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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

31 July 1987

East Asia Reacts to Gorbachev's Merdeka Interview [redacted]

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Summary

East Asia, for the most part, has welcomed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's global double-zero proposal on INF. Beijing and Tokyo are applauding his offer to remove short- and long-range missiles from the Soviet Far East, but publicly are remaining silent on his call for corresponding cuts in Pershing missiles under West German control.

[redacted]

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[redacted] P'yongyang has not acknowledged the proposal; Seoul has also maintained an official silence, but the South Korean press has responded negatively by contending that the idea complements North Korean security proposals. Hanoi is voicing strong support for the scheme and giving it extensive media play.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Office of East Asia Analysis, and [redacted] the Office of Soviet Analysis. Information available as of 31 July 1987 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may directed to the Chief, International Security Branch, China Division, OEA, [redacted]

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Copy 11 of 34

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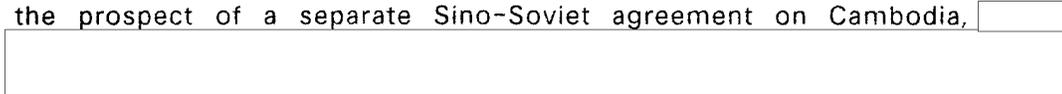
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Only China and Vietnam responded to Gorbachev's expression of willingness to have the Cambodian problem solved politically. China's official news agency on 26 July called for Soviet action rather than mere rhetoric. We believe, however, that Beijing in private views Gorbachev's comments as an extension of the greater Soviet flexibility exhibited at the 10th round of bilateral political talks in April. Beijing probably will seek Soviet follow-up during the annual meeting of the Chinese and Soviet foreign ministers at the UNGA in September and at the 11th round of bilateral political talks in October. Hanoi, meanwhile, is concerned about the prospect of a separate Sino-Soviet agreement on Cambodia,



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Gorbachev Plays the Asian Card

Gorbachev used his interview of 21 July with the editor of Indonesia's widely distributed Merdeka newspaper to review and elaborate on the good neighbor policy he unveiled a year ago in Vladivostok. The principal focus of the interview was disarmament, and Gorbachev announced Moscow's willingness to eliminate all short- and long-range INF missiles from Asia as well as Europe if all Pershing missiles under West German control are dismantled.¹ We believe Gorbachev had several reasons for making his proposal public in an interview with an East Asian newspaper:

- The Soviets were able to portray their willingness to eliminate the missiles in Asia as a bow to the sensitivities of the countries of the region -- a claim that would have been less persuasive if the proposal had been announced in a bilateral US-Soviet forum.
- By highlighting the Asian angle, Moscow probably hoped that Beijing and Tokyo will lobby Washington not to let a "minor" issue like the Pershings block the elimination of Soviet INF in the Far East.
- The global double-zero proposal ensured maximum publicity in East Asia for a second major conciliatory message on the anniversary of his Vladivostok speech.
- By announcing the proposal through an Asian newspaper, the Soviets circumvented the interpretive filter of the Western press.

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The INF Issue

Beijing reported the global double-zero proposal in a straightforward manner. Earlier US efforts to persuade Beijing that an agreement calling for the reduction of Soviet INF warheads in the Far East to 100 was the best that could be expected



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probably fueled Chinese suspicions that Washington is more concerned about its NATO allies than about its friends in Asia. Although Beijing has assessed that Washington would not immediately accept Moscow's demand on the Pershings and that negotiations therefore would continue, in our judgment Gorbachev's latest proposal has struck a responsive chord with the Chinese and has planted the seeds of resentment if US-Soviet INF talks break down over the Pershings. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted] the US Embassy in Tokyo reports that Japanese Foreign Ministry officials are concerned that the Pershings represent a significant impediment and a potential wedge to divide the West on arms control. Moreover, Tokyo has yet to react to Gorbachev's suggestions of further steps -- such as freezing the number of nuclear-capable aircraft in the Soviet Far East in exchange for a US agreement not to introduce additional nuclear systems that can reach Soviet territory. Should Moscow formally table these ideas in Geneva, we believe Tokyo would oppose restraints on US forward-based systems, which the Japanese view as key to deterring Soviet threats against Japan. [Redacted]

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North Korea has neither reacted officially to Gorbachev's INF proposal nor acknowledged it in the media. Although Moscow and P'yongyang have supported each other's security initiatives in Asia over the past two years, it is not clear how well the latest Soviet offer meshes with North Korea's concurrent proposal for staged force reductions on the Peninsula. The Soviets have dropped their previous demand for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from South Korea. But the North Korean initiative repeats P'yongyang's traditional insistence on this point. It is possible North Korea is pressing a demand the Soviets hoped to shelve pending an INF agreement in Geneva. Soviet public comment on the North Korean proposal, while positive, is less supportive than Chinese commentary and is expressed by relatively low-level officials. [Redacted]

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South Korea has also maintained an official silence on the Gorbachev offer. As with previous Soviet proposals, however, the South Korean media reaction has been negative, contending that Soviet ideas complement North Korea's security policy. One article in a conservative and generally progovernment newspaper claims Gorbachev has put Washington on the defensive and doubts the United States would find it easy to respond. At the same time, the article suggests the Soviet peace offensive could lead to an new era of detente. [Redacted]

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Hanoi has voiced strong support for Gorbachev's proposal. Vietnam has given it extensive media treatment, and Hanoi's ambassador to Moscow publicly lauded the proposal in a meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze on 25 July. [Redacted]

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Cambodia: Gorbachev Hints at Peacemaker Role

In his Merdeka interview, Gorbachev reiterated the Soviet view that the Cambodian problem can only be solved by political means, and claimed that the idea of a national reconciliation was gaining ground. By speaking about the possibility of a coalition of national forces, Gorbachev again stressed the need for dialogue rather than confrontation and avoided the issue of excluding Khmer Rouge elements from either negotiations or a resulting coalition government. We believe his remarks on Cambodia track well with an apparent Soviet effort over the past year to nudge Hanoi toward a negotiated settlement -- albeit not so hard as to anger the Vietnamese and jeopardize the Soviet naval presence at Cam Ranh. [Redacted]

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Only China and Vietnam have sharply reacted to Gorbachev's Merdeka comments on Cambodia. The New China News Agency roundup of 26 July on the Third International Conference on Cambodia noted Gorbachev's expression of support for solving the problem "politically," but predictably characterized apparent Soviet and Vietnamese "flexibility" as empty words designed to split up the Cambodian resistance coalition and to weaken its support in the international community. The article called on Moscow to promote peace through action rather than words, and urged the backers of the Cambodian resistance to increase their support. [Redacted]

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We believe, however, that the Chinese may privately welcome Gorbachev's remarks as the latest indication that Moscow is moving in the direction of an equitable settlement in Cambodia. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Beijing probably expects Moscow to follow up with concrete proposals when Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian and Shevardnadze hold their annual meeting at the UNGA in September and during the 11th round of bilateral political talks in October. [Redacted]

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The Chinese probably do not expect a quick settlement in Cambodia, however, and probably will hold out for one that includes a supervised withdrawal of Vietnamese forces and participation in a coalition government by Khmer Rouge elements -- although not necessarily including the so-called "Pol Pot clique." [Redacted]

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We believe the Vietnamese would be concerned if the Soviets were to follow up on Gorbachev's interview by assuming a dramatically higher profile in the search for a Cambodian settlement. [Redacted]

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East Asia Reacts to Gorbachev's Merdeka Interview 

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