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A New Balance of Power in Northeast Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the last thirty years, China, Russia, and the United States have formed a balance of power in Asia recognizing a bipolar world. The international system has shifted in a new direction creating a potential vacuum of power in Northeast Asia.

The United States must be prepared to take advantage of this watershed of political change. Only with the understanding of the historical perspective of Chinese, Russian, Japanese, and American relationships can a viable option be selected. The overriding assumptions are China's continuing population growth and its historical desire to be a world power.

The basic question: will the United States take sides if China moves north? The three options considered -- remain neutral and support the status quo, support Russia, and support China. My recommendation is to select the last option. The key strategic decision is whether to maintain Russia as the focus of the older balance of power triangle or recognize that Russia has returned to its European origins and is no longer an equal partner in the region.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2	SINO-RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVES	5
CHAPTER 3	SINO-JAPANESE PERSPECTIVES	11
CHAPTER 4	ANALYSIS OF THE OPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES	16
CHAPTER 5	RECOMMENDATION	20

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As so often before, significant change in one side of the Soviet-U.S.-China triangle points up the need for adjustments in another, as well as the complex impact upon Japan and the other states of Asia.¹

In sum, the heart of the Sino-Soviet conflict remains: Russia wants a weak, relatively isolated China, while China, in turn, is determined to attain security in the short run through ties to the West and Japan, and in the long run by achieving the status of a major -- if not dominant -- power in Asia.²

For the last thirty years, China, Russia, and the United States have formed a balance of power in Asia recognizing a bipolar world. This international system has shifted in directions when influenced by ideology, historical territorial issues, and changing leadership; however, the triangle has maintained its equilibrium through a balance of power. What happens to this system when Russia collapses in exhaustion from the Cold War and Northeast Asia is no longer balanced in a bipolar world?

It could be argued that protecting China against foreign attack and warding off attempts at encirclement have been Peking's paramount foreign policy goals since 1949.³ A review of Chinese history back to the 1850's clearly shows humiliating defeat at the hands of the British, Russians, and Japanese as the Manchu empire lost the mandate of heaven. The return of those territories -- Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mongolia and the northern borders of Manchuria -- has played heavily in the growth of

nationalism and regaining the past glory and security of the Middle Kingdom.

Although the United States was certainly viewed as an imperialistic threat to China in the earliest days of the Cold War, the death of Stalin and the competition with nativism Maoist ideology led to an even greater mistrust between the Soviet Union and China. Sharing a long border in Manchuria, this mistrust came to battle and blood in 1969 along the Ussuri River. In China's opinion Russia has never stopped pushing -- a conventional and nuclear threat to the North and West, a powerful Russian Pacific naval fleet, and suspicious and encircling political relations with Vietnam, Afghanistan, India, and North Korea. As the Soviet Union abandons communism, it is not only an ideological threat to the last great communist state; but, it is still a military threat with 50 divisions still active and restless in the Far Eastern theater.⁴ The obvious counter balance to this Soviet encirclement has been and continues to be the United States.

The domestic political situation, nativism or cosmopolitan, has been a major factor in China's ideological and economic struggle to catch up with the modern world. One catastrophe looms beyond all others: mainland population has reached 1.14 billion (end of 1990). With such an immense population base, China, despite implementation of birth control, still sees a yearly net increase of 17 million people, a number equal to a medium sized country. As for the per-capita area of cultivated

land, it had dropped to 1.3 mu, representing only 25% of the world average.⁵ The 1.5 million square kilometers of Chinese territory annexed by Russia during the "unequal treaties" period should be returned to their rightful owner. In the long term revanche in Manchuria at the expense of the Russians would settle old debts, but in the short term ameliorate the population growth and encourage industrial and agricultural economic expansion to the north.

Finally Japan must become part of the equation. According to Soviet analysis, the Japanese desire to participate in the development of Siberia and to share in its rich resources will steadily grow, especially since the Russians believe that the China market will prove disappointing and that American-Japanese friction over economic issues will increase.⁶ Japan now has the third largest defense budget in the world with an economy capable of absorbing the natural resources of Manchuria as well as Siberia. "If Japan and China cooperate, they can support half the heavens," said Deng Xiaoping. But cooperation depends to a large degree on Japanese attitudes,⁷ attitudes defined by the history of invasion and violent subjugation of China "quickly" forgotten by a new Japanese hubris! Thus there is a probability of a new balance of power in Northeast Asia -- the Sino-U.S.-Japan triangle.

My research paper will focus on China's possible political and military opportunities as Russia withdraws in the Far East, leaving a power vacuum along their borders in Manchuria. In the

short term or long term, will the United States take sides if China moves north? Will American foreign policy take advantage of this watershed in Northeast Asia and seek a new balance of power reflecting a new world order? Historical perspective is critical to this new evaluation of American alternatives, so I will discuss different perspectives in separate chapters. It is also very important to remember that strategically Manchuria is a buffer zone between China proper, Russia, and Japan. Surely the Middle Kingdom will once again seek alliances to assure its national security, perhaps with the threat of Japan in mind, and the United States must be pivotal in the balance of a new Sino-U.S.-Japan triangle.

CHAPTER 2

SINO-RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVES

In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, whereas to Asia we shall go as masters. F.M. Dostoevsky⁸

Where once the Russian flag has been raised it must never be lowered. Emperor Nicholas I⁹

The Sino-Soviet conflict is not only genuine but rooted deeply in geographic, political and cultural bedrock.¹⁰ Both countries have histories of military empire, but the last 150 years have witnessed the expansion of Russia across Asia largely at the expense of the Chinese Empire. One could conclude that the correlation between geography and ideology has determined and guided Russia's national interest toward the east, thereby creating the longest and widest land corridor of territorial expansion in the history of colonialism.¹¹ Now this tide of imperialism and then communism has begun to ebb away from China's borders. The Russian perspective of this evolution has little in common with the view from the Middle Kingdom.

Russia from its earliest days of existence has struggled with its national security, particularly against threats from both east and west at one time. But certainly since the death of Stalin the Russians have developed a cultural hatred and distrust toward the Chinese leadership that does not correspond to similar attitudes toward the West. As described by Seweryn Bialer in "Soviet Perspective", the Russians have displayed a feeling of superiority and contempt for the Chinese, who they perceive as an irrational

and unpredictable people. Underneath this prejudice was a fear that China would become a superpower in the near future and that must be delayed as long as possible. Further, the Russian leadership considered granting concessions to China would only encourage greater Chinese demands on Russian territory in the future. The forward deployment of top of the line military forces along the border and the largest Russian naval fleet at Vladivostok gave Moscow additional chips in the game of normalization.¹²

Although the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China began their relationship under conditions of socialistic friendship and financial support, the period of excellent relations was short lived. Ultimately this Russian history of mistrust and fear toward the Chinese was described by the popular phrase -- "Yellow Peril". In the Far East the Russians were very few in number. They faced over one billion Chinese to their south, Chinese in search of living space. There was also an ideological bent to this fear -- a return to Stalinism which the Russian middle class saw in Mao and his continuing revolution to rule the world.¹³ In Russia's view Chinese diplomatic actions toward rapprochement with the United States and Japan pointed to continued isolation of Russia in Asia.

The Brezhnev Doctrine had spawned the anti-hegemony clause of the Sino-Japanese Friendship treaty in 1978. Russia responded to the abrogation of its friendship treaty with China with a major increase in military power projection capability: 500,000 troops on the border, 165 SS-20 intermediate range ballistic missiles, top of the line aircraft (Floggers and Backfires), and the largest and

most lethal naval fleet in the Pacific with bases in Vietnam, North Korea and the Northern Territories off Japan.¹⁴ There were attempts to better relations with China after Brezhnev's death, but Moscow was not willing to endanger seriously relations with Vietnam for the sake of improving relations with China.¹⁵ This hypermilitarization of Soviet Asia during the preceding two decades must be considered one of the heaviest burdens inherited by Gorbachev from the Brezhnev era.¹⁶

Chinese leaders, especially Mao and Zhou, were much quicker to realize that China's vulnerability to Soviet pressure could be reduced by political as well as military means.¹⁷ In addition the ability to achieve China's four modernizations before the year 2000 economically pointed toward an alliance with the West and Japan. Development first as a domestic policy combined with the historical and ideologic disagreements made Russia a poor second choice. The logic in all three areas, military, development and strategy, made the case for a "united front" with the West.¹⁸

The economic disaster of competing with the United States globally while fighting and supporting regional conflicts was too much for Soviet domestic policy to maintain. While economic "declinism" dominated the Soviet Union, the regions around the Soviet Union, especially in the Asian-Pacific, were experiencing dynamic growth.¹⁹ Gorbachev began initiatives to Beijing in his speech at Vladivostok in 1986 to end the border tension and begin economic participation in the region. This included troop withdrawals from Mongolia and Afghanistan, a fair principle of

border demarcation, and joint economic projects. In 1988 the Soviets began moving their troops out and all but removed the "Three Obstacles" to normalization -- the encirclement was over. China agreed to a summit in Beijing in 1989.

In all the previous five meetings, Sino-Soviet summits have proven to be milestones with new developments. The results of Gorbachev's four day visit did not live up to expectations -- it merely declared closure to nearly three decades of conflict.²⁰ Yet, there has been some economic progress. On November 20, 1991, Heilongjiang Province announced the opening of five more Sino-Soviet border ports next year, bringing the number of open ports throughout the province to 15, second only to Guangdong Province.²¹ It is reported in the Chinese press that Russia is also opening wider its Far East areas to the outside world. The development of these areas will require great amounts of manpower and material. Heilongjiang Province began to export labor services several years ago and plans to send 25,000 contracted workers to Siberia during the Eighth Five-Year Plan period.²²

"Far Eastern Singapore" wants to attract foreign capital, but the average Russian is hostile to the idea of letting in Asiatic guest-workers and entrepreneurs. "We would rather let the land go to waste than to allow foreigners in!"²³ A Tsarist ordinance of 1882 had barred non-Russians from acquiring land in Siberia.²⁴ "Yellow Peril" mixed with Malthus and Darwin inevitably come to mind. "In ten years China will have between 240-260 million unemployed, mostly young and illiterate peasants, who may become

restless. (This figure is higher than the entire adult working population Russia will have in the year 2000.) Where will they go if Siberia and the Far East are declared off-limits for Asians?"²⁵

Present analysis has stressed the Soviet forces were in transition to a more defensive military doctrine and force structure. "At the same time it must be made clear that the Soviet Army presently remains an offensive force; even if the change to a "defensive structure" is realized in the future, the Soviet Army will still carry tremendous potential of launching in-depth attacks".²⁶

Additionally, social stability remained the top priority of Chinese leaders, and they fear the effects of glasnost and perestroika clearly demonstrated in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Many Chinese leaders view reformist ideologies from socialist countries as more dangerous than western democratic nations.²⁷ To help prevent such ideas from entering their communist society, Beijing wished to slow expansion of commercial contacts on the non-governmental level, particularly on the border. Trade with Russia accounted for just 3% of China's overall foreign trade in 1989, most in barter. In real terms, the Sino-Soviet trade has actually declined over the past two years primarily because of the demand for hard currency on both sides. Both want to send their best products to hard currency customers. "We only sell each other things that we can't sell for foreign exchange."²⁸

China must also face Russia as a rival for international

capital and technology. The development of Siberia's natural resources will also be competition to China's development -- "China should try whenever possible to undermine Soviet interests in Asia and prevent its influence from expanding there."²⁹

Russia is retreating for the moment, and perhaps it is time for Russia to consider Alexander Solzhnitsyn's recommendation to colonize Russia's own "North-East" along the Arctic shore: to provide Russia with a new military frontier, endowed with solid Russian stock against the anticipated Chinese penetration from the south.³⁰ Present political disunity will only add to the isolation of Russia's Far East and to its fears of ultimate Chinese domination. But we must never forget there is much Russian history and Russian nationalism involved in these lands to the east -- Vladivostok is Russian for Ruler of the East.

The Sino-Soviet schism is now effectively eliminated, and in its place an emerging independent China is arising. The question is no longer whose side Beijing is on, but the degree of self interest coinciding with those of others. "We can no longer take the answer for granted."³¹ Yet two factors remain clear: China has no significant foreign threat on its borders for the first time in this century; and China's economic interest remains with the West.

CHAPTER 3

SINO-JAPANESE PERSPECTIVES

"Remembering the past provides a guide to the future," serves to focus old memories and new consciousness on the invasion, with the Nanjing massacre of December 1937 conveying the sharpest image of Japanese brutality -- perhaps 300,000 Chinese died -- becoming the touchstone of nationalism on both sides.³²

So long as the congruence of economic interests exists between Japan and China, and so long as they share common concern over the Soviet military buildup in Asia, it is reasonable to expect the continuation of Sino-Japanese economic cooperation in the future.³³

The historical heritage of the first half of this century was Chinese hatred toward Japanese expansion in Asia. The victor of that great conflict that ended in 1945 now finds itself economically and technologically dependent on its former enemy -- suffering psychologically from an historic reversal in roles between teacher and student. In China this has become an economic attack on nationalism and traditional Han superiority.³⁴

Japan has a different view of this conflict starting in 1894. The war first with China and then Russia that ended in 1896 was very costly to Japan -- over 230,000 deaths and two billion yen lost³⁵ -- and the Japanese anticipated some compensation for their effort in pushing the Russian Bear away from China's borders. In addition Japan took advantage of its position in World War I to acquire Germany's leased territories in China. It eventually placed the "Twenty-one Demands" before the Chinese government that clearly showed Japan's long term and ambitious goals in China.

Japan seized Chinese territory outright both in Shandong and Manchuria and guarded its areas with the Kwantung Army, which was directly responsible to the general staff in Tokyo.³⁶ After clashes in Mukden and then Shanghai, the Kwantung Army used another incident at the Marco Polo Bridge in Beijing to begin a full scale war that ultimately killed or wounded twenty-two million and cost the Chinese over \$60 billion.³⁷ Its impact on subsequent images of Japan was evident in the allegation that "the best historical records show that some 340,000 people died in Nanjing, 190,000 in group massacres and 150,000 in individual murders ... which surpasses even the combined figure for Hiroshima and Nagasaki."³⁸ Even German fascists labeled Japanese soldiers a "group of beasts."³⁹ The Chinese have some difficulty in understanding why Japan often wins sympathy as the victim and the United States was cast as the nuclear villain even though Japan started the war.

The Chinese treaty of peace with the Soviet Union in 1950 was an alliance defining Japan as the enemy; however, twenty years later it was the threat from Moscow that made the Chinese re-think the balance of power and consider reversing the alliance. As Soviet power began to wane in the mid 1980s, Beijing once again voiced concern over prospective Japanese militarism.⁴⁰

Once Deng Xiaoping was committed to economic modernization, Japan was required to be an active participant -- playing the balance between economic pragmatism and political prejudice. Japan ranks number one with roughly 20% of China's foreign trade: \$18 billion export/import totals and a \$6 billion trade surplus for

China in 1990. But the trade was asymmetrical in two ways: it was very important to China but only 5% of Japan's foreign trade; and China trades foodstuffs and natural resources for Japanese high value consumer goods. Only with strict state control of imports can those past trade surpluses be maintained.⁴¹

Much of China's economic growth has been supported by loans and credits from Japan -- nearly \$20 billion available credit between 1979 and 1986.⁴² But in the view of the Chinese, Japanese generosity was tainted with the guilt of reparations and the suspicion of blatant self interest against Japan's foreign competitors in China. Tokyo clearly recognized that loans and grants were likely to benefit Japanese contractors.⁴³

The question of reparations for the destruction inflicted by Japan in World War II was an historical political issue involved in the revolutionary breakup of mainland China. The Republic of China in Taiwan, in seeking Japanese recognition, offered no reparations from a position of weakness, and Zhou was in a similar weak position (in response to a Soviet threat) in 1972. However many of these loans and credits in the 1980s made no financial sense and politically they were really disguised reparations.⁴⁴

Yet, there remained controversy even in past economic cooperation, because Japanese joint investment has significantly trailed other foreign investors and Chinese expectations. The Japanese government viewed this short fall as an example of free enterprise under which it has no control. The Japanese private sector continued to avoid the high risk involved in working with a

centrally controlled, highly bureaucratic Chinese government that has a track record of canceling legitimate contracts -- over 30 contracts worth \$4.1 billion between 1979 and 1981 alone. These cancellations were heavily biased against Japanese companies when compared to European and American losses in the same period.⁴⁵ The Chinese viewpoint of these circumstances centered upon the cultural prejudices shown in the lack of technology transfers -- "the implication being that Japan is keeping China backward and dependent on its more advanced neighbor."⁴⁶

The Chinese government has compared Japanese official generosity against an unofficial insensitivity to past aggression. Under Deng Xiaoping the economic benefits of the relationship had priority; nevertheless, there have been several incidents of forgetfulness which have caused a great deal of domestic political difficulty for both nations.⁴⁷

To the unobservant eye, many of the following areas of misunderstanding, at least on the surface, were unclear: historical text of school books in 1982 and again in 1986; official and unofficial visits to the war memorial at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo; the visit of 3,000 Japanese young people to China; the Kyoto dormitory dispute and "two Chinas"; the firing of Fujio (the first cabinet minister fired in 33 years⁴⁸) and the dismissal of Hu; and the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Island. In the Chinese perception each incident in some way was related to Japan's insensitivity to its past aggression or its perceived racial superiority in its economic assistance to China. "Past experience,

if not forgotten, is a guide for the future."⁴⁹

Japan's military buildup added even more to China's tension. In some ways pushed by the United States, Japan has become a major regional military power with the third largest defense budget in the world (no longer capped at 1% of GNP).⁵⁰ During the Persian Gulf War, China viewed with alarm any deployment of Japanese military forces overseas as another indication of growing militarism. Japan's growing economic ascendancy in the Asian-Pacific region compared with China's peripheral role was enough to cause concern in Beijing⁵¹ without adding the fear of a revival of Japanese militarism.

Since the Tiananmen massacre, however, there has been steady improvement in relations. "Indeed, Beijing and Tokyo are on better terms than at any time in the twenty years since the resumption of relations in 1972." Tokyo was the primary exception and muted its criticism of the event, helping to lift sanctions imposed by the Western industrial powers.⁵²

Thus China has dual images of Japan -- little or no fear in the short term, but genuine concern that the past will be repeated in the future.⁵³ Perhaps the test will be the Senkaku Island, particularly if oil was actually discovered in that area. In 1978 Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that problem could be handled better by the next generation⁵⁴ -- oil would change the time table.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF THE OPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

Fundamentally, Russia will look west and China will look east.⁵⁵

When their national security is at stake, Americans have been prepared to ally with the devil.⁵⁶

The end of the Cold War and the dramatic results of the Persian Gulf War have forced China to reconsider its leverage over the United States, raising the question of American hegemony once again. Instead of the multipolar international system that Chinese analysts had been predicting, there now seemed to be the possibility of a unipolar world centered around the United States.⁵⁷ America's reaction to the Tiananmen crisis revealed that Washington still seeks to transplant its cultural values in China.⁵⁸ Taiwan will remain the wild card as the negative aspects of human rights violations and the "democratization" of Taiwan affect the American political system.

When Deng Xiaoping and his contemporaries die in the near future, a new generation of leaders will emerge. They will quite likely take a more positive attitude toward the United States than their predecessors.⁵⁹ Perhaps they will be open to a renewed strategic alignment with Washington against either a resurgent Russia or a more assertive Japan.⁶⁰ The United States, unlike Russia or Japan, has no Chinese territory and claims none.

The following options were based on a future dependent upon

China peacefully reuniting with Taiwan and expanding a modern economy. China has great expectations and greatly desires to be a world power once again. Its military strength is not capable of acting as a world power, at least not in the foreseeable future. However, the military strategy of defense in depth is valid against an attacking foe from the North due to its massive land area and the large size of its army. Using this defensive capability as a strength, the Chinese can push very hard politically and economically to recover those lands needed for continuing population growth. The population growth of 17 million per year in 1990, however, is very likely to increase as liberalization of the free market economy "frees" the peasantry from the birth control laws of the central state. Even without a major increase in the birth rate, it is my assumption that China will fill the population vacuum to the north. An offensive military operation against Russia probably would only happen if Russia attacked first in frustration. The United States has the following options to consider:

I. United States remains neutral and supports status quo. This appears the safest alternative, but Russia remains the most powerful military force in Northeast Asia. China would attempt to move conflict to United Nations for settlement; however, both parties have veto power in the Security Council. Third World would likely support China with anti-colonial rationale. Although conventional military power is strongly in favor of Russia, the possibility for nuclear war exists if allowed to

escalate. Japan, with economic interests on both sides, is very likely to assume persuasive diplomatic position. Russia will win the conflict, will suspect U.S. as hidden enemy, and will retain military capability to threaten Japan. This will be at great cost to Western support to Russian economy, will add to political instability, and could give Russian military a visible threat to the "motherland" allowing a nationalistic military coup. The United States runs the risk of losing influence with both parties, abrogating the pivotal position in the balance of power to Japan. Japan now has the choice of short term support to Russia, long term support to China, or a mix of the two.

2. United States supports Russia. China will not commit itself to force if it is clear that the U.S. supports Russia. China will look for support from Japan and the Third World and present its case at the United Nations. There is no real strategic advantage to the United States other than the probable political stability in Russia and the possibility of eventual economic recovery. The cost is continued Russian military power in the Far East. Again Japan has economic options available to both parties, although its safest foreign policy would be to stay with the Russo-U.S. team.

3. United States supports China. If Russia clearly understands this, it most likely will negotiate territory without fighting. The United Nations will not get involved. It is probable that Vladivostok will become untenable requiring a withdrawal of the Russian military to Petropavlovsk, a port that

is frozen most of the year. It is also possible that Vladivostok could be designated a free port under some sort of international control.⁶¹ This would be a major military setback for the Russians in the Far East, but it would not eliminate them from the region. Russia might focus toward the north and the Arctic Circle. China would gain its historical territory for expanding its population and economy without growing as a regional military threat. It still has no open ocean navy and a very antiquated army needing U.S. support for continuing protection against Russia. Japan has obvious economic options with Russia although now in a much smaller area in Siberia. China will accept limited support from Japan, now more a regional rival, and look to the U.S. as its unselfish benefactor for economic assistance and military presence in the region.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATION

The theory, shared even by some Japanese, is that a strong U.S. presence acts as the "cork in the bottle" that prevents Japan from trying to match its army to its economic might.⁶²

What merits attention is that in an atmosphere of relaxation of international tension, Japan shows a growing tendency to build up its military strength, regardless of its military expenditures already ranking third in the world. Where will an economically expanding Japan be heading for has become a universal concern for Asian Pacific countries.⁶³

As one of our speakers at the recent National Defense University symposium commented: there is no question that China will respond to the decreased power of Russia in Northeast Asia. The question is really how soon and which side will the United States take. And in the process of making that decision, the United States must consider Japan's future role in the region as more than just an economic power.

My recommendation is to select the last option. China's population growth and economic modernization are important to world stability. China has history, the Third World, and perhaps the United Nations on its side in this argument. China is not a global threat to any country, and its military has limited capabilities beyond its borders. Rather than just the enemy of our enemy, the United States can become a long term friend of China.

Russia is the big loser with this option. In my view Russia

cannot see this area as a vital interest under the present circumstances. The loss of territory will isolate Vladivostok, logistically if nothing else, requiring a military withdrawal to the north. This will decrease the usefulness of the Russian Pacific fleet reducing global tension with the United States and regional tensions with China, Japan, and many Southeast Asian countries. The key strategic decision is whether to maintain Russia as the focus of the older balance of power triangle or recognize that Russia has returned to its European origins and is no longer an equal partner in the region. But no matter what happens, it appears that it is in the best interests of the United States for China, and not Japan, to grow in regional power.

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