

Reorienting the Orient

by Robert E. Bedeski

The past year witnessed an acceleration of political reform, leadership transition, and reduction of tensions in East Asia. In China, the thirteenth Congress of the Communist Party of China elected Zhao Ziyang to be General Secretary, and consolidated the reform movement, after signs earlier in the year of wavering and conservative counterattack. Li Peng, regarded as more conservative, was named Premier, and has indicated his support for the reforms. Relations with Taiwan have also rapidly improved, with exiled mainlanders allowed to visit families. Under the late President Jiang Jingguo (Chiang Chingguo), the Guomindang ended martial law and has allowed the formation of opposition political parties. On the Korean peninsula, the election of Roh Tae Woo to the South Korean presidency may produce a breakthrough in Beijing-Seoul relations. In the USSR, Gorbachev's perestroika takes a few pages from the Chinese experience in economic reform. Major changes are taking place in East Asia, and China is playing a pivotal role.

Three trends

Three major trends can be identified in the 1980s regarding the Asia-Pacific region which may continue through the end of the century. These trends have affected China, and in turn will be affected by Chinese modernization. In particular, these trends are likely to produce modifications in the balance of power in the region. First, socialism as a developmental strategy has lost its attractiveness. China's rising prosperity and more rational political order has been increasing in proportion to its abandonment of Maoist and Stalinist ideology and institutions. State and party control has led to economic stagnation in the communist world, and today the USSR, Hungary, Vietnam, and even North Korea are introducing measures which were denounced as capitalist a few years ago.

In China, this ideological and economic pragmatism was further consolidated at the thirteenth Party Congress, while the leaders maintained the line that the country was at a primary stage of socialism. General Secretary Zhao Ziyang declared that China would continue its modernization program, its open door policy, emphasis on the "commodity economy" with public ownership playing the dominant role, and "democracy on the basis of stability and unity." There is little reason to believe that the Chinese commitment to the "new and improved" socialism is anything less than sincere. But it would be a mistake to conclude that political, economic, and social stability are assured for the next decade.

The "conservatives," those leaders who want to maintain the central party dictatorship, have either retired or are over-

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shadowed by the reformers. Domestic peace has been achieved for the present, and few want to return to the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the relative ease of reform in China may be due to the destruction of the Maoist days — Mao, the "gang of four," and the Red Guards probably inflicted a sufficient shock on the party, government and society such that a return to the old ways would be a worse evil than the sweeping experiments and reforms currently underway. This contrasts with the USSR, for example, where no such shock has been encountered in recent years, and a stagnant status quo may be preferable to an unknown restructuring.

US decline

The second major trend has been the decline of the "American Empire." The US pullout from Vietnam in 1975, and the subsequent hostage incident in Teheran were turning points in Asian perceptions of the US as a superpower. The OPEC oil embargoes earlier also contributed to the view of the US as a giant with feet of clay. President Reagan's military buildup — at the cost of severely weakening the US economy — may have slightly increased confidence in US resolve to maintain international commitments, but this has not disguised the slowdown in economic growth as Japanese banks and investors attempt to prop up the eroding dollar.

The US has reached a plateau in projecting national power, and it is unlikely that any Korean- or Vietnam-type interventions in East Asia will be tolerated for decades ahead. For countries of the region, this plateau represents a decrease in US power. This decline coincided with the end of the Cultural Revolution in China, and marked the end of superpower balance, with the result that the Chinese expected greater Soviet pressure unless they abandoned their relative isolation and aligned with the "declining superpower." The Chinese have tended to see the Reagan era as one of relative stalemate, with some progress in arms control. Despite public denunciation of SDI, Beijing strategists probably had mixed reactions. A new leap in nuclear technology through SDI research, whether offensive or defensive, would leave the Chinese more vulnerable to threat than before, and would require a major investment to stay in the same place vis-à-vis nuclear technology. On the other hand, US commitment to SDI has undoubtedly played a role in bringing Gorbachev to the bargaining table, and perhaps slowing the arms race.

The PRC and other countries in the region are considering the effects of gradual erosion of US influence in the Western Pacific. To take the place of the American imperium, the Sino-Soviet rivalry will no doubt continue to simmer in places such as Vietnam, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and North Korea. The Chinese insistence on their exclusive right to Tibet is also linked to fears