

September 17, 1975
**Telegram from L.L Mehrotra, Charge d’Affaires in
Beijing**

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Summary:

China’s stance on Asian collective security and India-Soviet relations

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FROM: L.L Mehrotra, Charge d'Affaires in Beijing

TO: Shri Gurbachan Singh, Joint Secretary (N&EA), MEA

DATE: September 17, 1975

I am attaching a copy of a comprehensive note prepared by Shyam Saran, Second Secretary, on China and the Asian Collective Security.

Asia is fast becoming the hot-bed of contention between the Soviet Union, already a superpower, and China, aspiring for that status despite its forceful denials. There is mounting evidence of this rivalry not only in the Pacific region but in South Asia and the Middle East as well. The Chinese make no secret now of their fondness for continuing American security involvement in Asia as a counterpoise to the Soviet Union, and China's opposition to the Asian Collective Security proposal is another symptom yet of her pathological approach towards that country.

While the Chinese have been fretting and fuming over India's association with the Soviet Union, they have carefully noted India's very cautious response to the Soviet proposal and have welcomed it. Soon after Brezhnev's visit to India in November 1973, the Chinese media observed that the Soviet leader "tried once again to sell the system there, but the Indian government has as yet made no open commitment." Chou En-lai and Teng Hsiao-ping reportedly told a Japanese Delegation at the time that they had thought Mrs. Gandhi would buckle under Soviet pressure, were pleased that she did not do so and remarked that "this shows she is quite clever" - a rare compliment for a leader against whom their vendetta is all too clear. This was a far cry from China's sordid comment in 1969 with which they had greeted the Soviet proposal thus: "Now the Soviet revisionists have instructed their loyal lackeys, the Indian reactionaries, to prepare for a "system of collective security in Asia."

I trust that our present stance in the matter serves us best. We cannot oppose the proposal simply because it comes from the Soviet Union and yet cannot endorse it while it remains nebulous and its relevance and value to the present Asian context not quite proven. A total detachment on our part from the proposal would leave the Soviet Union displeased and the Chinese more disposed towards taking us for granted. However, we should take note of the fact that out of its keenness to have the proposal accepted, the Soviet Union is attempting to link it with proposals for regional zones of peace and neutrality and might be tempted to link it further with proposals for nuclear-free zones in Asia. That would imply support for Pakistan's proposal for South Asia as a nuclear-free zone and will obviously not suit us."

The Chinese policy in respect of South Asia is to walk on four legs, if one may say so, namely Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. China would not want any of them to show any predilection for moving towards the Asian Collective Security and would keep warning them of the dangers from "social imperialism and expansionism." Any suggestion on our part to look at the Asian Collective Security proposal with respect rather than circumspection would enhance China's capability to play our neighbors against us and shout us out of our present status in the non-aligned world.

I should be grateful for your comments.

SECRET

NOTE Compiled by Shyam Saran, Second Secretary

DATE: September 17, 1975

The history of Communist China is in some sense a chronicle of a claustrophobic battling for breath. A perennial fear of "encirclement" and "containment" underlies both the style and content of much of the foreign policy of the century. It is small wonder, therefore, that Chinese fulminations against the Soviet-sponsored scheme for Collective Security in Asia belong to the same genre as the tirade that met the rigging up of the CENTO and SEATO alliances in Asia by the USA in the fifties. The Soviet proposal was first made in 1969, a year which saw the two erstwhile Communist allies locked in armed clashes on a disputed border. For both, ideological, ethnic and political differences coalesced into an overriding concern with security from mutually perceived threats. Moscow's Asian Collective Security scheme, though theoretically embracing China as well, was announced at a juncture when only the naïve would have expected China to nod with favor and assent to participate. As it came to pass, a drastic readjustment in China's foreign policy was triggered off, which has as yet not been fully played out. In essence, this readjustment involved meeting a threat of Soviet encirclement with a Chinese inspired united front against "hegemony by Soviet social imperialism."

Definition of Collective Security: Though recent Soviet pronouncements have added some flesh to the vague proposal of collective security that was originally put forward in 1969, it is still anybody's guess as to what precise formula would be adopted for guaranteeing peace in the Asian continent. In the classic sense of the term, collective security is "the proposition that aggressive and unlawful use of force by any nation against any other nation will be met by the combined force of all nations." (Inis L. Claude Jr.). However, the recently concluded Helsinki Summit, which is being commended as an example for Asia by the Soviets, merely adopted certain "rules of the game" with no guarantee of collective enforcement. Besides, in the six years since the proposal was first put forward, Soviet presentation of the scheme has consistently changed both in form and substance, to take maximum advantage of the opportunities arising both in the Asian and the international environment.

Initially the Soviet proposal involved by all the participating States to the "well-known principle" of peaceful coexistence, respect for sovereignty and inviolability of existing borders, non-interference in internal affairs and "the broad development of economic and other cooperation on the basis of full equality and "mutual advantage." In effect what this meant was a second Bandung under the auspices of the Soviet Union. This would have the effect of giving tacit recognition to the Soviet Union as an Asian power.

In the second stage, which came after August 1971, the Soviets gave a new direction to their pet scheme. By this time, they had signed treaties of friendship and cooperation with at least two important Asian countries, India and Iraq, which were then commended as models for the rest of Asia to follow. These bilateral arrangements were described as the "first bricks" in the edifice of the proposed Collective Security System in Asia. On March 7, 1973, for instance, Moscow Radio said that Soviet-Indian relations could become "the foundation of the whole system of international relations in Asia." Thus, during the three-year stage, 1971-1974, Moscow has been projecting the security system, not as a multilateral system of guarantees, but rather as a network of bilateral treaties between the Soviet Union and other Asian countries. This would have had the effect of making the Soviet Union the sole sponsor and guardian of Asian security, a fact that was noted by the Chinese immediately and countered.

In the third stage, which commenced in mid-75, the pattern outlined above appears to have been abandoned at least for the time being. The Soviets have watched the virtual epidemic of schemes for regional neutrality, proposals for nuclear-free zones and mutual security pacts, emerge without Soviet sponsorship, and worse, applauded by the Chinese as being directed against Soviet "hegemony." This has now been countered by projecting the Collective Security Scheme as being in "consonance"

with these smaller-scale regional efforts. In fact, what the Soviets now seem to be saying is that all these separate strands could be merged together into an Asian penumbra, sponsored by the USSR. Yet, when the ASEAN first put forward its aim for neutralization in 1972, the Soviet Union had called it "unrealistic" and projected it as another stumbling block in the path towards realizing the goal of Asian security.

It has been hinted that the scheme could cover nuclear-free zones as well - something that could make it attractive to countries like Japan, and palatable to countries of West Asia and Pakistan, who have called for the creation of nuclear-free zones in West Asia and South Asia respectively. (On this point, please refer to pg. 44, Problems of Communism, Nov.-Dec. of 1973). This would bear watching by India as well, especially since the Soviets could not have been very happy about the lack of response from India to what is undoubtedly a very important project for the Soviet Union.

...(Had been fear in 1969 that USSR and India would work in collusion - Gandhi just said she was for economic cooperation)...The siege [of the second stage] was finally broken, symbolically, when the US President Nixon visited Peking in February 1972. The Japanese premier followed in September. The Soviet Union, for its part, finding little enthusiasm among the Asian countries for its "sinister-ware," as the Chinese labeled it, decided to bring the propaganda offensive into lower gear and bide their time for a more congenial Asian environment...

...The latest [meaning 1975] Soviet propaganda blitz over the virtues of the Asian Collective Security System started almost immediately after the successful conclusion of the European Security Conference in July 1975. This event, more or less, coincided with the total US withdrawal from Indo-China, and the psychological if not military, "vacuum" this created for America's allies in Asia. Having made suitable adjustments in the concept of collective security, as we have noted above, Soviet Union lost no time in trying to convince the "orphaned" Asian States that their salvation lay in participating in the scheme. Similarly, nations like Nepal were informed that the proposal for neutralization of the country was not different from the concept of collective security of Asia.

China has responded with its offensive against what it calls Soviet "hegemonism" in Asia. Thus during the last one year, in joint communiqués signed with Malaysia (June 1974), Philippines (July 1975) and Thailand (July 1975), a pledge to oppose "any attempt by any country or group of countries to establish hegemony or create spheres of influence in any part of the world" is also included. Chinese propaganda has made it amply clear that for China, hegemony is merely an euphemism for the Soviet Union. It is precisely because of this that China insists on the inclusion of an "anti-hegemony" clause in the proposed Sino-Japanese Peace Treaty, which would imply a virtual alliance against the Soviet Union. Thus while the Soviet Union says that China's opposition to collective security "proves" that it is against peace in Asia, China says that Soviet opposition to the inclusion of an "anti-hegemony" clause in the treaty with Japan, is "evidence" of Soviet quest for such hegemony! In fact, both are trying to outmaneuver each other through rival alliances, whether formal or informal.

In the latest offensive, the Chinese are making similar point as before, but the focus is on South East Asia and Japan. For instance, an article in Peking Review No. 33 of 1975, entitled "Soviet Social Imperialists Covet South-East Asia," concentrates on the following issues:

One of the ways used by the Soviet Union to make the proposal acceptable to South East Asian nations is the link it up with the ASEAN proposal for neutralization. However, the Soviet scheme is "designed to serve nothing but the Kremlin's policies of aggression and expansion." Evidence of this is in the opposition to the joint control of Malacca Straits in 1971 by Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, and the initially adverse reaction to the ASEAN's neutralization proposal.

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□□The Soviet Union is actively seeking military bases in South-East Asia and the Indian Ocean, in order to step into the shoes of the United States. Hence, it cannot be considered a genuine supporter of neutralization.

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Similarly, other articles have strenuously tried to delink regional zones of peace and neutrality, which China supports, from the Soviet Asian Collective Security System...

...The wheel has thus come full circle. From being a means of "colluding" with the US for encircling China, the Asian Collective Security System has now become a means for "contending" with the US in Asia. The target is not specifically China, but the entire Asian continent. No mention has been made so far of India's association with the scheme in the current phase of Chinese propaganda. However, for all those who may compromise with the Soviet Union or oppose "anti-hegemony" so as not to displease this "social-imperialist superpower," the People's Daily editorial rings a rather ominous message: "Whether in the world as a whole or in Asia and the Pacific region, opposition to hegemonism is a question people of all countries and on which there must be no equivocation.

A concluding word about India may be in order. As pointed out earlier, the Soviet Union has skillfully kept changing the contents of its Asian security proposal in order to keep it topical and flexible enough to adjust to twists and turns of the Asian environment. For India, the possibility that such a scheme may incorporate concepts like Nepal as a zone of peace or South Asia as a nuclear-free zone, make it necessary to keep a careful and critical watch on the changing hues of the Soviet proposal for Asian Collective Security. China's silence on India's association with the scheme dates back to Mr. Brezhnev's visit to Delhi in 1973, when the Chinese even "admired" Mrs. Gandhi for having no truck (?) with the Soviets' pet scheme. In the light of constant accusations of Indo-Soviet "collusion," silence on possible Indo-Soviet partnership in such a collective security scheme appears rather unusual and uncharacteristic. Perhaps, the Chinese are genuinely impressed by India's cautious approach to the proposal. It is also significant that another emerging power centre in Asia, Vietnam, has also been shy of associating with the proposal.

On present indications, therefore, Sino-Soviet rivalry may be expected to intensify further in the region of Asia, especially North-East and South-East Asia. Moscow's scheme for Collective Security in Asia finds its symmetrical opposite in the Chinese "anti-hegemony" ring. Both nations are acutely aware, however, that the attitude of countries like India, Japan and now Vietnam would be crucial in deciding the fate of these respective initiatives.