The SOVIET UNION as an ASIAN PACIFIC POWER

Implications of Gorbachev's 1986 Vladivostok Initiative

edited by
Ramesh Thakur
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Introduction

Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle A. Thayer

According to one scholar of the USSR, "[t]he coming to power of any new top leader in the Soviet Union changes, to a greater or lesser extent, the correlation of forces among the various institutional interests, opinion groupings and issue networks which exist within both the domestic and foreign policy making realms."[1] The case of Mikhail Gorbachev has proved no exception to this rule. The turnover of General Secretaries has been unexpectedly frequent in the Soviet Union in recent years. However, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko lacked both health and time to leave a mark upon Soviet history.

Mikhail Gorbachev by contrast has seized the opportunity, if not with relish, then at least with evident vigour to try and reshape Soviet society both domestically and in its international relations. In so doing, Gorbachev has defied early predictions of maintaining the tradition of "[c]ontinuity, caution and consensus" characteristic of "a system revolutionary in doctrine but deeply conservative in practice." Consequently, continued the *New York Times* editorial, "whatever his ambitions, Mr. Gorbachev is unlikely soon to make waves."[2]

If "we base our conclusions on the course of events since 1949," Geoffrey Barraclough has noted, then "it would be ... easy and ... plausible to argue that the world was moving not into an Atlantic but into a Pacific age."[3] Europe has been a settled if divided continent since the Second World War. In the Pacific theatre, the war began earlier and ended later. It was the Pacific war which ushered in the nuclear age; it is the Pacific which remains the scene of competing claims, great power rivalry, and residual regional tensions, some of which predate both world wars.

In 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), journeyed to the Soviet Far East Maritime Kray to present the Order of Lenin to the city of Vladivostok.

While in this seaside city, he delivered a major policy speech which touched on both domestic and foreign policy issues. The General Secretary's remarks were broadcast live on 28 July 1986 by Soviet television and by Radio Moscow's home service.

Russian encounters in the Far East were not the happiest at the turn of the century, nor immediately after the establishment of the Soviet state. For all that, in July 1986 Gorbachev served notice that the USSR would engage in international relations as an Asian-Pacific power as much as a European power. In the eastward-looking approach adopted by Gorbachev at Vladivostok, the General Secretary may be said to have launched his own, or at least the Soviet, version of *ostpolitik*. Jerry Hough has noted that the "vast majority of men of the Brezhnev-Gromyko generation were born between 1900 and 1910 and were almost all thrust into high positions in the wake of the purges of 1937-1938. Men of this generation remember World War I; their fathers may have fought in the Russo-Japanese War and reminisced about it; they, themselves, were high officials in World War II."[4] In his Vladivostok Initiative, as indeed in other remarkable aspects of his foreign policy, Gorbachev perhaps reflected the fact that he was the first Soviet leader "too young to have been an active participant in the Second World War, which had such a profound effect on the thinking of his predecessors ...."[5]

At the same time as the Pacific is the scene of much contemporary tension, it also contains some of the most dynamic economies of the post-war period. Even the US trade with Asia-Pacific surpassed that with Europe in the 1980s. It was appropriate therefore that Gorbachev's call at Vladivostok for improved international relationships in the Asian-Pacific area were preceded by calls for economic development of the Soviet Far East. That is, the Soviet Union's identity as an Asian-Pacific power is critical to Gorbachev's twin concerns of the security of the USSR and the rejuvenation of its economy.

Ambassador Evgeni Samoteikin's chapter seeks to explain and interpret the meaning of the Vladivostok address, and to respond to critical reactions in the West to aspects of the speech. It is an interesting statement for being simultaneously an affirmation of superpower legitimacy for the Soviet role in the Pacific, and an attempted reassurance against any military or other anti-Western designs in the South Pacific.

An early indication of Gorbachev's firmness of intent and search for new directions was the scale of personnel changes in the highest echelons of party and state organs, a subject which is discussed by Graeme Gill. Dissatisfaction with the intractability and durability of problems had perhaps suggested to the General Secretary that fresh minds ought to be

brought to bear on them. More importantly, though, a new General Secretary uses early opportunities to replace the old guard by his own nominees as a tried and tested method of consolidating his position at the apex of the Soviet leadership. Gill suggests how an urgent task for any new General Secretary is to establish his authority, and that personnel changes - what Jerry Hough terms "the politics of building coalitions and neutralizing opposition"[6] - are an important and early item on the agenda of authority building. Personnel changes are more significant in the foreign policy realm than in the domestic because of the relatively fewer people who occupy key positions, and who can therefore be made more readily responsive through a tightened chain of command to the policy preferences of the General Secretary.

Another characterisitc of the Gorbachev approach seems to be to make the political environment more receptive to the possibility of fundamental change by engaging in bracing rhetoric at the declaratory level prior to policy innovations at the operational level. Changes both in the climate of opinion and in personnel can be prerequisites to policy innovations. The Vladivostok address confirmed Gorbachev's reputation as an impressive salesman of ideas who through a masterful campaign of public diplomacy can set the agenda for international affairs and force opponents into a reactive role.

The characteristic Gorbachev style has been much in evidence in the arms control sphere: bold pronouncements, challenging visions and unilateral initiatives which not only made Soviet foreign policy uncomfortably unpredictable, but also created a superpower and international climate of opinion more conducive to concluding a historic nuclear disarmament agreement in September 1987, earlier false starts notwithstanding. On this "question of questions," Gorbachev was not interested in mere cosmetic changes at the margins of the nuclear balance; he wanted fundamental progress. He was not willing to negotiate away strategic parity with the USA; but he was prepared to contemplate strategic parity at a significantly lowered threshold.

In a prescient piece of scholarly journalism, Adam Ulam noted that "a younger man could be expected to be impatient with the immobilism that has characterized the Soviet economy and society in the last decade or so and be inclined to look at the risks and costs of expansionism and the arms build-up."[7] The Vladivostok speech too underlined the impression that Gorbachev believes that mere tinkerings will not suffice to achieve long term fundamental goals in either the economic or the foreign policy realm. The General Secretary attacked what we might term the intellectual inertia which has produced a lag between the security requirements of the 1980s

and the state of the world's nuclear arsenals. He called accordingly for a fundamental break with many conventional approaches to foreign policy, a break with the axioms of political thinking on the problem of war and peace, a break with the entrenched assumptions of individual and international security policies. In so doing, he acknowledged the special responsibility of the superpowers in the management of world order, which is the necessary corollary to their privileges flowing from that status.

Furthermore, Gorbachev has been an evident believer in the linkage argument. A deteriorating international environment was less conducive to the pursuit of economic prosperity because it diverted scarce financial and human skilled resources to the less productive sectors of defence. As he said almost a year before the Vladivostok Initiative, "[i]f the main thing for us Soviet people is the development of the economy, social relations and democracy, this also determines our interests in the international arena and our foreign policy issues - above all our interests in peace, in a stable international situation that would make it possible to focus attention and resources on peaceful, creative matters."[8] Not surprisingly, the linkage re-emerged at Vladivostok. There is thus an economic logic to the fervour with which Gorbachev has pursued arms control and disarmament negotiations. Vladivostok was a clear affirmation by Gorbachev that even a superpower cannot live in security by military means alone.

The result of such linkage for analysts is to raise questions about the sincerity of proposals to reduce international tensions in their own right. Richard Armitage, the US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, remarked that what "we are seeing is the addition of political and economic elements to the growing [Soviet] power projection capability in East Asia and the Pacific, a capability clearly aimed at the US and its regional friends and allies."[9] Paul Keal in his chapter too draws attention to the fact that many of Gorbachev's "initiatives" were in fact self-serving and therefore foredoomed.

The Vladivostok address was important also for confirming that in the Gorbachev strategy, high-level overtures to Europe, Asia and the Pacific were meant to complement relations with the United States. If one was not a substitute for the other, then it could not be hostage to the other: relations with Asian-Pacific countries could be delinked from the state of superpower relations. Nevertheless, the USA too was explicitly acknowledged as a fellow-Pacific power, with legitimate superpower interests in the region.

If the Vladivostok Initiative was a bluff, then can it be shown up as such without being called? If the address contained a genuine offer of accommodation with Asian-Pacific countries, then what responses should

be forthcoming from these countries? How, in other words, can the countries that were the objects of Gorbachev's courtship at Vladivostok respond positively while minimising security risks to themselves? Questions such as these are addressed by all the contributors. While there is, not surprisingly, no unanimity, there does seem to be a general feeling that the Soviet overtures deserve cautiously optimistic treatment rather than uncritical embrace or outright rejection.

In the 1970s, the Sino-American *rapprochement* profoundly realigned the world's power relations. A normalisation of relations between China and the Soviet Union would usher in a similarly profound process of readjustment, not just regionally, but globally. A major, if not the major, object of Gorbachev's Vladivostok address was therefore the People's Republic of China. The nature, meaning and significance of his remarks, as also the likely Chinese responses, are analysed by Gary Klintworth. He describes the accelerating pace of inter-governmental contacts between Moscow and Beijing since Gorbachev came to power, and notes some genuine concessions made by Gorbachev at Vladivostok on the obstacles to Sino-Soviet normalisation. Perhaps we will witness the development of a less antagonistic and more pragmatic relationship between China and the USSR during Gorbachev's stewardship of the Soviet state. If so, then that would surely represent a major prize of Soviet diplomacy.

But it would also entail complications in some other relationships. The notion of a general system of Asian-Pacific security was revived by Gorbachev at Vladivostok, with the important difference from the discredited proposal of Leonid Brezhnev that it was not so transparently aimed at China. The centrality of China to the entire Asian-Pacific region is attested to by the fact that it borders upon or is proximate to, and certainly relevant to, all the relationships touched upon by Gorbachev, from Afghanistan in the Southwest to Korea and Japan in the Northeast.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the importance of the Sino-Soviet relationship is discussed in virtually all the chapters. Thus China will be a key actor in determining the shape of the eventual solution of the Afghanistan problem. Amin Saikal discusses the implications of the Vladivostok Initiative for the conflict in Afghanistan, and is generally sceptical of the "initiatives" in terms of their novelty, sincerity, significance, or likely success. In South Asia, China is a looming presence rather than an integral player. The central actor there is India, which is a neighbour to every other country in the region; Pakistan and Afghanistan are the only two other countries to share a border. While Saikal's analysis brings in the Pakistan factor, Ramesh Thakur gives it a more central place in his account of the relationship between the USSR and India. Moscow's

link with New Delhi is the only unqualified success story for the USSR of any note in the entire non-communist world; and it is some success. Yet Thakur notes the constraints to the relationship as well as the mutual benefits. Gorbachev could easily have had the Indo-Soviet relationship in mind as a model when he spoke of improved bilateral relations with the countries of Asia-Pacific. But even the Indo-Soviet relationship could be dramatically affected by major changes in the Sino-Soviet relationship.

China is of course much more directly concerned about and involved in the Southeast and Northeast Asian regions. Carlyle Thayer analyses in some detail recent moves concerning the problem of Kampuchea, noting in particular possible shifts in nuances in the Soviet position in and since the Valdivostok Initiative. Topics such as confidence-building measures, nuclear-free zones and Helsinki-type conferences are covered for Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia by Robyn Lim and Paul Keal repectively, both of whom are less than confident about major progress resulting from the Vladivostok Initiative. Lim argues that the non-communist countries of Southeast Asia may be willing to concede legitimacy to the USSR as an Asian-Pacific power, but are unlikely to enter into an arms control regime which disadvantages American strategic interests in the region. But the Americans do have to devise appropriate responses to the freshly fashioned moral-political challenge posed by the Soviet Union.

Given the location of the symposium, it is not surprising that the South Pacific in general, and Australia in particular, receive separate and detailed treatments by Richard Herr, Stuart Harris and David Charles. Herr argues that the era of strategic denial of the South Pacific to the Soviet Union may have passed, and that it may be time to work out a new *modus vivendi* of peaceful coexistence which acknowledges a Soviet fishing, and possibly a Soviet diplomatic, presence in the island countries of the South Pacific. Harris and Charles assess the Gorbachev initiatives from an Australian perspective of cautious optimism: it may be that one can detect a note of greater caution in one than in the other.[10]

Not long after its delivery, it became apparent that Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech carried with it implications extending far beyond his domestic audience. Yet outside analysts differed in their assessments and interpretations of the address. Some argued that the speech was mainly rhetorical and designed for propaganda purposes. Others argued that references to the development of the Far East were merely an example of wishful thinking. Still others noted a mischievous flavour in certain sections, especially those dealing with nuclear-free zones, foreign bases, and the conflict in Afghanistan. Yet, however much Gorbachev's speech

was discounted, it became clear that it was a significant policy address which warranted careful attention and close study.

The idea to host a one day symposium on Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech arose from discussions held in October 1986 by members of the Department of Politics at the newly created Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA). An organising committee, consisting of Anthony Bergin, William Maley and Carlyle Thayer, successfully obtained financial backing and moral support from Professor G. V. H. Wilson, the Rector of University College; Professor Ian McAllister, Head of the Politics Department; and Dr W. H. Smith, Director of the Australian Defence Studies Centre at ADFA. Major General Peter Day, Commandant of the Defence Academy, provided logistical and other support.

It was decided to convene the symposium in March 1987 in order to allow sufficient time for retrospective analysis and judgment. In this, the organisers proved wise. In the weeks preceding and following the symposium, Eduard Shevardnadze made his first visit as Soviet Foreign Minister to Southeast Asia and Australia. On the eve of the symposium, Kim Beazley, the Australian Minister of Defence, released a White Paper, the first in a decade. Accordingly, interest in the topic was high and the symposium attracted a gratifyingly large audience, including many members of the diplomatic corps and the defence establishment based in Canberra.

Although the symposium was weighted in favour of the foreign policy sections of the Vladivostok speech, domestic implications were not ignored. The organisation of the symposium took the following form. Keynote addresses were delivered by Dr Stuart Harris, Secretary of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs, and His Excellency E. M. Samoteikin, Ambassador of the USSR. Then followed two separate presentations, the first, by Graeme Gill, dealing with the interrelationship between domestic politics and foreign policy, and the second, presented by Gary Klintworth, covering the Sino-Soviet relationship.

The second half of the symposium consisted of three panels. The first considered the implications of Gorbachev's Vladivostok Initiative on a region by region basis: Paul Keal on Northeast Asia, Robyn Lim on Southeast Asia, Ramesh Thakur on South Asia, and Richard Herr on the South Pacific. The second panel examined the prospects for a negotiated settlement of on-going regional conflicts: Amin Saikal on Afghanistan, and Carlyle Thayer on Kampuchea.

The symposium concluded with a panel of specialists who were asked to comment on the day's proceedings and to draw out the implications of Gorbachev's initiative, if any, for the region and Australia. The

government and opposition were represented by David Charles and Andrew Peacock respectively. Other panelists included Nancy Viviani, Director of the Centre for the Study of Australian-Asian Relations, Griffith University; Air Marshall David Evans (ret.), former Chief of the Defence Force Staff; and Denis Warner, editor of the *Pacific Defence Reporter*.

After the symposium, the organisers concluded that the written papers were of such high quality that they should be made available as soon as possible to a wider audience in published form. One factor which influenced this judgment was the publicity accorded by the Soviet press, which ran features on page one of *Pravda, Izvestia* and *Krasnaia Zvezda*. The *Washington Times* too reported portions of the address by the Soviet Ambassador. It was agreed to ask contributors to update their papers for publication, and to invite Ramesh Thakur to co-edit this volume because of his previous relationship with Westview Press, his experience in producing camera-ready books for Westview, and his status as the inaugural Visiting Fellow of the Department of Politics at ADFA in 1986.

The text of Mikhail Gorbachev's Vladivostok address is reproduced in the appendix. While it is almost entirely the BBC version that we have published, we have supplied our own section headings for ease of reading convenience. We have also on rare occasions checked words or passages, which seemed to be not entirely clear, against the edition published by Novosti Press,[11] and substituted the latter version if it seemed to clarify the meaning more readily. But for practical purposes it remains the BBC version, and we are grateful to the organisation for permission to reproduce it.

NOTES

1. Archie Brown, "Change in the Soviet Union," *Foreign Affairs* 64(Summer 1986), p. 1060.

2. As reprinted in the *International Herald Tribune*, 13 March 1985.

3. Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 22.

4. Jerry F. Hough, "Gorbachev's Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 64(Fall 1985), p. 45.

5. Roderic Lyne, "Making Waves: Mr Gorbachev's Public Diplomacy, 1985-6," *International Affairs* 63(Spring 1987), p. 206.

6. Hough, "Gorbachev's Strategy," p. 42.

7. Adam B. Ulam, "Gorbachev: A Strange Soviet Sequence May Now Give Slow Change a Chance," *International Herald Tribune*, 13 March 1985.

8. In an interview on 30 September 1985; quoted by Lyne, "Making Waves," p. 208.

9. As reported in the *Australian*, 27 February 1987; cited in Amitav Acharya, "The Asia-Pacific Region: Cockpit for Superpower Rivalry," *World Today* 43(August/September 1987), p. 156.

10. The Harris and Charles addresses to the ADFA symposium were also published in the official *Australian Foreign Affairs Record* 58(March 1987), pp. 111-119 and 122-124 respectively.

11. *Speech by Mikhail GORBACHEV in Vladivostok, July 28, 1986* (Moscow: Novosti Press, 1986).

2

The Goals of Vladivostok

Evgeni Samoteikin

If we put aside all technical and secondary questions, the main point to discuss and argue about is whether the Soviet Union is sincere in its aspirations. What are the reasons for and goals of the Vladivostok Initiative?

To answer this question I have to begin from relevant general aspects of the Soviet policy.

Last year the Party Congress, the highest forum of Soviet society, set forth our vision of the world, our philosophical concept of its present and future. We did not just proclaim a pure theoretical doctrine but formulated a definite political platform for an all-embracing system of international security. This is a system based on the principle that one's own security cannot be ensured at the expense of others; it is a system that organically links all the main areas of security - the military, political, economic and humanitarian.

We consider this system to be an essential international background for the process of restructuring and accelaration which has been launched on such a large scale in our country. The reasons here are quite obvious - we simply won't be able to reach our goals at home in a hostile international environment, spending material and intellectual resources of our society on arms race and confrontation.

Restructuring, which is a dominant factor of our domestic life, cannot but affect the foreign policy of the USSR. The thesis about the need for a new political thinking, a new outlook put forward by the Soviet leadership is not a tribute to a fashion. It is a reflection of our understanding and recognition of the fact that with the stockpiling and sophistication of nuclear armaments the human race is no longer immortal, that international relations

and the policies of governments and states must, without delay, be brought into line with the realities of the nuclear age.

Recent political actions of the Soviet government in the international arena are clear evidence that we take this plain truth into full account. It is virtually impossible to name a sphere of international policy where the USSR has not put forward major proposals and initiatives, the main features of which are realism, constructiveness, and boldness. That is what makes them so attractive to the public worldwide.

The Vladivostok Initiative attracted special attention here in Australia, because it is aimed at the solution of problems in Asia and the Pacific - regions of direct national interest to this country.

The title of the symposium contains a question whether this initiative is something new? In a sense it will not be absolutely correct, because many ideas which are an integral part of the proposal have been known for years. What is really new is the comprehensive character of the initiative, its balanced approach to all complex problems of the vast region. The main idea which underlies the whole Vladivostok speech is that all the problems can be solved if there is political will and joint efforts of all the states.

Let me very briefly outline the main points of the Soviet Union's proposal for integrating the Asian-Pacific region into the general process of establishing a comprehensive system of international security.

First of all, the Soviet Union intends to invigorate its bilateral relations with all countries in the region without exception. Certainly, we are prepared to expand ties with Australia and all South Pacific Islands countries, as well as with our neighbours - the People's Republic of China, Japan, the United States and others.

Secondly, we advocate joint efforts for finding settlements to regional issues, such as Afghanistan, Kampuchea, Southeast Asia and Korea. In our view there are good possibilities for not only quickly stopping bloody violence and relieving dangerous tensions in these areas, but also for establishing mutually acceptable relations between the countries concerned.

Thirdly, we suggest concrete measures on scaling down military preparation in the Asian-Pacific region, including, in particular, prevention of a proliferation and build-up of nuclear weapons, establishment of nuclear free zones, bringing down the level of naval activity in the Pacific, resumption of talks on establishing the Indian Ocean as a peace zone, reduction of armed forces and conventional armaments in Asia, and practical discussion on confidence-building measures and the non-use of force in that region. In this respect simpler measures - for instance, measures for the security of sea lanes in the Pacific, and for the prevention of international terrorism - could serve as the beginning.