role in the world in accordance with its original charter. In October 1987, Moscow declared that it would pay all its overdue UN bills, including US \$ 197 million for peacekeeping operations that it had opposed over a long time. Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Petrovsky said that "Any attempt to create financial difficulties in the UN and use these to extract political pressure on the organisation and bind its activities is inconsistent with realities and responsibility in politics". He also blamed the USA for reducing its commitments to the UN. The USA presently owes the Organisation \$ 414

million of which \$ 61 million is for peacekeeping operations. Some concrete measures that have been proposed by the Soviet Union in this regard are:

- * An international force in the Gulf to guarantee safe movement of ships, rather than only a US backed force.
- * Giving more powers to the UN on human rights.
- * Increasing the powers and role of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).
- * Constituting a world space organisation in line with the IAEA.
- * A UN tribunal to deal with terrorism.²
- * Moscow also offered to channel her entire humanitarian aid to Afghanistan through the UN.

THE VLADIVOSTOK INITIATIVE AND SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS

Based on the above formulation the Vladivostok speech was an attempt to chart a new course. There were five proposals in this speech which were in the nature both of a declaration of intent as well as of laying down a broad course which Soviet policy was to follow. The first proposal related to issues of regional settlement both of Kampuchea and Afghanistan. The second dealt with nuclear non-proliferation issues in Asia primarily by supporting nuclear free zones. The third proposal related to the reduction of naval forces in the Pacific and support to the resumption of the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace Conference. The fourth point was on the reduction both of armed forces and of conventional armaments in Asia. The last aspect was a proposal to have practical discussions on confidence building measures and on non-use of force in the forum of a Helsinki type conference in Hiroshima.³

The Vladivostok initiative differed from the Brezhnev proposal of 1969 on two key issues. The earlier proposal was directed primarily to protect Soviet strategic and economic interests in Asia by attempting to reduce US role in the region and to isolate and contain China. The emphasis now is on cooperation. The objective is to rehabilitate and improve positive relations with China while at the same time expanding and consolidating existing interaction with other Asian countries. In the perception of the USA, however, Gorbachev's appeal is seen to prove US dispensability to Asian security.⁴ Though a consequence may well be to

reduce US influence this is probably not the main objective. Another important point of difference was in the follow-up measures. The Brezhnev proposal received very little positive response from any nation in Asia, including India and consequently these could not be pursued.⁵

Within four months of the Vladivostok speech Gorbachev visited India. In New Delhi on Nov 27, 1986, Rajiv Gandhi and he signed the Delhi Declaration. Unfortunately this received little attention in the world media, but this actually lays down a frame work for international relations, whose impact is bound to be felt in the years ahead.

There have been other Soviet diplomatic initiatives in the region leading to substantial improvements in its strategic position. Quite clearly, China has been the focus of this attention. After the Soviet Union agreed to the Thalweg principle of mid-channel alignment for riverine borders, negotiations resumed and border talks were held for the first time since 1978 from 9-23 February 1987. Trade between China and the USSR rose from a low of US \$ 330 million in 1978 to \$ 2 billion in 1986. By 1990 this is expected to rise further to \$ 3.2 billion.⁶ Cross border trade has flourished benefiting the poorest regions of both countries. Moscow has unilaterally withdrawn one division from Mongolia. Major assistance to refurbish some 17 old factories earlier built by the Soviet Union is being discussed and many joint projects are under consideration.

Soviet relations with Japan seem to have also broken out from its earlier diplomatic freeze. Foreign ministers of both countries visited each other's capitals in 1986 and Sheverdnadze visited Tokyo again in early 1989. All these visits are an indication of this thaw. In the ASEAN, Moscow's sustained overtures at last seem to be making some headway. It is hopeful of improving relations with Indonesia and Malaysia. The Soviet foreign Minister visited Thailand and Indonesia in March 1987 and important South-east Asian leaders have been to Moscow. Trade with the region has however not yet shown any improvement. But major progress has been achieved on the Kampuchean issue. Vietnam had pulled out 50,000 troops from Kampuchea by December 22, 1988 a matter on which Moscow had been pressing hard. All Vietnamese troops are now to be withdrawn from there by end September 1989. The signing of the Geneva Accord on Afghanistan and the subsequent troop withdrawal from there has enabled the Soviet Union to disentangle itself from a most uncomfortable situation.

Barely two years after the Vladivostok speech the situation in Asia-Pacific was very different. In analysing this at Krasnoyarsk Gorbachev said that:

"In short, comrades, I would put it in this way: although not too much time has gone by since Vladivostok we can see a healthy, definitely positive and very promising process unfolding in this vast region. It bears out the increasing relationship of universal and national interests and the growing awareness of the integrity of the world in which we live. We have a realistic view of our role in this. Nonetheless, I think our contribution here has been substantial and we can see how the peoples of all countries appreciate it."⁷

THE KRASNOYARSK INITIATIVE

This was the backdrop for the speech at Krasnoyarsk on Sep 16, 1988. The focus is on normalisation of relations with China and for creating a climate of economic cooperation with Japan. However, other areas of Asian security also feature prominently. There are seven specific proposals, more to the point than at Vladivostok inviting action rather than discussion.⁸

The First point calls for a moratorium on additional deployment of nuclear weapons by all powers in the region. Soviet Union claims to be implementing this already. This is an advance over the earlier suggestion not only because it proposes the idea of a mutually agreed freeze between the USSR and the USA, but it now includes China as well. The Second point calls for the "non-increase of naval forces in the Region". The Third point relates to Northeast Asia and proposes multilateral discussions with a view to freezing and lowering the levels of naval and air forces and limiting their activity. The Fifth point calls for joint measures for ensuring secure sea and air space.

The Fourth point pertains to the elimination of military bases. It specifically calls upon the USA to dismantle the Philippine bases (Subic Bay naval and Clark Field air bases and other facilities vital to the US) and agrees in return to give up the Soviet fleet's "material and technical supply station in Cam Ranh Bay." The timing of this proposal was important because simultaneously talks were in progress between Philippines and the USA on the Bases Agreement till 1991. The Bases enhance US and ASEAN security, not necessarily that of the Philippines. The Bases occupy large tracts of prime land and contain major facilities which can be economically exploited by the Philippine Government perhaps with Japanese investment, to generate even greater advantages than what is currently the compensatory package provided by the USA. In addition the Philippines have had to pay substantial human and moral costs that cannot be equated in financial terms alone. Hence, when the Leasing Agreement comes up for renewal in 1991, there is no certainty that the Bases will be

allowed to continue. The Cam Ranh Bay 'facilities' in comparison are negligible though no doubt also important to the Soviet Navy.⁹

The Sixth proposal is about the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace conference. This was mentioned in the Vladivostok speech as well, but there is now a deadline of 1990 that has been incorporated. This proposal has been strongly resisted in the past by the USA and the Conference issue has been considered dead for all practical purposes. The chances of its taking place at this point seem rather remote.

The Seventh proposal is to create a negotiating machinery to consider issues pertaining to security in the Asia-Pacific Region. This replaces the suggestion put forward in the Vladivostok speech of a 'Helsinki type' conference which was proposed to be held at Hiroshima and which did not receive a very favourable response. The proposal is now to discuss at any level and in any composition, the creation of a negotiating mechanism to consider Soviet and any other proposal for Asia-Pacific security. The USSR, USA and China as permanent UN Security Council members could launch such a discussion.

Two crucial issues were raised at the end of the Speech. One related to improving relations with China. On this the General Secretary said:

"We are for full normalisation of relations with the People's Republic of China, for their development to a level equal to the responsibility of our two countries for peaceful world politics. We are ready for the immediate commencement of preparations for a Soviet-Chinese summit."¹⁰

The second aspect was on Japanese assistance for the development of Siberia. In his recent 'walkabouts' in the region, he has had to listen to people's complaints of the shortages and deficiencies and the general backwardness of the area. To rectify this and for the overall development of the region he has now proposed 'favoured treatment' to industrialists wishing to set up enterprises in Siberia. He has also taken note of "articles in the Chinese press about possibilities of organising Sino-Japan-Soviet trilateral economic activity on mutually advantageous conditions." The Soviet Union shares "this approach, and if all the sides are ready, the ideas could begin to be translated into practice."¹¹

IMPLICATIONS FOR ASIAN SECURITY

The implications of these initiatives have to be seen in the backdrop of Soviet military build-up in Asia in the 1960's and 1970's. Four stages of this can be identified and this may form a suitable basis for analysis.

- * Consequent to worsening of relations with China, Moscow increased its military deployment in the Far East. From a total of about 17-20 divisions in 1964, presently there are 56 divisions including 4 in Mongolia. These divisions are of course at different states of readiness. It is likely that about 18 may be at Category A (75% strength), 12 at Category B (50-75% strength) and 26 at Category C (20-50% strength). There has been corresponding increase in Strategic Forces, Air Forces and Naval components. Substantial numbers of SS-20 (intermediate range ballistic missiles) were also deployed. For the command of these forces the Far East Theatre of Military Operations (TVDO) came into being at the end of 1978.¹²
- * The four Northern Territories south of the Kurile Islands that are disputed with Japan, were reinforced and militarized.
- * Development of naval and air facilities at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang.
- * Military intervention in Afghanistan and the consequent massive military presence there.¹³

Distinct improvements have been made in all the above areas. Northern Territories question is linked overall with the Soviet-Japan relations. The Islands are of crucial strategic importance to the Soviet Union. The entire Indian Ocean OTVD, at this only effective round the year Soviet port in the Pacific at Vladivostok, can be blocked if these islands are in hostile hands. Through diplomatic initiative, political approaches and economic incentives, Soviet Union will attempt to diffuse the issue. However, so far little headway has been made on improving relations with Japan, because of its reluctance to normalise relations till the Islands question is resolved.

Resolution of the other two issues hinges on Sino-Soviet relations. Efforts at normalisation of relations are well on their way. There have been significant diplomatic visits; first at the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers, then Foreign Ministers and later to culminate with Gorbachev's visit in the Spring of 1989 to Beijing. That the visit is likely to take place even before the 'three obstacles' have been removed is an indication of Chinese willingness to talk. The Chinese leadership is also aware that a response to Soviet initiatives cannot be delayed. It is true that there is a limit to 'good relations' between two giant states that are destined to live cheek by jowl without the benefit of any buffer. Both are highly nationalistic and have their own big power ambitions. There are also historical antagonisms and a question of unequal borders that cannot be resolved easily.¹⁴

China's huge population and Soviet Siberia's demographic vacuum is another factor to be reckoned with. China's primary economic technology cannot also tie up with that of the Soviet Union to any significant extent except in relation to border trade. Yet normalisation of relations have distinct advantages and once begun the process will have its own momentum to take it forward.

Gorbachev's impending visit to China will indeed be significant. He had already helped create an atmosphere for this by unilaterally declaring the elimination of intermediate range missiles from Soviet Asia. Ground work for the visit is being prepared well and there is every likelihood that major decisions will be taken during this Meeting.

There is likely to be a decision on the question of the Sino-Soviet border. The parameters for its settlement appear to have been finalised with the acceptance of the 'Thalweg' Principle. Some irritants still remain, regarding the fate of mid-stream islands and the security of the major Soviet city of Khabarovsk that lie on the banks of the Ussuri River. But the issue can be resolved with mutual understanding and compromise. The same probably also applies to the Border in the West. It is not yet clear as to what principles will be adopted there regarding the alignment of the border in the mountainous areas of the Pamirs. Here too apparently initial discussions seem to have been favourable. It is perhaps not too much to expect that a solution of the Border issue may well take place at this visit. Even if it were not to be resolved, the tension at the borders which has almost disappeared may then be totally removed.

It is in this framework that Gorbachev's December 1988 declaration at the UN on unilateral military force reduction has to be analysed. In addition to substantive reductions in mechanized warfare capability in Europe he also announced that Moscow will reduce total military manpower by 500,000 in two years. of these 50,000 will be reduced from East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. On February 4, 1989 Shevardnadze announced the details of troop withdrawal in the Far East. Within the overall framework spelt out by Gorbachev in the UN, the Soviet Union would reduce its troops in the Eastern strategic theatre by 200,000 and by 60,000 in the southern strategic theatre. In addition three quarters of the troops in Mongolia will be withdrawn. The formations and units deployed near the Soviet Chinese border would be reformed to a defensive structure. He also called for a matching Chinese unilateral reduction.

The four divisions in the plains of Mongolia were two tank divisions and two motor rifle divisions. Alongwith their supporting air element, this was an adequate force to seriously worry the Lanzhon and Beijing Military Region Commanders. The details of these reductions in the Far-East may well be spelt out by Gorbachev in Beijing. Such a massive reduction of forces will indeed be very welcome to the Chinese and should set the scene for substantive discussions on other issues.

All these developments will challenge US pre-eminence in Asia. In many respects this position had already been eroded with US economic decline and the emergence of Japan and the four Asian Tigers as economic powers of consequence. But US military pre-eminence in the region continues, just as Japan's leading role in world economy has been clearly established. This US position is now being challenged by Gorbachev's initiatives. A result of which will quite likely be to weaken Asia's link with the US military power. This was perhaps inevitable. US economic weakness was bound to affect military power sooner than later. Congressional pressure for reducing overseas bases and military presence can no longer be avoided. Therefore, US role as guarantor of regional stability may well be affected.

Kissinger sees two sets of balance of power emerging in Asia in the mid 1990's. In Northeast Asia, between the Soviet Union, Japan and China. In Southeast Asia (including South Asia) another one between Japan, India and the Soviet Union (to some extent). In this scenario, he sees India gradually increasing its international role and in its own geopolitical interest take over some of the security functions now being performed by the USA. In doing so he sees India "condemned to rivalry with Moscow in the Indian Ocean and with China and Japan in Southeast Asia". He recommends that the USA should maintain a stand-off stance but remain as the guarantor of the equilibrium by supporting the weak against the strong.¹⁵

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

There is no doubt that Soviet initiatives will have far reaching effects on India's security environment. Some will be beneficial while others may not be favourable. Consequences of some actions, though favourable in the long term, may have effects that will be adverse in the immediate future.

Soviet Union's decision to work through the UN, not only on humanitarian aspects, but also on vital security issues must be welcomed. India has always believed in strengthening the UN and to make it more responsive to the needs of our time. It has been a prominent participant in

the UN's peacekeeping efforts especially in the earlier years. If the UN's peacekeeping role is strengthened and the machinery for this well formulated, India can not only increase its cooperation in this effort, but may feel confident to entrust the Organisation with some roles in the subcontinent. Concepts like troop withdrawals upto a specific distance from the borders, supervising force reductions, ensuring observance of demilitarised zones, control of ethnic insurgencies that transcend national boundaries, and others, could then be more credible.

On nuclear disarmament again India can whole heartedly support Soviet initiatives for ridding the world of nuclear weapons by the year 2000 A.D. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's proposal in June 1988 at the UN Disarmament Conference was on similar lines. With a little more realism he had extended the period upto 2010 AD. However, the attitudes of other countries towards nuclear disarmament and the progress made so far, indicate that the idea is yet to take root. Total nuclear disarmament is not accepted even as a goal by many nuclear weapon powers and any substantial reduction of nuclear arsenals will take many years to achieve. China for one is not willing to enter into negotiations for nuclear disarmament till the super powers have reduced their arsenals very substantially (upto 90 per cent according to some indications). It has also not shown any willingness to participate in serious discussions with non-nuclear weapon powers regarding substantive guarantees of not using its nuclear capability. In this environment of continued nuclearisation to coerce other nations through the IAEA or other institutions by giving them mandatory powers, will not enhance the security of such nations or that of the world.

On the other hand if the Soviet Union in its impending talks with China can convince the latter to either join the international nuclear disarmament process, or to agree to a southern Asia nuclear weapon free zone, it would be a useful contribution. Such an agreement could be in the nature of eliminating in a phased manner all nuclear weapons upto a 5,500 kms range, the triple zero option (battlefield, short and intermediate range weapons). Another may be a trilateral pact between Pakistan, China and India not to use their nuclear capabilities against each other. This may be reinforced if necessary with effective guarantees, including mutual inspections.¹⁶

The more immediate consequence of Gorbachev's initiatives on India is in relation to China. India has been accused of looking at these initiatives purely from its impact on Sino-Indian military equation. Considering India's strategic environment where China looms so large, it is only

natural that emerging developments should be analysed closely from this perspective. Gorbachev had stated in November 1986, in reply to a query, on this aspect, that, "...if we have an improvement in overall relationships among China, India and the Soviet Union.. your forecast will not come true. No one will have to take sides."¹⁷ Though an improvement in Sino-Indian relations has begun, it is far slower in pace as compared to Sino-Soviet normalisation. This mismatch may have consequences that need to be noted. We have seen the massive troop reductions that are projected by the Soviet Union by 1991. On the other hand, China's PLA has recently reduced its strength by about 25%. It is true that this troop reduction was actually restructuring and redeployment that was essential in order to enhance its combat capability. Yet it has been a very painful process for the PLA. It was a traumatic experience for many senior cadres (officers) who were used to service for life with all its attendant perks, to be asked to go home when they did not have one in the first place. Consequently there was widespread discontentment and disturbance. The PLA has barely recovered from its effects. Chinese leaders have now had to go on record to say that there will be no further reductions till the end of the Century. What then does this imply?

The current estimated deployment of PLA divisions opposite Soviet Union and Mongolia, in the Shenyang, Beijing and Lanzhou Military Regions, is 42 infantry, and 7 armoured.¹⁸ Considering that Chinese divisions are at full strength, they adequately matched Soviet capabilities. With the approximate 50% reductions of the Soviet Far East TVD, it is logical to assume that by 1991, China would be able to spare about 20 full strength divisions for redeployment elsewhere. Consequently, the PLA capability will then loom large in Asia with considerable impact on its neighbours. A result of this may be that in the 1990's border/territorial disputes with China may be more difficult to resolve than in the current decade.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

India cannot afford to underestimate the implication of Soviet initiatives in the Asia-Pacific. As an emerging regional power of some consequence, it will be affected considerably by these developments. If taken to its logical conclusion, the path set out at Vladivostok has the potential to reshape the international order in Asia. But this final goal is yet far away. In the intervening period, there would be other implications in the Asia-Pacific that may not all be beneficial to India. Yet the immediate future provides space for manoeuvre with greater challenges and op-

portunities. It is imperative that these be carefully considered and policy options evolved to maximise the advantages.

POST-SCRIPT

General Secretary Gorbachev's visit to China on 15-18 May, 1989 was overshadowed by the students protest demonstrations that shook the country threatening its very political structure. This must have intimidated major initiatives. The main significance lay in the normalisation of relations. Yet unilateral reduction of forces were announced by Gorbachev for 1989-90. These would amount to 2,00,000 soldiers in Asia. The details of these are; 12 army divisions, 11 air force regiments, and 16 combat ships from the Far East Fleet. From Mongolia would be removed the entire air force element and three divisions, leaving behind only one tank division. He also offered to demilitarise the entire Sino-soviet border and convert this into a frontier of peace and good neighbourliness. The border talks would be upgraded to Foreign Ministers level.

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