

# The Dance of the Bear and the Little Tigers: Soviet-North Korean Relations and the Opening to South Korea in the Gorbachev Era

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本稿はソ連の対南北両朝鮮外交政策を取り上げるものである。戦後ソ連と北朝鮮両国の関係は起伏の激しいものであったが、北朝鮮が中国との関係を強めソ連との関係が弱くなった時期においても、ソ連では関係維持の努力を続けた。ゴルバチョフ政権下でソ連の対両朝鮮政策は維持と修正の二要素を持つことになった。朝鮮半島の政治的軍事的立場を自己の力の下におく為に、北朝鮮との関係を強化し、同時に韓国に対しても重要な新機軸を打ち出したのである。本稿はゴルバチョフ政権下のソ連の対北朝鮮外交の主要な政策の概略を述べ、同時に1980年代のソ連の外交政策に見られる「新思考」に目を配りながらその重要性を分析するものである。

This paper focuses on the Soviet foreign policy toward the two Koreas. Throughout the postwar era, Soviet-North Korean relations rode a roller coaster, and while Moscow-Pyongyang ties took a back seat to relations with China, the Soviets worked hard to maintain them. Under Gorbachev, Soviet policy toward the two Koreas contained elements of both continuity and innovation. Relations with the North were cultivated, as a means of controlling the politico-military situation on the peninsula, while significant openings were made to the South. This paper attempts to outline some of the major patterns in Soviet policy and actions toward North Korea under Gorbachev, as well as to analyze their significance in light of the "new thinking" in 1980s Soviet foreign policy.

## Introduction

Analysts speak of East Asia as if it were one region, yet it contains great contrasts and disparities. Much of the region is considered part of the Third World, yet Japan is one of the most advanced of the advanced industrial countries (AICs). China, though developmentally part of the Third World, is a regional power in a strategic triangle with the United States and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union). Both North and South Korea are widely considered developing nations, yet the South is an East Asian Newly Industrializing Country (NIC) and member of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), while the North is an impoverished "Marxist hermit kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

No region of the world has experienced as dramatic economic and political change over the past quarter century as has East Asia, and no country in this region has seen as rapid a transformation as has South Korea. Devastated by the Korean War, 1950-1953, the country rapidly reconstructed through its own efforts and acquisition of U.S. aid in the 1950s and early 1960s. It then underwent an explosion of export-oriented growth from the mid-1960s through mid-1980s, an "economic miracle" that boosted the small nation of about forty millions to NIC status. Statistics speak eloquently of South Korea's progress: from 1965 to 1975, for example, it was the most productive economy in the world, as its annual industrial production growth rate averaged twenty-five percent, both its per capita Gross National Product (GNP) and actual GNP quadrupled, and its exports increased an average forty-five percent per year.<sup>2</sup> A fortuitous combination of factors allowed such growth: high levels of literacy and skills among the Korean people, long-range planning and guidance by the government bureaucracy, a large, unorganized labor

pool, a boost from U.S. military procurement during the Vietnam War, and a favorable world market for light manufactured exports.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1980s, political change began to catch up with economic transformation, and during 1987-1988 the country experienced a "political miracle" when the ruling military junta allowed free elections for the Presidency and the National Assembly.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, despite ups and downs, the South maintained a strong alliance with its military protector, the U.S., a firm economic relationship with Japan, and increasingly friendly contacts with China.

Across South Korea's northern frontier, another Korea anxiously watched all this unfold. In many ways unchanged since Kim Il Sung was installed as its leader by the Soviet occupation forces in 1945, North Korea has for over fifty-five years adhered to a strict Stalinist model of political and economic development. The core of this is a strong "vanguard" party and a cult of personality surrounding the Kim family, a centralized bureaucratic administration, long-term, centralized planning of the economy, collectivization of agriculture and emphasis on heavy industrialization, and an indigenous *juche* ideology that claims to be within the Marxist-Leninist tradition.<sup>5</sup> After rapid reconstruction in the 1950s, growth gradually fell off, foreign aid dropped, and Northern leaders began to realize that their country was not doing as well as the South. Despite a policy of self-reliance, the North became dependent on foreign oil, and partly as a result of heavy debt incurred in the 1970s, nearly defaulted in 1987.<sup>6</sup> By the early 1980s, the South's GDP was almost five times larger than the North's.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, North Korea constantly had to juggle its relationships with its northern socialist benefactors, China and the Soviet Union, in order to preserve its independence and lessen political pressures from both.

These changed conditions on the Korean peninsula necessitated new approaches by the great powers to the two Koreas. This paper focuses on the Soviet Union, which never quite knew what to do with the divided nation on its Far Eastern periphery.<sup>8</sup> From the end of the Korean War, the Korean peninsula was for Soviet leaders more a nuisance to be controlled than an opportunity to be exploited. Soviet attention to Korean affairs was as peripheral as its geographic relationship. This was due partly to the lack of Soviet academic or bureaucratic analysis or news media coverage of Korean affairs.<sup>9</sup> As such, the Soviets' primary impulse was to employ whatever means they possessed to head off East-West conflict there, while keeping as much influence as possible over the unpredictable Kim regime. Throughout the postwar era, Soviet-North Korean relations rode a roller coaster: at a low point in the late 1950s, much improved by the late 1960s, in a slump through most of the 1970s, and on a steady upswing during the last decade of Soviet rule. Moscow-Pyongyang ties took a back seat to relations with China, yet the Soviets worked hard to maintain them.

Under Gorbachev, Soviet policy toward the two Koreas displayed elements of both continuity with Brezhnev era policy and innovation. Relations with the North were cultivated, as a means of controlling the politico-military situation on the peninsula, while significant openings were made to the South. This paper outlines some of the major patterns in Soviet policy and actions toward North Korea under Gorbachev, as well as analyzes of their significance in light of the "new thinking" in Soviet foreign policy--and the new approach to the Korean peninsula--from 1985 to 1991. It concentrates on literature by Western scholars or Koreans writing in English.

While this may limit the exploration of Soviet and North Korean perspectives, it provides a comprehensive overview of the changing nature of Soviet policy toward the Korean peninsula in the 1980s. Soviet era sources are often spotty, and North Korean documents are generally little more than propaganda. The article begins with an examination of Soviet interests in Korea and the development of Soviet policy from the Korean War to the early 1990s.

## **Soviet Interests in Korea**

The Soviets' basic interests on the Korean peninsula were strategic. In territorial terms, they did not want a hostile government on their eastern border, and so consistently sought the maintenance of at least a friendly government there. Strategically, Korea was viewed as an arena of power conflict among the major powers (the USSR, China, Japan, and the U.S.), since it is situated where the first three nearly meet, the geopolitical intersection of Northeast Asia. Tactically, the peninsula's warm water ports beckoned to a Soviet navy restricted in East Asia to nearby Vladivostok, an only partially ice-free port. Politically, the Soviets sought to make the Northern regime cooperative by out-wooing the Chinese for its favors. Economically, a reunited Korea could have been a valuable Soviet trade partner, as well as a contributor to the economic development of the Russian Maritime Province and Siberia. While the division of the peninsula helped make North Korea dependent on Soviet trade and aid, the North benefited far more from the trade than did the Soviets.<sup>10</sup>

As they pursued these interests in Korea, Soviet leaders saw events on the Korean peninsula as secondary to Soviet-American relations. Since the U.S. regards South Korea as a major interest and stations 37,000 troops there, the Soviets were careful to do nothing to provoke the Americans in the South. They would have preferred that the U.S. troops leave, and gave "routine, low-keyed support" to North Korea's demands for withdrawal of American forces, but they did not view those forces as an immediate threat to their own East Asian territory.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they knew that Kim Il Sung's hopes for reunification of the country would not soon be realized due to complex East Asian security realities, i.e., that none of the major powers could impose a peninsular solution to the inter-Korean conflict, that neither of the Korean regimes was prepared to come to terms with the other, and that any form of reunification under Kim likely would lead to conflict with Japan and the U.S. and perhaps worsen relations with China. Accordingly, they shared an interest with those countries in preventing conflict between the two Koreas.<sup>12</sup> Cooperation with the other major powers on Korean security might also help forestall the strengthening of "a Sino-American-Japanese triangle," i.e., it could help prevent the other major powers from uniting against the Soviets in the Far East. Just as Soviet support for Kim did not extend to full endorsement of his militant reunification goals, it was generally "governed by the Sino-Soviet rivalry and the state of U.S.-Soviet relations."<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Korea fit into the larger scheme of Soviet interests in Asia. The Soviets had six general interests in Asia: 1) defense of the Soviet homeland, 2) integration of Asian interests into broader Soviet interests, and subordination of Asian matters to more global policy concerns, 3) defense of the "gains of the

revolution", i.e., friendly Marxist-Leninist regimes such as North Korea, Vietnam, and (at least until 1989) Afghanistan, 4) economic development of Siberia, with foreign capital, 5) expansion of Soviet influence in Asia through "both traditional and unconventional means", and 6) "acquisition of technology and industrial goods through trade with Asian countries."<sup>14</sup>

The most difficult problem the USSR faced in postwar Asia was the strained relationship and quasi-Cold War with the People's Republic of China (PRC), largely caused by stark power politics, "a rivalry for influence in Asia and in the Communist movement, as well as reciprocal military threats...."<sup>15</sup> The Soviets were constrained in pursuit of these larger interests to mostly military means, which they could not use without antagonizing China. Accordingly, they adopted a "negative" strategy of merely promising to defend North Korea, in case of attack. In the 1980s, they increased the use of diplomatic and trade tools to enhance their position.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Soviet interests in Korea overlapped more its general interests in Asia. First, territorial concern for the Korean border was part of the defense of the homeland. Secondly, concern with power conflicts on the peninsula, as well as the desire to avoid confrontation with the U.S., dovetailed with integration of Soviet interests and subordination of Asian concerns to more global interests. Thirdly, political control over Kim, along with outbidding the Chinese for influence in Pyongyang, was in line with the search for greater political influence throughout Asia. Finally, the potential use of Korean ports was useful for military planning, since the Soviet military played a key role in its East Asian strategy.

Two of the broad Soviet interests in Asia involving economic development proved decisive in moving Soviet thinking beyond its former fixation with North Korea to more balanced relations with both Koreas. These concerned the economic development of the Maritime Province and Siberia, and the acquisition of technology and industrial goods from other Asian countries. For these interests, trade and bilateral relations with South Korea became more useful than the largely political ties with the North.

## Soviet Policy Toward Korea Before Gorbachev

Until the 1980s, Soviet policy toward the Korean peninsula was concerned almost exclusively with North Korea. The Soviets never had an easy relationship with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (or DPRK). To begin with, the Soviets did not "trust or like" Kim Il Sung, North Korea's "Great Leader."<sup>17</sup> They thought he was at heart much closer to the PRC than the USSR, resented his opposition to Soviet policy in Indochina and Afghanistan, and winced at his occasional denunciations of Soviet "dominationism" (i.e., desire to guide East Asian geopolitics). They perceived Kim's foreign policy to be too independent and a possible source of confrontation with the U.S.<sup>18</sup> To the by-the-book Soviets, in short, Kim was the epitome of unpredictable and unreliable leadership.

Moreover, the Soviets disdained Kim's philosophy of *juche*, or self-reliance, which became something like a state religion in the North.<sup>19</sup> Kim presented *juche* thought as the completion of Marxism, giving it an equal status with Marxism-Leninism. Kim claimed that, as a revolutionary ideology, it would eventually replace Soviet-style Marxism, and be accepted throughout the world.<sup>20</sup> Cumings

suggests that *juče* can be thought of as an extreme form of corporatism, "the organization of a society into industrial and professional [organizations] for political purposes."<sup>21</sup> By seeking to elevate Korean ideas above foreign ones, and by placing self-reliance teachings at the center of the Korean intellectual universe, it became a kind of "national solipsism."<sup>22</sup> *Juče* may have been originally inspired in part by Maoism,<sup>23</sup> but was incorporated into official ideology in 1955-1956 partly as a way to declare North Korean independence from the Soviet Union at a time the latter was urging de-Stalinization on other communist countries. It was reaffirmed whenever the geopolitical winds shifted between Moscow and Beijing.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the exotic *juče* cult, in 1973 Kim began to promote his son Kim Jong Il (later called "the Dear Leader") as his successor, and this was made official in 1980.<sup>25</sup> The elder Kim's motive in setting up what became something akin to the first hereditary monarchy in a socialist country was in part to prevent following his death the very kind of de-Stalinization campaign (or even significant reform) that he resisted in the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> The Soviets were not impressed. Taken together, Kim Senior's personality cult, *juče*, and the paternal succession convinced the Soviets of North Korea's quirkiness and unmanageability.

Likewise, Kim was from the beginning suspicious of Moscow. He never got over the degree of control the Soviets exercised in his country between 1945 and 1950, and he chafed at Soviet use of advisors, military personnel, and KGB agents "to infiltrate governments they intend to dominate."<sup>27</sup> He thus tried to keep Soviet presence in the North to a minimum. He remembered that the Soviets chose not to risk war with America in order to save his regime in 1950, and that only Chinese intervention permitted his country's continued existence.<sup>28</sup> Faced by two socialist giants to his north, and unwilling to accommodate the South Korean-American alliance to his south, Kim generally felt his only choice in foreign policy was to be as independent as possible, while maintaining the friendship of both the Soviets and the Chinese. *Juče* was in part an ideological statement of this desire. Soviet and North Korean mutual suspicions reinforced each other, and solidified over time.

These suspicions naturally led to the North's policy of "equidistance," i.e., "siding with one or the other of its communist neighbors on particular issues but aligning [itself] with neither."<sup>29</sup> Pyongyang never moved so close to the Soviets that it alienated the Chinese,<sup>30</sup> or vice versa. In spite of the unfavorable Soviet image of North Korea, Kim's foreign policy goals were limited and specific: 1) to secure his borders against hostile attack, 2) to avoid a direct confrontation with either the USSR or PRC, 3) to "isolate South Korea from the international community," 4) to attain economic self-sufficiency, 5) to force the U.S. to withdraw its forces from the South, and 6) to reunify Korea on his terms.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, North Korea followed its own agenda in the Third World, promoting relations with a number of "progressive" and revolutionary regimes.

Though Kim distrusted the Soviets, he found them crucial to many of his goals. They served as a deterrent against U.S. military action directed at the North, often provided a ready source of advanced weaponry for DPRK armed forces, and gave substantial economic aid to Pyongyang. They also helped in "mobilizing the support of other socialist and nonaligned Third World countries to buttress the DPRK's irredentist claims" against South Korea. Finally, friendship with the Soviets gave the North "significant leverage vis-a-vis China, Japan, and the United States."<sup>32</sup>

Equally, the Soviets felt they needed North Korea. In line with their interests listed above, they saw the North as a buffer protecting Vladivostok. North Korea also had the potential to serve as a Soviet military base in the strategic rivalry with the U.S. in Asia, and could be a counter to an "Eastern NATO" (including South Korea) that the Soviets long believed the U.S. was trying to create in East Asia. Maintaining Soviet influence in the North from 1953 also helped prevent another outbreak of war on the Soviet eastern frontier. The Soviets believed either defeat or victory for the DPRK in a second Korean War could be disastrous for Soviet interests in Asia.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, the Soviets gradually took notice of the nation to the south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas. Although they officially supported DPRK unification efforts, their attitude toward the Republic of Korea (ROK) gradually warmed over the years. As early as 1972, for example, they referred to the existence of two Korean states, an idea which was anathema to the DPRK. From time to time, they compared the Korean division to that of Germany, which was underlined by the visit to the North by East German leader Erich Honnecker in 1977. Honnecker's public remarks emphasized the need for global detente and for maintenance of close ties with the Soviet Union. Kim replied to Honnecker by suggesting Germany and Korea were historically dissimilar.<sup>34</sup>

The Soviets moved beyond mere open-mindedness to strictly limited relations with South Korea in the 1970s. In 1973, three South Koreans were allowed into the Soviet Union for, respectively, travel, a convention, and a sports competition. Other South Korean groups and individuals were admitted in subsequent years, partly to avoid compromising Soviet desirability as a location for international conventions. The Soviet Union and South Korea set up an indirect telephone link in 1979. Nevertheless, Soviet citizens were not allowed to visit the South until 1982, when TASS and Ministry of Culture officials attended an international conference in Seoul.<sup>35</sup>

## The Course of Soviet-North Korean Relations, 1953-1985

Soviet-North Korean relations experienced major swings from the Korean War to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Kim desperately needed good relations with both of his large communist neighbors to gain help in rebuilding his country after the devastation of the Korean conflict. However, the development of the Sino-Soviet dispute in the late 1950s made a shambles of his efforts to construct a genuine foreign policy of friendly "equidistance" between the USSR and PRC.<sup>36</sup> In practice, the North Koreans were always closer to one or the other of the two countries. At first, the North Koreans had more grievances against the Soviets than against the Chinese. The Koreans resented what they believed were big-power Soviet attempts to dominate their small country, and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's pushing of de-Stalinization campaigns in other communist countries. They were also upset about the Soviet practice of buying North Korean goods cheaply, while selling Soviet goods dearly.<sup>37</sup> Some reports even suggest that the Soviets may have tried to overthrow Kim in the mid-1950s as a way to rein in Korean independence.<sup>38</sup>

Relations between the USSR and DPRK reached a low point in 1963-1964.<sup>39</sup> The immediate problem was a dispute over policy toward the U.S. Khrushchev

wanted to improve bilateral ties with America, whereas the North Koreans continued to brand the U.S. an imperialist power. The Soviet leader therefore cut off military and economic aid to the DPRK in 1962 in an effort to get Kim to go along with the Soviet foreign policy line.<sup>40</sup> In fact, anti-Americanism has always been an important component of the North's foreign policy, which has consistently "tilted to either the USSR or the PRC, whichever one took a more militant policy toward the United States."<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, the North moved steadily closer to China, without openly breaking with the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup> The North Koreans have always felt greater cultural affinity and more personal familiarity with the Chinese than with the Russians. This is due in part to Kim's experiences as a guerrilla fighting the Japanese in Manchuria and the North during the 1930s and 1940s. It also has to do with Chinese intervention in the Korean War, which led Kim to characterize Sino-North Korean relations as a "militant friendship cemented in blood." (The Chinese often said that the two countries were as close as "lips and teeth.") Moreover, the Chinese were quite generous to the North Koreans in trade, aid, and military sales, despite the limitations of their developing economy. Diplomatically, they provided a lever against the Soviets, and consistently supported DPRK positions on reunification of Korea.<sup>43</sup>

By the late 1960s, partly as a result of China's instability during the Cultural Revolution<sup>44</sup> and a series of armed Sino-Soviet border clashes, North Korea began cultivating better relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup> After Khrushchev's ouster, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin visited Pyongyang in 1965. Kim exchanged support for the Soviet position against American bombing in Vietnam for a range of the latest Soviet military hardware: surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), advanced electronic equipment, and up-to-date interceptor aircraft.<sup>46</sup>

Soviet-North Korean relations began to deteriorate after 1968, reaching another low point in 1973. As in the early 1960s, policy toward America provided the flashpoint. The Soviets were upset about North Korea's seizure of a U.S. Navy surveillance ship, the *Pueblo*, in 1968, and its shooting down of a U.S. reconnaissance airplane the next year. They saw both incidents as evidence of Kim's recklessness and were concerned that the North could involve the Soviet Union in an unwanted confrontation with the U.S. By the early 1970s, the Soviets refused to send modern equipment to the DPRK.<sup>47</sup> For their part, the North Koreans were upset with the Kremlin for mentioning the ROK by name and allowing South Koreans into the Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup>

Again the North Koreans returned to the Chinese, and again the change in direction began with an official visit. Chinese Premier Zhou En-lai went to Pyongyang in 1970, offering restored and increased military and economic aid. As a result of the visit, Sino-North Korean trade expanded rapidly throughout the 1970s. Soviet-North Korean relations reached another flashpoint in 1976, when North Koreans killed two U.S. military officers at the truce village of Panmunjom, located in the DMZ. Once more, the Soviets feared being dragged into a conflict with the U.S., and the Kremlin cut off further loans to Pyongyang, forcing the North Koreans to reschedule debts with Western banks the same year. The USSR-DPRK dispute began to resemble the long-running Moscow-Beijing fight. Sino-North Korean relations did not deteriorate, and despite the continuing Sino-Soviet hostility during

the decade, the Moscow-Beijing-Pyongyang triangle was temporarily quiescent, with the Beijing-Pyongyang spoke remaining strongest.<sup>49</sup>

However, the triangle was still subject to big shifts, and conflict soon developed between North Korea and China. As with previous dustups with the Soviets, the issue was policy toward the U.S. In 1979, Beijing signed a peace and friendship treaty with Japan, America's ally, and finally normalized diplomatic relations with Washington. Within two months of sealing the relationship with the U.S., Chinese forces invaded Vietnam, a Soviet client. North Korea condemned the attack with stony silence.<sup>50</sup> Pyongyang and Moscow began moving closer in 1980, carefully laying the groundwork for a rapprochement.<sup>51</sup> Strengthened Moscow-Pyongyang ties paralleled reaffirmation in 1981 of the alliance between the U.S. and South Korean leaders, Ronald Reagan and Chun Doo Hwan.<sup>52</sup> Still, both Soviets and North Koreans moved warily. North Korea lent support to the Soviet position on the shoot-down of (South) Korean Airlines (KAL) Flight 007 in 1983 only after the Soviets announced they would not participate in an International Parliamentary Union (IPU) conference that was to be held in Seoul.<sup>53</sup> Soviet commentators reciprocated by stating the DPRK was not responsible for the bombing/assassination of South Korean cabinet ministers in Rangoon, Burma (Yangon, Myanmar) a month later.<sup>54</sup>

The two nations seemed to have worked out their differences by 1984. Each side was more accommodating of the other in public gestures. The most conspicuous evidence of improved relations was Kim's visit to Moscow in May 1984, his first in twenty-three years.<sup>55</sup> As a result of the visit, Kim received Soviet support for his position on Korean reunification and for the succession of his son.<sup>56</sup> When Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa returned the visit later that year, the Soviets resumed provision of economic aid and sophisticated military equipment to the North. This was apparently in return for the DPRK's adherence to "proletarian internationalism," i.e., following the Soviet line on arms control, East Asian security, Cambodia, Afghanistan, and other key Kremlin policies.<sup>57</sup> In essence, the Soviets reasserted themselves as the dominant foreign influence in Pyongyang, and they again decided to take advantage of North Korea's geography to enhance their own strategic position vis-a-vis the U.S. These moves put them in a better position both to restrain Kim's recklessness and "prevent the North from drifting toward better relations with the United States and Japan under Chinese tutelage...."<sup>58</sup>

## **Soviet Policy Toward Korea Under Gorbachev**

As Mikhail Gorbachev launched his government in 1985, he was determined to pursue a number of new initiatives in foreign policy. The mid-1980s seemed opportune for a change of approach to East Asia because: 1) the nuclear arms race in Asia was a much smaller affair than in Europe, 2) the "intersystems confrontation" (communism vs. capitalism) was much less tense in East Asia than in Europe, and 3) the mechanism of economic integration had not yet crystalized, unlike the European Community (EC) and COMECON.<sup>59</sup>

The outlines of Gorbachev's approach to East Asia generally, and to the Koreans in particular, did not emerge until his Asian affairs speech at Vladivostok in July, 1986. The speech could be seen as an attempt to "redefine in a more positive

manner the [previously] dreary and negative approach to the area," or as an effort, "at no significant cost to the USSR," to maintain its political position in a region where it had not much influence, or as publicity for policies that "had been parts of the Soviet package for some time."<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, by promising to remove Soviet troops from the Sino-Soviet border and Afghanistan,<sup>61</sup> Gorbachev pushed relations with China off dead center and suggested that the Soviet Union intended to be a serious and cooperative player in Asia. Chinese leaders were sufficiently convinced of Soviet sincerity to agree in 1989 to a summit--which, unfortunately for both parties, was held during the Tiananmen Square protests.

Gorbachev's Asian policies evolved in an incremental fashion, and they indicated two opposed tendencies: a search for "a new image of dynamism, flexibility and reasonableness," and a "felt need to try to preserve as much as possible the military and other geopolitical advantages" obtained under Brezhnev.<sup>62</sup> Also, his foreign policy approach was a direct extension of his domestic reform program. Gorbachev felt he "urgently need[ed] a respite from external pressures" to carry out his *perestroika* (restructuring) program.<sup>63</sup> Overall, he pursued five main objectives in Asia: 1) maintenance of close ties with friendly states, 2) acceleration of the political rapprochement with China, 3) pursuit of "broader ties" with non-communist countries of East Asia, 4) de-emphasis of military approaches, and 5) challenges to "American preeminence" in the area.<sup>64</sup> Relations with North Korea fit under the first objective, while establishing ties with the South fell under the third objective. Moreover, better Soviet-North Korean relations could subtly augment the second objective by encouraging "China to return to the socialist fold or become increasingly isolated in Asia."<sup>65</sup>

Conspicuously absent from Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech was any mention of security questions in Asia, including the inter-Korean situation.<sup>66</sup> Actually, Gorbachev was playing a double game, trying to have "the best of both Koreas." First, he continued to build a close relationship with North Korea: he supplied the DPRK with ever newer military hardware (including SU-25 ground attack aircraft, MIG-23s, and SA-5 SAM missiles), Soviet ships visited North Korean ports, and Soviet military aircraft flew over the North's airspace.<sup>67</sup> Pyongyang was grateful to Gorbachev for continuing the late Brezhnev-through-Chernenko policy of publicly supporting Kim Jong Il's succession and DPRK positions on inter-Korean matters.<sup>68</sup> In return, North Korea moderated its fiercely independent foreign policy and followed the Gorbachev line,<sup>69</sup> especially regarding the U.S.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev tried to cultivate a fuller relationship with South Korea. Though the North boycotted the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, the Soviets (and Chinese) attended. While the Olympians were contending in September, 1988, Gorbachev gave another well-noticed speech at Krasnoyarsk. This time, he went beyond appeals to China and called for expanded economic ties with the South. His government made no effort to stop establishment of relations between the ROK and several Eastern European states. Subsequently, the Soviets and South Koreans agreed to open trade offices in each other's capitals. In return, ROK President Roh Tae Woo inaugurated more flexible trade and negotiation policies toward both the Soviet Union and North Korea.<sup>70</sup>

Changes in Soviet policy toward the two Koreas came rapidly during Gorbachev's tenure. A review of the major events of the period illuminates the dizzying pace at which things changed:

### 1985

Five months after Gorbachev assumed power, Soviet First Deputy Premier Geydar Aliyev went to Pyongyang. His visit coincided with the first North Korean port call by Soviet naval vessels since the early 1960s, which symbolized efforts to revive a 24-year-old alliance between the two countries. The Soviets then began deliveries of MIG-23s, and received overflight rights as a *quid pro quo*. The MIG's served as a partial counter to F-15s and F-16s that America sold to the South. The Soviets also started providing new SAMs and SCUD ground-to-ground missiles. Closer USSR-DPRK military ties were seen as a setback for Beijing, since the Chinese had been trying to convince Kim not to rely on the Soviets.<sup>71</sup>

Under Soviet prodding, in 1985 the North was briefly more conciliatory toward the South on reunification issues. For the first time since World War II, the two Koreas arranged small exchanges of performing artists, reporters, and families divided by the Korean War. Meanwhile, ROK President Chun invited Kim Il Sung to visit him in Seoul, and stated his willingness to travel to Pyongyang.<sup>72</sup>

While Gorbachev worked to solidify ties with North Korea, he also began building a better relationship with China. The Soviets signed a trade agreement, the first in several years, with Chinese Vice Premier Yao Yi-lin in Moscow. Both countries began referring to each other as "socialist" countries for the first time since the Cultural Revolution. Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiao-ping suggested his "three obstacles" to better relations (Soviet troops on the common border, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia) could be settled piecemeal. Also, Gorbachev went out of his way to promote the need for improved relations with China.<sup>73</sup>

### 1986

The prospect of improved relations, especially with China but also with other countries in the region, was the highlight of Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech in July. East Asian reaction was generally positive. Deng responded cautiously but favorably to the speech, and Sino-Soviet trade and political ties continued to expand. Kim, while visiting Moscow again, endorsed Gorbachev's Asian initiatives, as well as the Soviet leader's nuclear arms proposals advanced at the Reykjavik summit with Reagan. In return, Gorbachev again affirmed Soviet support for the North's reunification efforts.<sup>74</sup>

One reason Kim moved closer to the Soviets was his growing dispute with the Chinese over the latter's improved ties with South Korea. The North was particularly upset that China decided to participate in the Asian Games, held in Seoul.<sup>75</sup> *Juche* notwithstanding, the North Koreans entered into a five-year trade and economic cooperation pact negotiated between the North's Premier Kang Song-san and Soviet Premier Nikolai Ryzhokov at the end of 1985. The Soviets subsequently made plans to upgrade several old North Korean industrial plants. The promised MIGs and SAMs also began arriving. Further, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze visited Pyongyang at the beginning of the year.<sup>76</sup>

The closer the North moved to the USSR in 1986, the farther it seemed to move away from dialogue with the South. Using the annual joint U.S.-ROK "Team Spirit" military exercise as an excuse, the DPRK suspended all inter-Korean talks after intermittent discussion early in the year. The North also rejected calls by U.S. and Southern commanders for military talks. North Korea did meet with representatives from the South in Lausanne, Switzerland to discuss the 1988 Olympics, but only to demand to be a full cohost of the Games.<sup>77</sup>

### 1987

If in 1986 the Soviets promised much to China, in 1987 they began to deliver. The Chinese now began to accept Gorbachev's commitment to reform and desire for peaceful relations as genuine. Troops started withdrawing from Mongolia, and the Soviets accepted the Chinese position on a lingering border dispute. Sino-Soviet trade grew even more rapidly. More significantly, Gorbachev announced on the anniversary of the Vladivostok speech that he wanted to dismantle the SS-20 intermediate range nuclear missiles aimed at the PRC.<sup>78</sup>

All the while, Soviet and Chinese attitudes seemed to converge on treatment of North Korea. Gorbachev had been quietly telling Kim that he needed to implement a Korean version of *perestroika*. When Kim went to Beijing that year, Chinese leaders said virtually the same thing--and have continued to do so to the present.<sup>79</sup> Of course, the Chinese were also concerned that Kim was drifting too close to Moscow, and Kim tried to assure them that his "equidistance" policy was still operative.

The North Koreans were more active in the arena of inter-Korean dialogue, making numerous proposals for talks on everything from further exchanges to withdrawing forces from near the DMZ. However, they again broke off all discussion over the familiar issue of the "Team Spirit" exercises. One bright spot in the North's foreign relations occurred when the U.S. resumed informal diplomatic contacts with the DPRK.<sup>80</sup>

The South seemed to have much more luck with both of the communist giants in 1987. In anticipation of the 1988 Olympics, the ROK expanded both informal relations and economic ties with not only China and the USSR, but Eastern European countries as well. Hungary became the first communist country to exchange trade representatives with Seoul. Trade with China and the Soviet Union reached the \$2 billion and \$300 million levels, respectively.<sup>81</sup>

### 1988

The much anticipated Seoul Olympics were all that the South Koreans had hoped for, and much more. Not only were the international Games a dazzling display of modern capitalist Korean nationhood, but an opportunity for the South Korean elite to work with its political opposition and begin the process of democratization. The Olympics also "provided a timely boost" for the South's "Northern Policy" of pursuing better relations with communist nations. South Korea welcomed Olympic teams from most communist countries, exchanged trade offices with Yugoslavia, and agreed on exchanges of official liaison offices with both China and the Soviet Union.<sup>82</sup> Hungary became the first communist country to establish full diplomatic relations with the ROK, apparently with the Kremlin's approval.<sup>83</sup>

The Soviets began to discuss with the South Koreans the possibility of investment in Siberian development projects.<sup>84</sup> Valdimir Golanov, deputy chairman of the Soviet Chamber of Commerce and Industry, visited Seoul at the invitation of the South Korean Trade Promotion Corporation. At Krasnoyarsk, Gorbachev stated that he wanted genuine economic relations with the South.<sup>85</sup>

North Korea could only grumble about the growing Soviet-South Korean concord. Because of her increased reliance on Soviet aid since the early 1980s, she had little leverage--and nowhere to turn, since China was expanding links with the South at an even faster pace. What was worse, the North's Soviet benefactors stepped up their criticism of the closed North Korean economy, most notably in the comments of Mikhail Vanichev, Soviet Minister of Machinery Industries, indicating that the North's enterprises were poorly managed, and produced low quality goods in insufficient quantities.<sup>86</sup>

North Korea felt abandoned by Moscow for the glitter of Seoul. After failing in a bid to become an equal co-host,<sup>87</sup> Pyongyang boycotted the Olympics, but was virtually alone in doing so. Kim Il Sung then lamely tried to upstage the Olympics with a lavish celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the DPRK. In a replay of the previous year's inter-Korean dialogue, the North made a number of proposals for reunification. Roh, in a dramatic appearance before the United Nations General Assembly, made several proposals of his own concerning exchanges and further talks. Kim at first rejected Roh's ideas, but later said he was willing to discuss them.<sup>88</sup> North Korea was clearly boxed in on all sides.

All year, the South's triumph was the North's humiliation. In 1988, Soviet and Chinese interests in the two Koreas for the first time began to parallel each other. Throughout the 1980s, China was concerned that the Soviets, by giving modern military hardware to the North, were "playing with fire" and "encouraging" Kim to move against South Korea. Accordingly, in a curious switch of Korean War alignments, the PRC had become along with the U.S. the South's "security guarantor."<sup>89</sup> Moreover, friction between Beijing and Pyongyang resulted from issues that paralleled those that had caused problems between Moscow and Pyongyang, i.e., the planned succession of Kim Jong Il, the North's general bellicosity as a possible threat to Chinese interests in cultivating better ties with capitalist countries, and the economic benefits gained by China through its dealings with Seoul.<sup>90</sup>

In 1988, both China and the Soviet Union pressured North Korea to behave itself during the Olympics by refraining from terrorism or any activities that might upset the sports events. The U.S. formally thanked the Soviets for their role in ensuring the success of the Games.<sup>91</sup> Further, there were hints that both China and the Soviet Union were losing patience with their ally's lack of movement in dealing with the South, and that both would begin dealing with the two Koreas in an even-handed manner.<sup>92</sup> Some U.S. analysts even believed there was an "implicit understanding" between Beijing and Moscow not to try to obtain short-term gains in Pyongyang to the detriment of each other.<sup>93</sup>

## 1989

Gorbachev's summit with Deng in May 1989 much improved the Sino-Soviet relationship. His refusal to visit the North on the way home, coupled with forthright

remarks in Beijing on the need for relations with the South, infuriated Pyongyang. South Korean opposition leader Kim Young Sam's trip to Moscow helped pave the way for a Soviet-South Korean summit.<sup>94</sup>

South Korea agreed with both China and the Soviet Union to exchanges of consular and trade offices. China and the South decided to establish direct air links between Seoul and Beijing and Shanghai.<sup>95</sup> The U.S. began consultations with the Soviets over ways to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula, and the Soviets dropped their previous insistence on North Korean preconditions for North-South negotiations, i.e., they no longer demanded direct U.S. participation in the talks or prior withdrawal of U.S. troops. This could have led to talks on a North-South peace treaty, something long sought by both Washington and Seoul, but the U.S. missed the opportunity to exploit the growing rifts in the Communist camp.<sup>96</sup>

### **1990-1991**

This was a time of fulfillment for South Korea, as the Soviets agreed to normalization of relations. Gorbachev met Roh Tae Woo, who had assumed the helm in Seoul a few months before the Olympics, in San Francisco in June. While no concrete agreements were reached, the meeting marked a clear shift away from the special relationship with Pyongyang. Even more important than this summit, in September Schevardnadze suddenly announced that Moscow would normalize relations with Seoul in January 1991. The North Koreans publicly scolded Schevardnadze when he visited Pyongyang, and in response the Foreign Minister moved up the date to September 30, 1990.<sup>97</sup>

The Moscow-Seoul economic and political relationship blossomed in the last year of the Soviet era. Seoul extended a large loan to the Soviets. Budding ties encouraged the possibility of North-South Korean détente and a multi-party treaty to end the Cold War standoff on the peninsula.

### **Russia's Korea policy, 1992-present**

However, this was not to be. In 1990, the Soviet Union informed Pyongyang that they would suspend barter trade with the North. China later followed basically the same policy.<sup>98</sup> Henceforth, all trade would have to be conducted in hard currency. Since the DPRK had no currency<sup>99</sup> reserves to draw on, it was effectively unable to pay its bills. Realizing the North's difficult payments situation, the Soviet government delayed implementation of the new policy until 1992. Even so, Soviet-North Korean trade virtually dried up by the end of the Soviet period. This was the beginning of North Korea's economic catastrophe of the 1990s. North Korea began to pull inward, and had no immediate interest in détente with either Washington or Seoul.<sup>100</sup> It did negotiate the Basic Agreement on improved relations with Seoul in 1992, but follow-up talks stalled the next year as North Korean nuclear weapons development took center stage, and the nuclear crisis of 1994 derailed North-South negotiations altogether. The document remained essentially a dead letter until revived at the inter-Korean summit of 2000.<sup>101</sup> One can only speculate about the possible impacts of Soviet participation on the Korean peninsula had the Union continued beyond 1991.

The Russian Republic maintained contacts with North Korea, hoping to rebuild a relationship that was badly damaged by Moscow's recognition of the ROK

in 1990, and to regain its status as preeminent outsider in Pyongyang. The Russians renewed the 1961 treaty of friendship and mutual assistance, while agreeing to a treaty on basic relations with the ROK in 1992. Roh and Russian president Boris Yeltsin held a summit the same year, and agreed on a range of joint infrastructure projects in Russia.<sup>102</sup> During the 1994 nuclear crisis, Russia proposed an international conference to deal with North Korean nuclear issues, but the other major parties in the conflict rejected the idea. Nevertheless, Russia did co-sponsor a resolution calling on Pyongyang to honor international non-proliferation agreements, and it agreed to support the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the mechanism that helped to end the crisis.<sup>103</sup> However, limited Soviet resources and a shrinking military meant Russia had few cards to play in inter-Korean relations.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, the Moscow-Seoul tie became ever stronger, as Soviet desires for two-way cooperation settled into efforts to gain South Korean aid and investment.

## The Future

What does the development of Soviet policy toward Korea under Gorbachev portend for the future of Russia's ties with the two Koreas? One can sketch at least six scenarios of possible Russo-Korean futures: 1) break off of Russo-North Korean ties, 2) reestablishment of North Korean foreign policy independence, 3) reestablishment of equidistance, 4) maintenance of the status quo, 5) steady building of Russian-South Korean relations, and 6) complete transformation of Russia's Korean peninsula policy. Break off is the least likely of these scenarios because of North Korea's need for a friendly counter to the Washington-Tokyo-Seoul triangle.

The most likely scenario is probably steady building of relations with South Korea. There are two reasons. First, the strong Soviet-North Korean ties of the 1980s broke the pattern of North Korea's oscillation between its two communist neighbors, and Russia retains a residual of good will. Secondly, the Russians (and Chinese) hope to benefit from economic ties with the South, and so will work hard to improve economic contacts with this rising economic power. Better relations also weaken the chances for strengthening of the Japan-America alliance beyond the Defense Guidelines of 1997. After serious reform efforts begin in the North, such relations may encourage U.S. withdrawal from the peninsula, indirectly bolster friendlier Sino-Russian relations, and lessen the chances of a second Korean War. The Russians want to keep some degree of North Korean dependence on them. So, as much as they desire to go faster, they have to move cautiously on such things as full normalization of relations with the South or a "Two Germanies" approach to the Koreas. For all the talk about an even-handed approach to the two Koreas, Moscow's policy toward the South was largely derivative of its policies toward Pyongyang and Washington.<sup>105</sup>

## Discussion

Much in Soviet policy toward Korea changed during the 1980s. As with so many areas of Soviet foreign policy, these breathtaking changes could not have happened before Gorbachev came to power. In the Brezhnev era, who could have

dreamed that within six years the Soviets would not only effect a rapprochement with China, the Brezhnev era nemesis, but simultaneously drive North Korea out of its equidistance policy into subservience to Soviet foreign policy objectives? Who would have thought the Communists in Moscow could erect a friendly trade and political relationship with South Korea, an erstwhile "imperialist puppet" of the U.S. turned East Asian economic juggernaut? Indeed, one could not imagine the cautious Brezhnev sending his most modern military equipment to Pyongyang, or publicly calling for better economic links with Seoul.

To some extent, though, many of these outcomes were actually extensions of late Brezhnev era trends. The Soviets quietly hoped to restore ties with China even before Mao's death in 1976. They began quietly building a closer relationship with the DPRK in 1980, and had their first little-noticed contacts with the ROK during the 1970s. Gorbachev changed only the pace, not the direction, of Soviet foreign policy toward the two Koreas. It was that quickened pace, accompanied by dazzling initiatives, that marked 1980s Soviet policy toward Korea.

Soviet policy toward North and South Korea in the 1980s illustrated overall trends of Soviet foreign policy generally, and Gorbachev's foreign policy specifically. Breslauer's typology is a useful tool for evaluating Soviet policy for Korea. He posits four roles of Soviet foreign policy in the international system: 1) superpower, 2) continental power, 3) competitive global power, and 4) leader of world communist movement. As a superpower, the Soviet Union sought to avoid a confrontation with the U.S. on the Korean peninsula, and in the 1980s sought to lower tensions by making North Korea dependent on it, while opening channels to South Korea. A great Asian continental power, the USSR sought friendly and relatively subservient states like North Korea on its borders. By promoting expanded inter-Korean dialogue, it hoped to prevent a conflict that might spill over into the Soviet Far East.

The Soviet Union competed globally with the U.S. for influence in the Third World. Gorbachev hoped to wean South Korea away from its tight alliance with the U.S., and thereby drive it into neutrality. As the Moscow-Seoul tie developed, Soviet hopes of economic benefits grew. As the leader of international Communism, the Soviet Union wanted to rein in Kim Il Sung's personality cult, curb the heterodox *juche* idea, and promote reform in the North--though it was willing to compromise on the Kim family succession issue.<sup>106</sup> Soviet leaders knew that it would be increasingly difficult for a Soviet Union governed by *perestroika* and "new thinking" in foreign policy to unconditionally support the hidebound Stalinist regime in Pyongyang. As long as the Soviets maintained preeminent competitive influence in the North, they pushed Kim and his successors to reform the Korean brand of Communism.

Breslauer also lists four tactics the Soviets use in pursuit of their global roles: 1) confrontation, 2) competition, 3) collaboration, and 4) avoidance.<sup>107</sup> In Korea, the Soviets under Gorbachev employed a mix of competition and collaboration. They competed with the Chinese for influence in Pyongyang, and in the 1980s competed slightly with the Americans for influence in Seoul. In the end, they collaborated with both the Chinese and Americans to restrain the North during the Olympics and to start another North-South dialogue. Above all, the Soviets tried to avoid any situation that could result in East-West confrontation in Korea.

Under Gorbachev, foreign policy roles and tactics were put into the service of new goals. Hough suggests that Gorbachev period Soviet leadership had a distinctly different foreign policy agenda from the Brezhnev group. Instead of mere detente with the West, it sought "entente" or "a warm cooperative relationship" with non-communist states. In place of an exclusively bipolar approach to world affairs, the Soviets pursued a more multi-polar world in which power would be diffused. Hough says the Soviets gave up their interest in lessening the U.S. presence in Europe or Japan, and that Gorbachev needed Western technology to overcome Soviet backwardness, which was hurting Soviet defenses.<sup>108</sup> Thus, Soviet foreign policy was a "continuation of domestic policy." Simultaneously getting North Korea under control and creating an opening to South Korea facilitated a foreign policy geared toward ententist, multi-polar approaches. As a developing country on the verge of joining the club of developed nations, the ROK was perhaps the only small Third World country with the potential to become a regional power. Soviet ententist policy naturally sought to gain South Korean technology and political economic cooperation in East Asia; Soviet multi-polar thinking sought to establish better ties with Seoul to solve the inter-Korean problem directly, encourage U.S. disengagement from East Asia, and create leverage on China and Japan.

Gorbachev's approach to Korea also illustrated his much-promoted "new political thinking" in foreign policy. Checkel notes that under the Soviet leadership, the Soviets relied on economic initiatives to achieve a more "cost-effective" foreign policy. Foreign policy now posited a world view starting with "objective realities" and "ideological pragmatism." Gorbachev reorganized the foreign policy decision making apparatus, creating new institutional divisions and recruiting academics for advice. Checkel says Gorbachev wanted: 1) to break the military monopoly on national security information and expertise, 2) stimulate the generation of new ideas and policy options, and 3) avoid another Afghanistan-like entanglement.<sup>109</sup> The Vladivostok and Krasnoyarsk speeches were the clearest indications of Gorbachev's new thinking: bold repackaging of existing policy along with modest departures, designed to foster real give-and-take with East Asia. The new thinking, as limited as it was in Asia, nonetheless brought real changes to Soviet foreign policy, especially toward China and South Korea.

Such new thinking and policy changes were designed to serve Gorbachev's *perestroika* program. Before taking office, Gorbachev understood the degree of inter-related, systemic domestic stagnation and foreign frustration facing the Soviets in the late Brezhnev era. Sestanovich describes these adjustments as necessary, though one may disagree with his characterization of them as "a diplomacy of decline." He notes that, in 1985, there were no strong advocates for either optimism or complacency about the Brezhnev course of foreign policy. There arose a de-emphasis of ideology, a more accommodating assessment of outside threats, a stronger stress on common global interests, a limit on commitments of resources, a more conciliatory approach to negotiations, and "an arms length attitude" to many former friends.<sup>110</sup> Like Checkel, Sestanovich illustrates the new orientation that Gorbachev's team brought to Soviet foreign policy, an orientation that accounted for the changed approaches to both South and North Korea.

At least in dealing with other major powers, adds Sestanovich, the Soviets followed two styles, dubbed "Reykjavik" and "Geneva," derived from the first two

summits between Gorbachev and U.S. President Ronald Reagan. The Reykjavik style was marked by "diplomatic brinksmanship" that forced the U.S. to choose between a big breakthrough or a "tense stalemate," whereas the Geneva style involved

a more conciliatory, business-as-usual style, in which differences are fudged and big disagreements are put to one side for the sake of incremental progress.<sup>111</sup>

He also indicates that Soviet handling of China is "the supreme example of the incremental Geneva style,"<sup>112</sup> though the surprising Vladivostok speech may have been a variation of the Reykjavik style. These approaches can be seen in the Soviet approaches to the two Koreas. Soviet policy toward the Koreas can be seen in this light, i.e., it steadily built up relations with North Korea, while taking small, incremental steps to establish a relationship with the South. Alternately, one may see it as similar to Soviet handling of the two Germanies: support for East Germany almost until it collapsed, accompanied by steadily warming ties with Bonn.

Gorbachev's "new thinking" also altered Soviet dealings with the Third World. Mendras notes that the Soviets reassessed their policy toward the Third World, but did not disengage from it. The Soviets moved away from some "progressive" (i.e., pro-Soviet) countries, but they consolidated relations with mainstream Third World states, in line with their long-term interests in each country. They pursued a "new dynamism" that involved dealing with regional powers, downplaying ideology in favor of "ideological independence," and minimizing the socialism/ capitalism dichotomy. Mendras states that Moscow's wooing of North Korea was part of the process of developing ties with countries formerly neglected, and that the Soviets disclaimed responsibility for the North's internal problems.<sup>113</sup> That is not quite correct, in light of the considerable efforts expended on the North's behalf by the Soviets during the 1940s, mid-1950s, and late 1960s, and Soviet efforts to control North Korean foreign policy behavior. However, to the extent that the Soviets began to deal with South Korea as a regional economic and political actor, and at the same time de-emphasized ideological solutions to inter-Korean problems, their approach did undergo a significant shift.

Despite Gorbachev's commendable efforts to create "new thinking" in foreign policy, the Soviet Union's internal political problems overwhelmed any positive results gained from its international dealings. It was often said that Gorbachev and *perestroika* were much more popular abroad than at home. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic catastrophe that laid Russia low during the 1990s vitiated the hard work to reconstruct international relations during the 1980s. As a result, today Russia is at best a marginal geopolitical player in Asia. Continuation of the Soviet Union, or Russian retention of Soviet era military and political strength, probably would have facilitated a smoother path to détente on the Korean peninsula and the much hoped-for "soft landing" of North Korea, i.e., gradual Chinese-style internal reform and opening to the outside world. One may cite various reasons for this: the Soviet Union would have remained a major geopolitical player in East Asia; it would have continued as a substantial source of economic and military aid to Pyongyang; consequently, it would have retained leverage on North Korea; and it likely would have exerted pressure on the North to maintain the peninsular armistice agreement and refrain from developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

Russia has been trying to gradually rebuild normal great power relations with China and Japan. The recent friction in Sino-American relations, combined with Russo-Chinese perceptions of threat from American plans to build new missile defense systems, has motivated better ties and improved military cooperation between Russia and China. Any Moscow-Beijing power axis could prove a formidable counter to the Washington-Tokyo alliance in Asia.

In the inter-Korean geopolitical game, though, the Russians have more-or-less remained on the sidelines since 1992. The reason is simple: Moscow has little to offer that North Korea immediately needs, especially food, fuel, or aid. It still possesses imposing technology, and is in excellent position to facilitate North Korean trade with the outside world. Russia also benefits from China's inability to represent the North's interests, and from Pyongyang's suspicion of the U.S. and Japan. Russia's best opportunity to influence developments in the Koreas, then, may be to trade on her traditional access to Pyongyang (Russian President Putin's visit to Pyongyang in 2001 is an indication of this)--and for the time acting in concert with the other great powers to protect its interests on the Korean peninsula.

A major problem with the study of Soviet and North Korean foreign policies has been their utter opaqueness to the outside world. Scholars were often reduced to *Kremlinology*, or reading policy changes from otherwise obscure signs and signals. Unfortunately, this is still very much the story for North Korea. The Soviet Union has only recently begun to release a large number of Soviet era documents, but these usually address specific problems, and are not comprehensive. Needless to say, an ongoing imperative of Soviet foreign policy study is the more thorough examination of Soviet materials.

## Conclusion

North Korea's relations with its Communist neighbors were driven by its desire to maintain "equidistance" from Beijing and Moscow. Through most of the Cold War, Pyongyang was able to play off the two socialist giants against each other to maintain a degree of independence in foreign policy. The Soviets dramatically increased their leverage in the North during the 1980s, as they improved the quality of aid, trade, and defense assistance. Under Gorbachev, the Soviets established far-reaching economic and political ties with South Korea. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed Russia as a stabilizing force on the Korean peninsula, and may have set back the course of inter-Korean *détente*, which was underway until the nuclear crisis of 1994.

Soviet policy toward the Korean peninsula during the Gorbachev era was clearly affected by the "new thinking" and foreign policy departures undertaken under Gorbachev. The Soviets' Korean policy was both a response to the realities of Korea, i.e., the dramatic rise of the South and the stagnation of the North, and linked to the overall Sino-centered East Asian policy as enunciated at Vladivostok and Krasnoyarsk. While Korea remained peripheral to Soviet concerns, the two-track policy toward the Koreas yielded substantial geopolitical and economic benefits. Tying the North more closely to the USSR made Pyongyang less adventuresome and more open to negotiations that led to the Basic Agreement with the South in 1992. Better relations with the South were intended to assist the economic development of

Soviet East Asia and contribute to the weakening of the Washington-Tokyo-Seoul triangular alliance. Finally, calming the volatile Korean peninsula and promoting South Korean intercourse within the socialist camp indirectly aided Sino-Soviet and later Sino-Russian rapprochement.

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