

Gorbachev pitches new era of goodwill

CHIENG MAI, Thailand — News this week that a group of leading South Korean electronics firms will exhibit their products for the first time this fall in the Soviet Union may hardly seem noteworthy to westerners. Here in Asia, however, this news is an important portent of things to come.

Staunchly anti-communist South Korea is sending out business feelers to Moscow, a long-time foe. Moscow has recently announced plans to join in the Seoul Olympics, over the bitter protests of its close ally, North Korea.

There are two messages here: First, as the U.S. threatens to limit imports from South Korea and other Asian capitalist nations, they are making open overtures to the East Bloc. Second, the USSR has decided that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Gorbachev has outlined a new policy toward Southeast Asia aimed at promoting Soviet economic and political influence in the region. It is clear to everyone that the world's economic centre is quickly shifting to Asia.

The Soviets have had little influence in this area and must now move quickly to assure their role there.

But Moscow is having great difficulty improving its Southeast Asian relations so long as the war in Kampuchea continues to fester. The anti-communist coalition of Thai-based royalists, nationalists and the Khmer Rouge have managed to fight 180,000 Vietnamese occupation troops to a stalemate. Propping up the pro-Vietnamese regime in Kampuchea and sustaining the war has bled Hanoi's desperately ill economy. In spite of \$3.5 million a day in Soviet aid, North Vietnam's people are on the brink of starvation.

Backing the anti-communist coalition are China and the ASEAN nations—Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia—supported by the U.S. and Japan. Gorbachev must somehow force the Vietnamese, "the Prus-



Eric ARGOLIS

sians of Southeast Asia," to give up their dream, at least for now, of conquering all of Indochina. The time to do so is ideal. Hanoi is sore pressed to sustain its 1.2-million man army, most of which guards the tense border with China. Financial pressure from Moscow and promises of western aid may persuade the stubborn Vietnamese to withdraw from Kampuchea.

All eyes in Asia are now on Afghanistan. Moscow insists that it will withdraw from Afghanistan and allow the Afghans to decide their own fate. Clearly, a settlement of the Afghan war would serve as a model for a settlement in Kampuchea. In the latter case, a solution may be much easier than in fragmented Afghanistan: The erratic but resilient Prince Sihanouk is the perfect compromise head of state.

Many Asians truly believe Gorbachev when he calls for a new era of peaceful co-operation and non-confrontation. Of course, we have all heard this siren song many times before, but this time there is optimism that the USSR's economic anemia may force it to pull in its claws. Senior Indian officials, for example, who are very close to the Soviet leadership, assured me that Gorbachev was absolutely set on doing just what he said. Could we be entering another "Era of Goodwill," like the relatively peaceful years from 1871 to 1914? "The Soviets," insisted a high-ranking Indian who had

been with Gorbachev the previous week, "are damned and determined to pull out of Afghanistan and end the Kampuchean War—this year."

If such rosy predictions come true, the next problem will be Angola. There, anti-communist UNITA forces, backed by South Africa and the U.S., have put the Soviet-sponsored Luanda regime on the defensive. If the key southern city of Cuito Cuanavale falls to its UNITA besiegers, the communists will have no hope of winning Angola's 13-year bush war.

Accordingly, South Africa seized the opportunity this week to boldly offer Moscow the very same deal that the Russians are proposing for Afghanistan: A coalition government and the pullout of all foreign troops.

The Soviets seem inclined toward a settlement in Angola though their Cuban allies, who have 40,000 troops there, want to go on fighting, just like the Vietnamese in Kampuchea. No wonder a top African National Congress official recently accused Gorbachev of being "a traitor to international Marxist-Leninism."

This will certainly be the year of the diplomats. Moscow, as the French saying goes, seems to be taking a step back in order to better leap forward in the future. Who knows, 1988 may see the end of three nasty wars—certainly a milestone in modern history.

Yet before we all get giddy with optimism, remember that all three conflicts are primarily civil wars sustained by outside powers. Ending these dirty wars may be beyond the ability of their foreign patrons—particularly in Afghanistan.

Still, Washington and Moscow seem too caught up for now in their new romance to allow nettlesome Afghans, Kampucheans or Angolans—or perhaps even Nicaraguans—to spoil their honeymoon.

And as they say here in Thailand, do not interrupt elephants while they mate.