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Soviet Policy towards Japan and Western Europe : What the Differences Reveal

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Was it not Herzen who called the Pacific “the Mediterranean of the future”? Now even the myopic can see that the focal point of world economic power appears to be shifting from New York to Tokyo, just as once it shifted from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe and then from Northern Europe to the United States. In an age when it is argued that economic potential is displacing military capability as the decisive factor determining international relations, this shift can be expected to have a significant impact on the balance between the major Powers in the international system.¹ And even if one is sceptical that the coinage of international relations can be so abruptly changed, no one appears to deny Paul Kennedy’s well-attested proposition that without sustained superiority in economic power a country’s military capability is ultimately sure to decline relative to that of its rivals.² Either way, economics counts in international relations, and no one is more aware of this than Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev.

As a mammoth military power the Soviet Union faces the gloomy long-term prospect of extinction unless the economy can be revitalized in competition with the older industrialized countries of the West and newer industrialized countries of the East. Gorbachev’s solution — *perestroika* [reconstruction] — has been accompanied by unprecedented innovation in the management of the economy. But instead of thriving, the Soviet economy is faltering. As a result attention has now been turned to the excessively hungry defence sector, and in desperation Gorbachev has finally forced acceptance of cuts in defence as the necessary means to redressing the imbalance in Soviet domestic investment. These cuts were foreshadowed in Soviet diplomacy at the 27th Party congress in 1986 by Gorbachev’s statement that “The maintenance of security is increasingly a political task that can only be accomplished through political means.”³

The Russians have withdrawn from Afghanistan. They are effecting a detente with China. But it is in Europe that Gorbachev’s innovations have been most apparent, with respect to both nuclear and conventional forces ; it is here that the Soviet Union has been making the speediest adaptation to the new correlation in world forces that is continuing to shift to Soviet disadvantage. Under the shadow of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), that threatened to elevate competition between the Superpowers for nuclear superiority to new technological heights and at catastrophic financial cost, it is in Europe that the Russians retreated from position after position to reach agreement liquidating intermediate and lesser range nuclear missiles.⁴ And the Soviet Government is also pressing ahead to denuclearize the European theatre and to cut conventional forces on both sides of the great divide. Western Europe, whether as a bridge to a larger understanding with the United States or as the most perilous arena of confrontation between the two camps, has never been far from the centre of Moscow’s attention in the last few years.

Inevitably, with the spotlight on Europe, other areas of Soviet concern have fallen into the shade, in particular Japan. Not until 1991 is Gorbachev to visit Tokyo. Up to now, the Japanese have been a mere after-thought. Under the INF agreement of December 1987 the Japanese benefited from the destruction of the SS-20s that had been deployed in the Far East

as well as Europe ; not because the Russians wanted them to, but at US insistence which, in turn, resulted from persistent pressure from Tokyo.

There would appear to be a contradiction here. At the 24th Party congress in 1971 Brezhnev acknowledged that Japan was one of the three "basic centres of imperialist rivalry".⁵ And at the 27th Party congress in 1986 Gorbachev referred to Japan as one of the "*three centres of contemporary imperialism*".⁶ The Soviet Union now acknowledges the supremacy of economic power and the primacy of modern technology. Soviet experts recognize that the locus of world economic power is shifting to the Asian Pacific Region.⁷ At Vladivostok on 28 July 1986 Gorbachev freely admitted that "Japan has turned into a power of front-rank importance".⁸ And the rise of Japan is seen by some in Moscow as auguring the relative decline of the Soviet Union. "We have already let that moment slip by when the Japanese appeared in second place, outstripping us in economic potential" is the warning of a senior academic at the Soviet Institute of Oriental Studies.⁹ Yet the real innovations in Soviet foreign and defence policy are less evident with respect to Japan than elsewhere, above all in Eastern and Western Europe. This contradiction needs explaining. Ultimately it could well reflect not merely the peculiarities of Soviet attitudes towards Japan, but also a contradiction between (short-term) means and (long-term) ends in the conduct of Soviet policy. In this manner the differences between Soviet policy towards Western Europe and towards Japan may highlight the dilemmas of Soviet foreign policy as a whole under Gorbachev.

Since the 1970s the small fraternity of Japanologists in Moscow has been at odds over the extent of Japanese independence and the degree to which Japan is becoming a military Power. For instance A. P. Markov in his *Poslevoennaya politika Yaponii v Azii i Kitai* (Moscow : 1979) insists that on all the most important issues Japan has conducted a policy independent from that of the United States. But head of the Japanese section at the Institute of the Far East D. V. Petrov has argued — in *Yaponiya* (Moscow : 1981) — that, on the contrary, Japan has been unable to conduct an independent foreign policy ; indeed, it has been drawn deeper into the US strategic network, and this has further reduced its freedom of action. Petrov has also expressed the view that Japan is unlikely to have recourse to force. He is, however, challenged by another specialist, M. I. Ivanov — in *Rost militarizma v Yaponii* (Moscow : 1982) — who sees the rebirth of Japanese militarism as a reality. Other have tried to strike a balance between these disputants. Aliev, for example, sees the conflict arising from fact that specialists have focused on only one aspect of the whole and that this has distorted the perspective. He calls for more rounded studies and argues that Japan can be called one of the "Centres of imperialism" only "conditionally", in terms of economics but not politics : " 'power', but not 'strength' ".¹⁰

Aliev's approach to the subject is backed by the man who, in December 1974, replaced Ivan Kovalenko at the Japan desk of the Central Committee International Department : Alexei Senatorov. Senatorov quotes with approval Aliev's comment that the relationship between Japanese and American policies is that "when Tokyo 'proposes', Washington 'disposes'". That is to say, the Japanese do have independent lines of policy but US support is required to carry them out. Senatorov goes one step further in emphasizing that "the two imperialist partners and rivals have different aims in mind."¹¹ If this is, indeed, the view of the International Department then one would expect the Soviet regime to attempt to drive a wedge between Tokyo and Washington, to exploit "inter-imperialist contradictions." This would surely require major concessions from Moscow. Yet the Russians have offered very little. And they persist in the hope that they can encourage Japan's independence from the United States without at the same time accepting the logical corollary that no independence is feasible with-

out a self-sufficient military capability. For all the changes in Soviet military doctrine to “reasonable sufficiency”, the Russians still have a strong appreciation of military power. It takes little effort of the imagination to see what they would do were they in the shoes of the Japanese. Yet the capacity to project their minds into those of the Japanese has always been minimal.

The contrast with Western Europe is now striking. Here the Russians have correctly gauged the real concern prompted by their arms build-up since the 1960s and have been tailoring their policies accordingly ; even to the extent of showing signs of adjusting to a more integrated Western Europe, that would most likely lead to a decisive augmentation of political, and possibly military, as well as economic power on the other side of the continent. Under Brezhnev the Russians demonstrated sufficient flexibility to encourage (tacitly) the Gaullist solution — nationalism, an independent nuclear capability and anti-Americanism — to French security. And in the not too distant past they were not averse to playing with fire in backing German nationalism to undermine US hegemony over Western Europe ; witness the colours of the East German flag and, more substantially, the stratagem adopted to forestall the creation of the European Defence Community in the early 1950s.

Yet this degree of open-minded flexibility was never applied to Japan by Stalin and his successors. And, given the resurgence of a spirit of pragmatism predominant in the Malenkov years (1953–55), this anomaly is perhaps more evident now, under Gorbachev, than ever before. One is tempted to explain this in terms of fundamental forces acting as a brake on the development of Soviet policy towards Japan : the legacy of conflict in Russo-Japanese relations and the deeply rooted prejudices this has engendered ever since the surprise attack on Port Arthur in February 1904. These prejudices appear to transcend the divisions among Soviet Japanologists. They were strikingly apparent at the Yalta conference. They re-emerged with a vengeance under Khrushchev. And while Kovalenko was at the International Department and Gromyko at the Foreign Ministry, they continued to find an echo in Soviet policy towards Japan into the 1980’s. Yet none of this would matter were it not for the fact that at the very top of the Soviet structure Japan has yet to be accorded the full measure of attention worthy of its economic weight on the international scales. And this relative neglect is reflected in the open divisions among Soviet Japanologists.

The notion that “Moscow’s Japan-Watchers” form a house divided, and have long done so, is confirmed by the noted orientalist and sociologist Gilbert Rozman of Princeton in a recent issue of the *Pacific Review*. Rozman argues that the old school, dominated by such as Kovalenko (subsequently removed as a deputy head of the Central Committee International Department), which dismissed Japan as of little account in world affairs, has lost dominance to the new school, composed of academic international relations men — the *mezhdunarodniki* — such as Yevgeny Primakov, head of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (*IMEMO*), and Georgii Arbatov, head of the Institute of the USA and Canada (*ISShAK*) ; in this group Rozman also counts Nikolai Solovev, a career diplomat and Japan specialist, Soviet ambassador to Tokyo since April 1986. The new school regards the old approach as a failure and wishes Japan to be treated with realism and respect as an independent actor in world affairs. The displacement of the old school gives Rozman reason to describe Soviet policy towards Japan as “at a turning point.”¹² But, as already indicated, recognition of Japan’s independent line has been tempered by simultaneous recognition of Japan’s limited military capability and consistent opposition to any increase in Japan’s military budget. And when there are senior officials in the Soviet Foreign Ministry still insisting, against all the evidence, “that the territorial problem is not the main one in our relationship”¹³, one has to

wonder how much progress in understanding has actually been achieved. Even then, it is one thing to understand the situation but quite another to translate the logical conclusions into policy.

It is two years since Rozman wrote, and the Russians have still not altered course. The abyss between word and deed persists. At Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, on 16 September 1988 Gorbachev somewhat implausibly acknowledged that "the centre of civilization has shifted towards the East", and that the Asian region could give birth to "the dangerous spread of regional and worldwide contradictions." He accepted that "Soviet-Japanese relations are indisputably vital to the entire situation here." And he reiterated the now commonly accepted case that the Japanese "have apparently proved that in the modern world one can attain the status of a Great Power without relying on militarism." Yet he did so only to argue vigorously against Japanese rearmament; and in discussing the need for opening up special economic zones in the Soviet Far East to attract Japanese and other foreign capital for investment, he made not the slightest gesture towards answering Japan's territorial demands.¹⁴

Somehow the Russians still appeared to believe that economic interests override political imperatives in the capitalist world. And even with respect to economics, Moscow perhaps deluded itself in believing that the Japanese can be lured into massive capital investment in the Soviet Far East for little real financial return at a time when energy prices are at their lowest, without Moscow conceding anything of substance on territory.

The persistence of disputes over policy towards Japan at lower levels in the Soviet hierarchy; the absence of any bold initiative on a par with those taken towards Eastern and Western Europe; and the gap between diagnosis and policy prescription are partly the result of neglect of Japan at the very top. This may seem strange given the apparent activity of Foreign Minister Shevardnadze; but movement should not be confused with action. And, despite negotiations, there remain signs of Soviet neglect. At a roundtable convened by the Soviet Foreign Ministry (Minindel) journal *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn'* in 1988, head of the Minindel's South Asian Directorate, Fialkovskii, frankly acknowledged that the Asian Pacific Region (APR) still ranked low in Soviet foreign policy priorities. "In our foreign policy unfortunately there still exists an attitude towards Asia as a secondary sphere in comparison with the priority interests of our Western orientation", he added. This sense of neglect has even led to the change, publicly aired, that the Soviet Government has had "no conception of an Asian-Pacific Ocean policy."¹⁵

Indeed, then deputy head of the Central Committee International Department, Americanist Nikolai Shishlin, publicly acknowledged the criticism "that our contacts with Japan are unfortunately not developing actively enough."¹⁶ To which the more conservative elements, such as the leading Japan specialist at the Minindel, Lyudvig Chizhov — since September 1986 head of the Minindel Directorate of the Countries of the Pacific Ocean and South-East Asia — respond vigorously by listing all the tired initiatives for various collective schemes for the APR which anyone familiar with the Khrushchev era, let alone the Brezhnev era, will recognize as archaic.¹⁷

It may be that for the Soviet leadership the success in gradually easing relations with the Chinese to the point where inter-party ties were renewed eclipsed the importance of the Japanese. Certainly, in anticipation of Gorbachev's visit to Beijing on 15–18 May 1989, relations with China rather than Japan took top priority. And in Beijing Gorbachev had little positive to say with respect to Japan: "There is a dialogue under way with the Japanese side. We have developed a Soviet-Japanese mechanism to deal with problems with the peace treaty; it is functioning, and interesting ideas are emerging on this score."¹⁸ But there was

no sign that relations with Japan now lay at the top of the agenda. Indeed the leadership in Moscow may well have felt that with the neutralisation of Chinese enmity the balance of power in North-East Asia had shifted to US disadvantage. Yet this would have been to continue along the familiar lines of the "old thinking," that signally fails to connect the theoretical recognition that the international system has entered the new era of economic power to the practicalities of conducting relations with a more self-confident and assertive, if not defiant Japan.

How, then, is one to explain the lack of progress in Soviet relations with Japan? What is lacking here that one finds elsewhere, notably in Soviet relations with Western Europe? We have reviewed the sphere of prejudice in Soviet-Japanese relations; and we have noted that such prejudice continues to exert a decisive influence given the relative neglect accorded relations with Japan by the Soviet leadership. But all this, important though it is, is not enough. The Japanese are, of course, standing firm on the issue of territorial revision — the position adopted since 1956. So, in one sense they are the unreasonable party (whatever the legal status of their claim, which is doubtful). The West Germans accepted the loss of territory to the Russians in 1970–71. Yet the whole point about the new thinking in Soviet foreign policy as practised by Gorbachev with respect to armaments (Western Europe and the USA); diplomatic recognition (Israel, and possibly even South Africa); military intervention (Afghanistan); support for expansion by client states (Vietnam in Cambodia); and frontier disputes (notably China), is that Moscow has been willing, if not eager, to make critical concessions of substance to the aggrieved party in total disregard for past policy, precedent for the future, or ideological principle.

Thus to ignore precedent and appease Japan would not look amiss after concessions of a similar order elsewhere. And if Japan is as important as Gorbachev would have his audiences believe, surely it merits even greater concessions than to others? Yet in a sense all the examples of the new thinking in action also indicate the limits of the framework in which these innovations have been made. In theory Gorbachev's consciousness of Russia's technological backwardness and his recognition of the urgent need for economic reform at home have led to a novel emphasis on the importance of economics in Moscow's assessment of international relations. Yet those domestic reforms above all require peace on all fronts abroad and it is this that has produced a foreign policy curiously at odds with the immediate needs of economic reconstruction. The priority abroad has hitherto been not that of winning over foreign investors — and Japanese investment could make all the difference to the future prosperity of the Soviet Far East — but that of disarming Russia's adversaries. Where priorities have to be made, immediate requirements give way to the overriding supremacy of the security imperative. In practice Moscow's foreign policy — despite the primacy of *perestroika* at home — still assumes bombs are more important than bonds; that those with sufficient military capability to threaten the homeland merit greater concessions than those unable to do so. This attitude is echoed in a little noticed speech at Khabarovsk on 30 July 1986 in which Gorbachev points out how "difficult" it is "to handle the imperialists": "If we had been weak, nobody would have talked with us."¹⁹ It would not be unnatural for this also to be true of Russian attitudes to others. And the plain fact is that, apart perhaps from the potential of China, for the Russians the centre of gravity in world politics remains the Atlantic, not the Pacific; and the critical dimension of world politics remains strategic rather than economic, at least in the short to medium term; and who makes foreign policy for the long term?

In this respect Japan has not presented a real and sufficiently urgent threat to *perestroika* in Russia to merit the order concessions yielded elsewhere to appease the West Europeans and the Americans. In sum, the Russians — despite official doctrine — still see econo-

mic power in international relations as secondary. It is this that ultimately explains why there has so far been no fundamental reorientation of policy towards Japan. Should such a reorientation ultimately occur, we would have solid evidence of Moscow's recognition that the international system has, indeed, shifted from dependence upon military-political power to underlying economic forces.

NOTES

- 1 This claim — made plausible by the Arab oil 1973 — goes some way to explain the appearance of “international political economy” as the growth area in the study of international relations ; and the fact that this growth has been led from, though not entirely confined to, the United States is undoubtedly also a reflection of the relative decline of US economic power in the world.
- 2 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers : Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York : Random House 1987).
- 3 Speech to the congress, February 25, 1986 : M. S. Gorbachev, *Izbrannye rechi i stat'i*, Vol. 3 (Moscow : Politizdat, 1987), p. 245. This was also the first occasion Gorbachev referred to the change in Soviet military doctrine to one of “reasonable sufficiency”, though he defined what was reasonable relative to West possessed, rather than in absolute terms : *ibid.*, p. 248. The latter is now part of official policy, however ; witness the unilateral Soviet arms reduction Gorbachev announced to the United Nations on December 7, 1988 : *Izvestiia*, December 8, 1988.
- 4 This I have argued in *The Union and the Politics of Nuclear Weapons in Europe 1969–87* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1990). A summary can be found in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, (May 1988), pp. 38–42.
- 5 Speech, March 30, 1971 : *XXIV s'ezd Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuz : Stenograficheskii otchet*, Vol. 1 (Moscow : Politizdat, 1971), p. 38.
- 6 Gorbachev, *Izbrannye*, p. 193. Emphasis in the original text.
- 7 In the Soviet definition the Asian Pacific Region refers to the Western section of the Pacific Ocean Basin : Ivan Kovalenko, ed., *Tikhookeanskoe soobshchestvo : plany i perspektivy* (Moscow : Nauka, 1987), p. 15.
- 8 *Soviet News*, July 30, 1986.
- 9 K. Sarkisov, a head of department at the institute : “Vladivostokskie initsiativy : dva goda spustya”, *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*, (July, 1988), p. 17.
- 10 Rafik Shagi-Agzamovich Aliev, *Vneshnyaya politika Yaponii v 70-kh-nachale 80-kh godov : teoriia i praktika* (Moscow : Nauka, 1986), p. 122. I have no idea whether this Aliev is related to former Politburo member Makhmud Aliev ; he is certainly neither brother nor son.
- 11 A. Senatorov, “Ensuring Peace and Security in Asia and the Pacific”, *Far Eastern Affairs*, No. 5, (1987), p. 162.
- 12 Gilbert Rozman, “Moscow's Japan-Watchers in the First Year of the Gorbachev Era : The Struggle for Realism and Respect in Foreign Affairs”, *Pacific Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1988), pp. 256–75.
- 13 Quoted by Quinn-Judge (Moscow), “Glasnost's Asian frontier”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 4, 1988, p. 25.
- 14 *Izvestiia*, September 17, 1988.
- 15 “Gostinnyi dvor”, p. 142 and p. 147.

- 16 Moscow television, "Repercussions" (October 20, 1988), *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report : The Soviet Union* (October 27, 1988), p. 9.
- 17 "Gostinnyi dvor", pp. 147-8.
- 18 Press conference in Beijing, May 17, 1989 : *Visit of Mikhail Gorbachev to China, May 15-18, 1989 : Documents and Materials* (Moscow, 1989), p. 53.
- 19 Speech, 28 July 1986 : Gorbachev, *Izbrannye rechi i stat'i*, Vol. 4 (Moscow, Politizdat, 1987), pp. 9-34.