

Fishy business in the North Pacific

An arrested "North Korean" fishing fleet and a surprise get-together in San Francisco last week focused attention on the north Pacific, a little-known but highly strategic part of the world where the territory of four major powers — the U.S., USSR, Japan and the Koreans — converge.

First, the mysterious fishermen. KGB coast guards caught 250 "North Koreans" poaching salmon off the Soviet Pacific coast. Upon examining the crews, the astonished Soviets found that nearly all were Japanese. For Tokyo, it was a mortifying embarrassment.

The fishing boats were using drift nets that strip-mine everything in their lethal path — and this after Japan had said it would limit the use of such nets. Worse, Japan had signed a fisheries treaty with the USSR that expressly forbade trawling in Soviet waters. North Korea, however, had no such treaty, so Japan's largest fishing firm simply made a deal with North Koreans and told its men to hoist North Korean flags.

This fishy business occurred while South Korea's president, Roh Tae Woo, was making a state visit to Japan. As the scandal unfolded, it also turned out that Tokyo had been making secret trade deals with the North Koreans after assuring South Korea it was not.

While the red-faced Japanese were trying to sort out this fiasco, Mikhail Gorbachev met this week with President Woo in San Francisco, engaging the North Koreans and making the Japanese very, very nervous.

North Korea is an ally of sorts of Moscow and a recipient of extensive Soviet military aid. South Korea and the USSR, which have no diplomatic relations, have been bitter enemies since the Korean War. Now, the wily Gorbachev has evidently decided to begin the proc-

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ess of opening political relations with the South and expanding trade links between the two nations.

There are two good reasons for Gorbachev's strategy. First, Moscow needs more trade with South Korea and access to its growing technological base. South Korea is now a leading world industrial power and a potential investor in the Soviet economy. Second, Gorbachev seems to be edging away from Moscow's previous support of the totalitarian regime of North Korea's "Beloved Leader," Kim Il Sung, whose murderous attacks on South Korean leaders and aircraft have made it an international pariah.

Now that he's rid of such nasty Stalinist tyrants as Romania's Ceausescu and East Germany's Honnecker, Gorbachev may now be aiming to unsettle the communist world's most odious leader, Kim Il Sung and his heir apparent, son Kim Jong Il, who seems even worse than his father.

Third, by romancing South Korea, Gorbachev is sending a strong message to the Japanese. Soviet-Japanese relations are, at best, frosty. The two nations are century-old rivals for domination of the Far East and North Pacific. They have fought two wars in the last 90 years. Russians and Japanese do not like one another at

all. Moscow's continued occupation of four small Japanese islands north of Hokkaido, which the USSR seized in 1945, has even prevented the former foes from signing a peace treaty to end their part of World War II.

In typical fashion, Gorbachev is now taking dramatic action to break this Cold War ice. Early next year, he will make a state visit to Tokyo in an attempt to normalize relations and obtain desperately needed economic aid. He may, as a bold gesture, give back two or all of the disputed islands — possibly in exchange for Japan getting rid of some U.S. military installations.

To prod the tough-negotiating Japanese to loosen their security links with the U.S. and become more friendly toward Moscow, the artful Gorbachev will remind his hosts in Tokyo of his new romance with South Korea and better relations with China. The Soviets believe Japan and South Korea will increasingly become trade rivals and intend to play them off against each other.

Equally important, the Soviets hold an ace in dealing with South Korea. If Kim Il Sung somehow gets overthrown, chances are that North Korea might just do an East Germany and joyfully reunite with the South. The result would be one of the world's leading industrial and military powers, with an armed forces of 1.2 million men. This prospect makes the Japanese and Chinese nervous. It is also one that will tend to make South Korea highly responsive to Moscow's demands.

Gorbachev has brilliantly succeeded in starting the breakup of NATO and lessening U.S. influence in Europe by sacrificing part of bankrupt East Europe. Now, he appears set to do the same gambit in Asia by ditching Kim Il Sung. Which will likely leave Moscow calling the shots in the North Pacific.