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CASE STUDY

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND AIMS IN ASIA

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RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND AIMS IN ASIA

A CASE STUDY

BY

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SECRET

An Australian diplomat has an interesting theory about how the Russians look at the world.

"I believe the Soviets' number one priority, by a large margin, is its relationship with the United States and Europe," says F. W. Blakeney, Australian Ambassador to Russia from 1968-1971. "Next in importance to them are the Middle East, China, and the countries adjacent to the Soviet Union - Japan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The other countries in Asia including Vietnam run a bad third. You can put Africa and Latin America down the list after these three." "One of my colleagues on whom I have tried out this theory disagrees," adds Mr. Blakeney thoughtfully as he gazes out at sunlit Canberra from the Foreign Office. "He would move the Middle East down to the third category of importance for the Soviets."

After travelling more than 30,000 miles through nine countries, the author of this study would tend to agree with Mr. Blakeney. Certainly recent events bear out his theory. Experts on Soviet affairs with whom I have talked are most surprised that the Russians did not react to the mining of Haiphong by, at the least, cancelling President Nixon's visit to the Soviet Union.

If you accept Mr. Blakeney's theory, it is not surprising at all. Since, according to him, relations with the United States and Europe are foremost in the Soviets' mind, it would not be sensible to jeopardize the opportunity to better these relations by reacting to events in the Soviets' third area of interest - "the other countries of Asia" - no matter how provocative these events might be.

Although less than one-third of the Soviet Union lies in Europe, its three most important cities Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev are in Europe. Asia has historically been from whence the barbaric hordes have swept toward mother Russia while the West has been both its cultural inspiration and the greatest menace to its security as Napoleon and Hitler have demonstrated. It is no wonder then that the Soviet Union must view the United States and Europe as its first priority. However, this does not mean the Russians do not have an important interest in Asia.

Thomas P. Thornton in his paper entitled "The USSR and Asia" put it this way:

"The Russian perspective on Asia can be summarized as follows: the Indian subcontinent is relatively close and in some ways a cultural extension of Soviet Central Asia; Japan is distant across Siberia, but directly on the borders of the USSR and thus a potential threat; China is threatening to be the source of another invasion from the east such as Russians experienced throughout their early history; Southeast Asia is barely discernable beyond China..."

This paper does not attempt to deal with the Soviet-China state of affairs except where it affects Russian attitudes in other parts of Asia. Nor will it go into the complicated Middle East situation and the Soviets' relationship with Iran and Turkey. Rather I would like to explore the Soviet influence and aims particularly in India and Japan, the second and sixth most populous countries in the world, and to a lesser extent some of the more important Asian nations east of the Urals.

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INDIA

Although India does not quite border on the Soviet Union -- a narrow strip of Afghanistan separates the disputed territory of Kashmir from India, Pakistan and the Soviet Union -- the Russians consider the subcontinent to be their backyard. Czarist Russia had designs on India up to the turn of this century and Khrushchev began to woo the Indians in seriousness when he came to power. Even before the recent closer relationship was established between the two countries, Russia had become the major arms supplier to the Indians and had built two steel mills for them. In August of 1971 Russia and India signed a treaty of "friendship, support and consultation in case of crises." The Soviets then strongly supported Indian diplomatically in the December Indo-Pakistan war.

The treaty which many point to as signaling a new era in Soviet-India relations was drafted in 1967-1968. Moscow was seeking to contain China then while India wanted assurances against both China and Pakistan. Although India became more friendly with the Soviets during this period, its desire for a more formal relationship waned. Mrs. Gandhi was preoccupied with solidifying her position as head of the Congress party which she did by winning a smashing two-thirds majority in last year's election.

As the undisputed leader of India, Mrs. Gandhi was free to direct her country's foreign policy as she wished. When the Pakistan army moved brutally into East Pakistan in March of 1971, Mrs. Gandhi and Soviet President Nicolai Podgorny were the only leaders of any stature to immediately denounce this action.

As Spring moved into Summer and Mrs. Gandhi could not rally the support of other major nations to speak out against Pakistan, the Indians decided to ask the Russians if they were still interested in the treaty. They most certainly were.

However, as Max Frankel, Washington correspondent of the New York Times, wrote after a trip to New Delhi: "The Indians do not mistake any of this for charity. Indeed, they see -- and admire -- a persistent and deftly managed Soviet effort over 15 years to make India the linchpin of their campaign for 'collective security' on Asia's southern tier, from Turkey across to Thailand and Malaysia.

"Nor do the Indians feel entirely comfortable without a stable strategic and political tie to the U.S. to balance the growing Soviet influence. But it is Moscow that is remembered for rushing to the rescue at a moment of panic and isolation and for letting India turn the diplomatic and military pressures back onto Pakistan."

C.L. Sulzberger in another New York Times story expressed a similar thought that India would not always be happy with such close ties with the Russians."

"Peking will probably reconcile itself to the changed Indian situation and, without abandoning Pakistani friendship, return to the type of understanding with Delhi that existed when Nehru was Prime Minister," Sulzberger wrote. This will ultimately help India to disengage from overreliance on Russia.

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"As China and the United States recognize certain mutual interests that transcend ideology, they will find it useful to work together in counterbalancing Soviet interest in India. Mrs. Gandhi might quite willingly play along to frustrate Moscow's efforts to gain any preponderant influence in Southeast Asia."

During my talks with Indian diplomats both in Delhi and other capitals I got the impression they were not overjoyed by the closeness of their present relationship with the Soviets. Although provoked, angered or saddened (depending on the person with whom I talked) with the United States for not supporting India in its confrontation with Pakistan, the diplomats expressed hope that relations between the U.S. and India could be improved.

"I don't like to use the word balance," one Indian diplomat told me, "but we would like closer relations with the U.S. because our present situation is an embarrassment to us. The Indian public look on the Soviets as saviors when they are not. Disillusionment will set in when they find this is not true and our government may be blamed for creating the illusion."

In my talks with government officials, diplomats, newspapermen and intellectuals throughout the trip I asked three specific questions:

1. What does the Soviet-Indian treaty mean in the way of closer ties between the two countries?
2. Will the Soviets get naval bases for their Indian Ocean fleet as some military and civilian leaders in Washington believe will eventually occur?
3. Does India in her new position of strength, after defeating Pakistan and with Mrs. Gandhi so firmly in power, wish to extend her influence to other Asian countries as Nehru tried to do some years ago?

Although foreign observers agreed that the treaty meant closer ties between India and the Soviet Union, they did not feel the Indians would be drawn as tightly to the Russians as some in Washington fear.

"The Indians are too nationalistic to slip too far into the Soviets' arms," one foreign diplomat said. "There is a possibility for friction in any bilateral treaty and the Soviets are not always known for their delicate touch on the diplomatic front. They will run into trouble if they push the Indians too hard to do what the Soviets want because of the treaty and their support for India during the war. Mrs. Gandhi is in a strong political position and she won't be dictated to by anyone."

"Of course, the Soviets will continue to be the Indian's major arms supplier for some time to come and this does give them some leverage. However, these are military sales on international terms - they are not grants. "The Indian leaders feel an affinity for the Russians as fellow Asians while Russia sees its relationship with India as part of the global containment of China. Soviets have a greater realization of the size and power of India because of geography than does the United States."

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An Indian diplomat described the treaty thusly:

"In case of a threat to the peace of either nation the treaty calls for immediate consultation with a view to removing that threat or restoring the peace. It is not like the Soviet-Egyptian treaty. There is no commitment to supply war materiel or defense personnel. We have made it clear we are opposed to the stationing of military personnel on our territory except for military attaches of Embassies. This would be an encroachment on our policy of non-alignment."

While some observers say the new treaty with the Soviets makes India's non-alignment policy a farce, Indians are quick to deny this. They say it is just slightly more than a treaty of friendship and whenever the United States wishes to improve its relations with India they are willing and able to do so. At present the U.S. seems content to let the situation remain as it is, perhaps feeling the Indians should be the ones to mend the fences and will have to do so if the Russians tighten the screws.

On the question of naval bases, Indians are quick to say it won't happen.

"Reassure Washington there will be no naval bases," a Foreign Office spokesman said. "The Soviet treaty is not a mutual defense pact but only one of consultation."

"The Soviets have not broached the subject yet," an Indian diplomat said, "but if they expect to get special port facilities they are sadly mistaken. They will have the same right to call at our ports for refueling and rest and recreation as U.S., British or French ships."

I was referred to the statement made by Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy, when he visited India in April.

"The Soviet Union does not have any bases in the Indian Ocean," Admiral Gorshkov said in Bombay on April 8, "and it has no plans to have such bases."

However, the Soviet Union is collaborating with the Indians in a one billion, 500 million rupee (about \$2 million) naval base at Visakhapatam in the Bay of Bengal. Skeptics predict the Soviets will have special privileges there when the base is completed. In any case Soviet ship visits to Indian ports will be more frequent if the Russians increase their naval presence in the Indian Ocean as expected.

Some students of Indian affairs expect Mrs. Gandhi, with her political position secure at home, better economic conditions prevalent in India and in the wake of her country's prestigious defeat of Pakistan, to move India toward a position of greater influence to the East. Nehru tried this once before but found Asian nations reluctant to accept Indian leadership of the less developed nations. Many Southeast Asian lands have sizeable Indian minorities and are not anxious to see India increase its influence in their countries. Nevertheless, if there were a propitious time for such an Indian diplomatic offensive, it is now.

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The Soviets may be encouraging India to become their stalking horse for better Russian relations with Southeast Asian nations... An Indonesian source told me that Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko had advised the Indians they should influence Indonesia to join hands with the Soviet Union to keep out China and the U.S. However, there are swift denials from official Indian sources that they have any desires to influence other Asian nations.

"We have no ambitions toward other Asian countries," a Foreign Office spokesman said. "India is no larger nor more powerful now than before the war. Why should our victory make any difference in how we are viewed by other Asian nations. Our main desire is to see a peaceful subcontinent so we can devote our time and resources to internal problems."

An Indian "hawk" in the New Delhi intellectual community says he thinks it would be a mistake for India to try to extend its influence in Asia.

"India is a large power like the United States and it should bend over backwards to tread lightly abroad," he said, "But we must become a nuclear power so we can not be taken for granted by the United States or anyone else. If we have nuclear weapons, India can insulate itself from major power influence.

"As long as we do not have this power, the United States will not take us seriously. You will continue to interfere in our affairs. If we had nuclear weapons, the United States would not have dared send the Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal during the war. You would not have dared risk a nuclear war."

This was not the first time Indians had mentioned the Enterprise to me or other Americans. The dispatch of the aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal angered the Indians more than any other action the U.S. took during the Indian-Pakistan nine-month dispute.

"Up until you sent the Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal," a pro-Western Indian told an American in Delhi, "I had never thought in my wildest dreams we could have a military clash with the United States -- serious diplomatic differences, yes, but not a military confrontation. But when I heard the Enterprise had been sent to the Bay of Bengal, I suddenly realized there could actually be such a clash."

Any discussion of Indian-Soviet relations must lead into an examination of the Russian relationship with the other major nations of the subcontinent - Pakistan and Bangladesh.

BANGLADESH

Bangladesh with its 76 million people is the eighth most populous nation in the world; it is also one of the poorest nations in the world. Its internal problems are immense. Opportunities for the Soviets to exert influence in Bangladesh are there and they have moved quickly to take advantage of them.

A Soviet-Bangladesh Friendship Association opened within a month after the war was over and is extremely active. Trade talks have been held between the two countries. A Soviet--Bangladesh friendship treaty has been signed. (However, it does not go so far as the Soviet--Indian treaty on the matter of consultations in the case of a threat to the peace of either nation.) Russians are clearing the Bangladesh harbor of Chittagong which was heavily bombed by the Indians during the war.

Bhutto made his mission to Moscow in March. With his background as a supporter of close Pakistan-Soviet ties, Bhutto perhaps expected more than he got from the Russians. They did agree to send back their technicians who had left during the war to continue work on \$465 million in aid projects including a \$200 million steel mill which has been on the drawing boards for six years. However, apparently when Bhutto asked the Russians to use their influence with India and Bangladesh to free Pakistani prisoners of war and help work out a permanent peace, he was told this was a problem to be negotiated bi-laterally by Pakistan.

What shook up the Pakistanis even more was a Soviet explanation of its actions in Bangladesh. The Russians told Bhutto they had supported the people of East Bengal because theirs was a war of self determination and if a similar situation arose in the future they would take the same action.

Pakistanis with whom I talked in Islamabad and Karachi insist on applying this rather vague statement directly to their problems in the Northwest Frontier Province. There Bhutto has clashed with Khan Abdul Wali Khan, head of the National Awami Party, which came out of the December 1970 elections as the strongest party in the Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Bhutto's party won strong majorities in the other two provinces of Pakistan, the Punjab and the Sind, but was virtually shut out in the Frontier and in Baluchistan.

There have been several serious armed clashes between Bhutto supporters and Awami Party members while Wali Khan has waged a vociferous public campaign for a greater voice in governing the province. Wali Khan won a recent round when Bhutto backed down from his original intention of appointing a member of his People's Party as governor of the Northwest Frontier and named a person acceptable to the Awami Party.

However, Pakistanis expect Wali Khan to keep pressing for more provincial autonomy for the Northwest Frontier which is the home of the tough Pathan tribesmen. Wali Khan's demands are reminiscent of Sheik Mujib's claims for greater East Pakistan autonomy which eventually led to a confrontation with the Pakistan central government. Few think Wali Khan's movement is secessionist but they caution Bhutto must move carefully or the Northwest Frontier could erupt.

Should this happen, many Pakistanis believe the Soviets would back Wali Khan diplomatically and perhaps even with arms. They interpret the Soviet statement on wars of self determination as meaning just this.

Although it is true Wali Khan's National Awami Party has been considered to be vaguely pro-Moscow in the past and perhaps therefore worthy of Soviet support, it is hard to see what Russia would gain by more unrest in the sub-continent, this time close to her borders.

In any case, the situation in the Northwest Frontier with all its ramifications for Pakistan and possibilities for drawing the major powers once more into taking sides on the subcontinent make not only Pakistanis nervous. Pathans make up 30 percent of the Pakistani army and the British could not conquer these mountain people during 200 years of intermittent fighting in the lands near the famed Khyber Pass. A struggle in the Northwest Frontier Province could involve Afghanistan where more than half the population is Pathan and the Soviets might be drawn into a protracted civil war.

Bhutto has his hands full. He still must make a peace with India which will return 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war. The Northwest Frontier is a trouble spot as is Baluchistan to a lesser extent. Hawks in the military mumble among themselves about taking over again if Bhutto can't make a just peace and fighting another round with India which they would

surely lose. So Bhutto longs to rebuild his axis with the Soviets and China to give him more foreign support at least.

The Soviets will do nothing towards Pakistan which would jeopardize their relations with India. But they might be willing to work out something with Bhutto on Soviet terms, perhaps even a pact of some sort since Russia puts such great store on written agreements.

"The Soviets are trying to build a cordon around their southern flanks," a member of the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs told me in Karachi. "They have India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan on their side now with Burma neutral. Only Pakistan remains."

JAPAN

Speaking of Russian flanks, far to the East and adjacent to Soviet Siberia is Japan.

If Soviet foreign policy in Asia is based on containment of China, as many believe, a better relationship between Russia and Japan is essential. Japan is the only Asian nation with sufficient potential to balance China.

The time would seem ripe for a new Soviet diplomatic offensive toward Japan. Japan and the United States have had their differences lately. And Japan seems ready now to adopt an international stance more commensurate with its economic power. The Soviets have made recent overtures to Japan but they have a long way to go to overcome the natural suspicion the two countries have for each other.

"The Japanese have an obvious distrust of the Russians," says Arnold Horelick, visiting Professor of Political Science at Hunter College and an expert on Japanese affairs. "They will do nothing to jeopardize their alliance with the U.S. or their chances of bettering relations with China."

One might say the feeling is mutual since Russians genuinely feel Japan can be a threat to their security. They remember the Russo-Japanese war, the undeclared war of the 1930's and World War II to mention only a few of the clashes between the two countries.

If the Soviets hope to establish better relations with Japan they must return the islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai Island group which the Japanese call the Northern Territories and which the Soviets have occupied for 25 years. The return of these islands is what is standing in the way of a Soviet-Japanese Peace Treaty which has never been signed after World War II.

The Japanese feel so strongly about these islands that they have printed several illustrated booklets detailing their position and have made it perfectly plain to the Russians - no islands, no peace treaty, no better relations. The Russians on their part have stalled for years and seem stubbornly reluctant to hand back the islands although they must know any relationship of the sort they hope for with Japan depends on a peace treaty.

Before the Soviets occupied the islands in August, 1945, 16,000 Japanese lived there. No Japanese live there now. The nearest island is about three miles from Japanese territory. The waters around the islands abound in fish and marine products making them among the three biggest fishing grounds in the world.

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MOVING SOUTHWARD

The Soviet Union has publicly staked a role for itself in Asian affairs. In June, 1969 Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev invited an Asian security system. Although quite vague about just what kind of a security system they envisioned in Asia, the Soviets plainly intend to be part of it. They have pressed Asian nations, especially Malaysia, to react.

Professor Russell Fifield, Senior Research Associate of the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University doubts that Asian nations will rise to the bait.

"I don't believe the Southeast Asians will sign security pacts with the Soviets," he says. "The Southeast Asians have an ambivalent attitude towards Russia. Some believe they can play the Russians off against the Chinese. Another view is that they should welcome the Russians because if there is more than one power with influence in the area, they won't be dominated by any one power. But they don't look upon the Russians as a threat as they do the Chinese."

This may be an advantage to the Soviets but it is also true that the Southeast Asians don't consider the Russians Asians as they do the Chinese or as the Indians view the Soviets. Therefore Russian activity is viewed by the nations of the area as strictly that of an outsider, not a fellow Asian.

The Russians are perhaps doing as well as anywhere in the area in Malaysia, which sells almost all its rubber crop to the Soviets, but this isn't saying a great deal. The Southeast Asians are willing to trade but not much more.

"All of a sudden the Soviets are making overtures towards us," an Indonesian diplomat told me. "It caught us by surprise. They wanted to send the Moscow circus to Indonesia but President Suharto turned them down. We still remember what the communists tried to do in 1965 and we don't want cultural relations yet.

"They have talked to us about a steel mill and a fertilizer plant which we would welcome. We would also like their aid to develop our bauxite and tin. Above all we would like them to buy our rubber like they do from Malaysia. I would list our future prospects with the Soviets like this: (1.) Better cultural relations - zero. We are afraid of communist infiltration. (2) Better political relations, 50%- It is unavoidable. (3.) Better trade relations, 100%."

Certainly Indonesia, the fifth most populous country in the world with its wealth of natural resources, will be a prime Soviet target in that part of the world.

AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

The farther one travels from the Soviet Union in Asia the less fears you find of Russian influence.

Certainly Australia is not tense about what the Soviets are doing in Asia and New Zealand is completely relaxed, content to go along with Australia in joint efforts to ward off communist influence in the area whether from Russian or Chinese sources.

Through the Five Power agreement signed in April of 1971, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom affirmed their continuing determination to "continue to cooperate closely in defense arrangements." This means that Australia, New Zealand and Britain

(operating under the anagram ANZUK) will continue to station troops in Malaysia and Singapore to assure their defense against any alien powers. Clearly as long as this arrangement lasts Australia feels it is doing its part to contain communism in those two countries.

As for Indonesia which borders on the Australian territory of New Guinea, the Australians have a definite interest. They are providing aircraft and military equipment to Indonesia and a certain amount of economic aid. The Australians are also training a dozen Indonesian pilots. They would not like to see the Soviets extend their influence in Indonesia but are not really worried about this prospect in the near future.

The Australians do see the Soviets as a major power in the Indian Ocean for some time to come.

"The recent Soviet strengthening of its economic and military presence in the Indian Ocean region is only one facet of a world-wide plan by the Soviet Union to extend its influence and shape its foreign policy as befitting that of a super power," is the way a report on the Indian Ocean region by an Australian Joint Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs put it recently. "This must be regarded as permanent and likely to increase. The most important Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean region are the initiatives taken in the economic, political, diplomatic and military involvement and assistance which is applied to those major areas of the region in which the Soviet Union seeks to obtain greater influence, power and prestige. The Indian Ocean is a major area of competition between the People's Republic of China and the U.S.S.R."

The Australians see the Soviets as using their Indian Ocean fleet to impress on countries in the area that they are a world power to be reckoned with and thereby helping the Russians to increase their influence in that part of Asia.

Although the actual size of the Soviet Indian Ocean fleet has averaged four to six warships and support ships with a maximum of 12 at one time, it is buttressed by other vessels.

As the Australian report puts it: "The Soviet presence is not only confined to naval and support vessels. She possesses the world's largest oceanographic fleet as well as one of the largest, if not the largest, fishing fleet, a large proportion of which is stationed in the Indian Ocean.

"Evidence submitted suggested that such fleets can be run on quasi-military lines and are closely integrated with the Soviet Navy. A number of fishing trawlers are easily identified as being equipped for intelligence collection and, together with the oceanographic ships, tend to be the eyes and ears of Soviet intelligence in areas not adequately covered by their naval units. In addition, the Soviet merchant fleet, now the sixth largest in the world and expected to double by 1980, is regularly used in support of warships, including submarines."

To illustrate the amount of Soviet naval activity in the Indian Ocean it should be noted that more than 350 Russian ships called at Singapore harbour during 1970. The Soviets are expected to increase this activity in the future.

To sum up, it appears that the Soviets will continue in their attempts to consolidate gains made in the sub-continent with great attention being paid to India and Bangladesh. What they can accomplish in Southeast Asia without too much cost to themselves the Soviets will try to do. As for Japan, we can only observe what the Soviets are willing to do to work out a better relationship with the Japanese and how the Japanese will respond. Should the Soviets and the Japanese sign a peace treaty and move into close economic

cooperation in Siberia, it could radically change the current situation in Asia. This is worth watching, for all observers agree that the Soviets' major long range aim in Asia is to neutralize Japan while they build up greater influence to contain China.

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