

ERIC
MARGOLIS

China's fears

In the ancient oriental game of Go, each player strives to surround or isolate his opponent's pieces. Today in Asia, Russia and China are locked in a gigantic game of Go: Its outcome could well affect our immediate future.

Recent talks that I held in Peking with senior Chinese strategists conveyed China's very real fears of growing Russian encirclement. According to these strategists, Moscow is determined to push U.S. influence out of Asia, impose its own hegemony, and neutralize China by a process of isolation.

In effect, Russia is using the same grand strategy against China that the U.S. has employed against the Soviet Union for the past 30 years. Surround your enemy by powerful, hostile neighbors and keep him on the defensive.

Soviet strategy has proven successful. Since 1970, Afghanistan has been absorbed and Pakistan threatened; India and North Korea both secured as allies. Moscow's Vietnamese surrogates have occupied South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Mongolia, once independent, is today a virtual province of the Soviet Union.

The Asian order of battle shows this picture in sharp relief. Along its 3,800-mile border with China, Russia has deployed 450,000 troops in 52 divisions and 1,900 combat aircraft. Soviet forces in the Far East have increased by 50% over the last 15 years and now receive Moscow's latest equipment.

Equally alarming to the Chinese, Russia has been making a determined effort to dominate China's long, exposed coastline by means of a vast naval encirclement. The Soviet Far Eastern Fleet today patrols a 2,800-mile arc extending from Vladivostok in the north to Vietnam's ports of Danang and Camranh Bay.

Moscow's ally, Vietnam, with the world's third largest army, deploys nearly one million men against China's southern border. Russia's most recent strategic ally, India, has 900,000 soldiers and is threatening to attack China's ally, Pakistan.

Unpredictable North Korea

North Korea, flirting with both Moscow and Peking, remains unpredictable. Its powerful army of over 750,000 is a potential threat to China's industrial north. Nor can Peking ignore Taiwan, whose crack armed forces of 464,000 still menace the southern coast.

Given this threatening encirclement, China's huge but antiquated and immobile armed forces of 4.5 million do not seem excessive. China may well be impossible to occupy in total, but key economic and strategic areas, such as the Peking region, coastal cities or industrial Manchuria, are vulnerable to enemy action.

"The Russians," Chinese strategists told me, "are rapidly pushing into Asia. They are determined to dominate the entire area from Pakistan to Japan."

Moscow clearly recognizes that Asia is quickly becoming the world's economic centre. American trade with Asia, for example, now exceeds that with the Common Market by 50% and accounts for 30% of total U.S. exports. China's emergence, under the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, as a modern industrial power will ensure that Asia becomes the focus of world economic and political attention for the coming decades.

China realizes that it cannot alone withstand Russian efforts to gain strategic mastery of the growing Asian economic colossus. Active U.S. military support is essential. Listening to Chinese strategists is stunning; they sound remarkably like conservative Republicans.

"President Reagan has properly changed U.S. strategy in the Pacific." Or, "We wish the U.S. would station more aircraft in Japan and Korea," and "America needs more warships in the Pacific."

The Chinese also heartily applaud the U.S. decision of three years ago to "link" military operations in Asia to those in Europe. This means that any Soviet invasion of Europe will be met by U.S. — and probably — Chinese attacks on Russia's Pacific provinces.

Vulnerable Soviet installations

This policy is very important. Russia's Pacific provinces, with their vital naval and air bases, are linked to the rest of the country by only two vulnerable rail lines or by 9,000 miles of ocean. The principal Soviet military and economic Far Eastern complex at Vladivostok lies only 100 miles from the Chinese border. Even a limited Chinese ground attack would gravely threaten key Soviet economic and military centres.

By menacing China on all sides, Russia hopes to neutralize its giant neighbor and to gain a free hand in Thailand, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines and Pakistan. I believe that Russia will also make sustained efforts to draw Taiwan away from the U.S. and into a new alliance with Moscow.

How should the West respond to this deadly game of strategic Go? We may not approve of China's totalitarian system nor trust Peking's long-term commitment to alliance with the West. China cares for us even less than we like China, but we badly need one another.

China ties down as many Russian divisions as does NATO. If Moscow could move a large portion of these troops to the western front, Europe would likely prostrate itself in fear before the overwhelming power of the Soviet Union. Without Chinese resistance, much of Asia would fall under Soviet military and political influence.

Once remote and unfriendly China has now become our most important Asian ally. Like it or not, China's destiny is now inextricably linked to our own.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)