

GORBACHEV'S

Pacific

GAMBIT

Late last year Gorbachev made the West another offer: the closure of the USSR's only Pacific base in return for the US bases in the Philippines. It was received in silence. Kevin Rowley explains why.

In his speech at Krasnoyarsk in September last year, Mikhail Gorbachev offered to abandon Soviet facilities at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam if the United States agreed to eliminate its military bases in the Philippines. Over the last decade, American officials have again and again pointed to Cam Ranh as the cutting edge of Soviet expansion in the Asian-Pacific region. Yet the US dismissed Gorbachev's offer, as one press report put it, "at first glance".

In fact, this response should surprise no one. Gorbachev first floated the idea in his Vladivostok speech in July 1986, as part of a broader proposal to demilitarise great-power relations in Asia. That was not welcomed by the US. One of Reagan's advisers responded by warning that the Soviets were backing military initiatives with "subtle diplomatic tactics", and expressed confidence that the countries of the region would judge America's "solid record" more favourably than Gorbachev's "sweeping suggestions of

'confidence-building measures'".

Americans like to think of themselves as opponents of colonialism. Yet the US launched its career as a great power in Asia with a classical act of colonialism — the military occupation of the Philippines during the Spanish-American War (1898-1902). It was then that the US Navy moved into Subic Bay. And what is now Clark Air Base began as a colonial outpost of the US Cavalry in 1902.

However, these bases did not assume their present importance in US strategic thinking until World War II. In the wake of Pearl Harbour, the American government decided on permanent deployment of US naval and air forces to the western Pacific and East Asia after the war. This would provide "security in depth" for the US itself, and a shield for American trade and communication routes throughout the Asian-Pacific region. When World War II ended, the US had secured a network of bases from Hawaii across to the Philippines, north to Japan itself, then through the Aleutians to Alaska.

This, it should be noted, occurred before the onset of the Cold War. The massive US military presence in the Philippines is the legacy of the globalisation of US interests in the first half of the Twentieth Century and of the resulting commercial and military rivalry with European colonialism and Japanese imperialism. It was not a response to Soviet "expansionism".

The US ended its colonial rule in the Philippines after World War II. But in 1947 the new government signed an agreement giving the US a 99-year lease on Clark and Subic, amended to a 25-year lease in 1966.

These are now huge facilities. The naval base at Subic Bay covers 55,000 acres of water and land. Clark Air Base once encompassed 130,000 acres (larger than Washington DC); since 1979 it has been reduced to a more modest 25,000 acres. There are 6,000 Americans stationed at Subic, and more than 9,000 at Clark. In addition, the American military directly employs about 45,000 Filipinos.

An important part of the Reagan administration's drive to



build up American military might has been a renewed emphasis on the importance of sea-power. As a naval commander explained:

... sea transport is the basis on which the United States conducts commerce and exerts military influence globally. Raw materials and finished goods must move to and from this continent to sustain the US economy. Military force and its support must be deliverable in all seas and to distant lands to protect vital national interests ... Why do we need a navy? Because only a navy can protect sea transport and project national power world-wide ... Loss of the ability to move safely on the seas is loss of global power.

In 1986 Gaston Sigur, Jr, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, explained that the Philippine bases were central to the US "strategy of forward deployment in Asia". They "provide a secure foundation which makes possible the pursuit of our larger political and economic interests in this key part of the globe". In addition to protecting the Philippines, he said, the bases "support our wide-ranging commitments all along the Asian littoral" from Korea to the Persian Gulf, and secure the "vital South

China sea-lanes against the ever-increasing Soviet threat".

For forty years, nationalists and leftists in the Philippines have viewed the bases as symbols of foreign domination. That view has recently begun to command wide support among the public, and within the Aquino government. The Americans were unpleasantly surprised by the tough stance taken by the Philippine Foreign Secretary, Raul Manglapus, in the review of the base-agreement that began in April last year.

The US presently pays the Philippines US\$180 million a year for the use of the bases. Manila points out that Washington pays US\$2 billion a year for its bases in Egypt and Israel, and complains that the Philippines is being short-changed. Manglapus began with demands of an annual payment of \$US1.2 billion, declaring that the Americans should "pay up or move out". He added: "If Filipinos want to grow they have to slay the American father image."

US officials, struggling with yawning budget and trade deficits, and convinced that their allies (including the Philippines) have been enjoying a "free ride" on defence

expenditures, responded angrily. "This isn't a real estate deal," complained Nicholas Platt, Ambassador to the Philippines. Then Secretary of State George Shultz declared: "There are those in the Philippines who think they have a great asset and should rent it out for a staggering sum. If that's their view we'll have to find some other place."

By October the two sides had struck a bargain. The Americans agreed to increase their annual payments to \$US481 million. They also agreed to consider "creative" debt restructuring to help the Philippines overcome the disastrous legacy of the Marcos years; but the existing base agreement expires in 1991. So bitter were the exchanges between US and Philippine officials during the latest review that the idea that it will not be renewed is now taken quite seriously. That would mean the phasing out of the American presence in the Philippines within five to ten years — regardless of what Gorbachev does about Cam Ranh Bay.

Cam Ranh rivals Subic as one of the great natural harbours of the Far East. It has long attracted the attention of naval commanders. The French first visited it in 1847 but, when they quit Indochina in the mid-1950s, they left only a handful of rotting barracks behind at Cam Ranh.

The development of major facilities there was the product of American intervention in Vietnam. Cam Ranh became the site of what *US News and World Report* described as "the largest overseas project undertaken since World War II". The US constructed a deep-water seaport with five piers, and a 10,000-ft concrete airfield. 25,000 American and South Korean troops were stationed there. This was the American answer to the problems of "finding ways and means of feeding, clothing, housing, arming, supplying and resupplying the powerful military machine the US is installing in Southeast Asia, 11,000 miles from its home base".

The Americans had no doubts that they would win the war in Vietnam. (Showing a reporter

around Cam Ranh, an officer proudly declared: "This is the way we've won all our wars — being in the right place at the right time with the mostest.") Thus they thought Cam Ranh might be "only the beginning":

Looking into the future, some military planners foresee the possibility of Cam Ranh becoming another vital link in the US defence chain facing Red China ... Clearly the US military complex on the Vietnamese coast is going to be bigger than anything the Americans have in Korea. It is impossible to say at this point how big the installation will be eventually ... Plans change daily — always up.

But the Vietnamese communist victory in 1975 put paid to such ideas, and in 1976 the Americans also had to abandon the bases they had built in Thailand during the war. American forces were retrenched to the off-shore island chain, above all, the bases in the Philippines, while Vietnam's Soviet allies pondered whether Cam Ranh might now be useful to them.

Leonid Brezhnev believed in security through strength. His generation of Soviet leaders had been seared by the Nazi invasion in 1941, and in 1962 he observed how John F. Kennedy had used US military superiority to force Nikita Khrushchev into a humiliating retreat during the Cuban missile crisis. After he replaced Khrushchev as general secretary of the CPSU in 1964, Brezhnev presided over a military build-up aimed at achieving military parity with the US. What Brezhnev wanted above all was to force the Americans to treat the Soviet Union as an equal. He saw no contradiction between this and negotiations aimed at detente and strategic arms limitation.

One of the great beneficiaries of security through strength was Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, commander of the Soviet navy. When the US navy developed the capability of launching nuclear attacks on the Soviet Union from submarines and aircraft carriers, he persuaded Brezhnev that the only way to counter this was for the Soviet navy to develop a blue-water capability. The reach of the Soviet navy, previously limited to coastal

defence, would be greatly extended. Yet the aim was still basically defensive. As an Israeli writer on strategic issues noted recently in *The Australian*: "According to most Western analysts, the Soviet navy's primary strategic wartime mission is to deny the US and NATO access to maritime regions close to the USSR that might be used for offensive operations against Soviet missile-launching submarine bastions of the Soviet homeland."

As the Americans well know, a navy with the global reach to which Gorshkov aspired needs access to ports and supply-points far from its home bases. For the Soviet Pacific Fleet, based in Vladivostok, Cam Ranh Bay must have looked an interesting proposition. Soviet officials inspected it shortly before the Vietnamese communist victory in 1975. They reportedly asked for use of the facilities there, but were refused by Hanoi, keen to avoid a hostile response from Washington and Beijing.

That consideration had become redundant by 1978. China had adopted a hostile policy; Washington sided with Beijing and refused to establish relations with Vietnam. Hanoi responded by throwing its lot in with Moscow. Even so, Soviet access to Cam Ranh came only after the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in February 1979.

Soviet use of the facilities at Cam Ranh grew slowly but steadily. In 1979 there were only two broken-down piers left at Cam Ranh. By 1985 the Soviets had added five floating piers and a floating dock, and a fuel-storage tank. Soviet submarines and warships were using these facilities regularly.

The US-built airfield was also brought back into operation. Eventually, fourteen TU-95Ds ("Bears" in NATO parlance) and the same number of MIG-23s ("Floggers") and TU-16s ("Badgers") were deployed at Cam Ranh. The "Bears" are long-range reconnaissance aircraft, designed in the middle-1950s, though the variant deployed at Cam Ranh dates from the mid-1960s. The "Floggers" used to be the standard Warsaw Pact air-

to-air fighters, but are currently being phased out in favour of MIG-25s. The "Badgers" are long-range attack aircraft which can carry bombs or anti-ship missiles (with either conventional or nuclear warheads). They are of early 1950s vintage.

In addition, the Soviets had established a radio-communications centre at Cam Ranh. This presumably not only enabled Soviet forces there to communicate with their home-base at Vladivostok, but also to listen to US communications with their bases in the Philippines. This may also have provided Hanoi with valuable signals — intelligence on Chinese operations on the Sino-Vietnamese border and in Kampuchea.

US officials insisted that this amounted to a permanent, fully-operational Soviet military base. In reporting Gorbachev's Krasnoyarsk speech, the Australian press invariably followed suit, describing Cam Ranh as a "base" although Gorbachev referred only to a "supply-point".

When I was in Hanoi last year I asked General Tran Cong Man, editor of the Vietnamese army newspaper, whether Cam Ranh was a "base". He said it was not. It was simply a point of supply and replenishment for the Soviet Pacific Fleet:

Soviet ships come to get goods, such as fresh water, oil and petrol. But Cam Ranh Bay is the territory of Vietnam — we would never sell it to another country. This is completely different to the US bases in the Philippines, where weapons (including nuclear weapons) are stored.

In the most thorough western study of the question to date, Buszynski essentially concurred with General Man's view:

The Soviet Union has not yet acquired a base in Cam Ranh Bay ... The Soviet reliance on floating docks and limited installations demonstrates a reluctance to make a permanent commitment and an avoidance of major investments which shows that the Soviet build-up at Cam Ranh Bay has been restricted and controlled ...

When the Soviets first moved into Cam Ranh, many American observers had no doubts about their purpose. A *Business Week* writer, for example, declared that the Soviets were aiming at "the most traditional kinds of naval power" and strove to acquire bases and facilities "all over the world". From the "crucially important installation" at Cam Ranh they were able to threaten "one of the most travelled shipping routes in the world", that between the Middle East and Japan.

This fitted the Cold War rhetoric of the time, but it was never a persuasive argument. In time of war, the Soviets would have their hands full seeking to protect the Soviet homeland from nuclear attack; in time of peace, they themselves wish to use these shipping routes without

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disruption. The most thorough assessment of this point by a US military analyst (as distinct from propagandist) concluded that the Soviet presence at Cam Ranh "is unlikely to have a specific, aggressive regional intent, since that would be quite out of character for a power that, at least until now, has revealed itself as ... cautious and non-confrontational".

The Soviets have not made the investments needed to defend Cam Ranh against a major attack by American forces, let alone to use it for offensive purposes. As we have seen, the planes they have sent there are antiquated. As Kim Beazley, the Australian Defence Minister, has remarked, Cam Ranh would not survive day one of a military confrontation between the super-powers.

Cam Ranh is useful to the Soviet Pacific Fleet in more mundane ways. By providing repair and refuelling facilities, it has extended the operating time of vessels on missions far from Vladivostok. In particular, this has given the Soviets the capability of a greater presence in the

Indian Ocean, where there has been a substantial US naval build-up since the fall of the Shah, the Gulf War, and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Interestingly, however, the Soviets have made no real attempt to match the US build-up in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, the number of patrols they have carried out in those waters has reportedly declined markedly since the early 1980s.

Cam Ranh also enables the Soviets to make air-reconnaissance missions in the South China Seas, and probably to eavesdrop on both American and Chinese military communications. This was probably of much greater importance a decade ago, when international relations in the region were deteriorating rapidly, than it is now.

While Cam Ranh is clearly useful to the Soviet navy, it is hardly comparable to the US facilities at Clark and Subic. Gorbachev's Krasnoyarsk speech has compelled the Cold Warriors to do an abrupt about-turn: rather than exaggerating Cam Ranh's significance, they now seek to emphasise how unimportant it really is. Their point now, of course, is to show that mutual disengagement is unfair to the US.

Gorbachev's offer was dismissed by US officials as "largely a propagandist effort designed to embarrass us as we go through our Philippines bases review". No doubt, such considerations were in Gorbachev's mind. As such, the Krasnoyarsk speech was a highly successful exercise. US officials were suitably embarrassed.

But there was more to the matter than cynical point-scoring. Gorbachev's speech reflects an important shift in Soviet strategic thinking. By the early 1980s, Brezhnev's policy of security through strength was in tatters. The drive for parity with the US had alarmed less powerful nations (of which China was the most important), and helped provoke a new US military build-up aimed at restoring American supremacy. Detente and arms-control talks collapsed. However, the best response Brezhnev could come up with was to assert that peace

would not be defended by begging, and to promise to match the American effort. It was an approach which was proving hideously expensive, at a time when the performance of the Soviet economy was deteriorating.

Gorbachev is a member of the post-war generation in Soviet politics. He has been critical of the over-emphasis placed on the need for military strength by Brezhnev's generation, and is seeking to cut military spending. Among those who retired after Gorbachev took over was Admiral Gorshkov. His successor, Admiral Vladimir Chenavin, has reportedly come under strong pressure to cut ship-building programs initiated by Gorshkov.

Soviet military experts have recently been instructed to rethink received doctrines which engender insecurity among others by emphasising attack as the best form of defence. Gorbachev has been seeking to de-emphasise the whole military dimension of great power relations generally, and to emphasise diplomacy and mutuality of interest. But for this to succeed, he needs to provoke a similar re-evaluation in the US.

It is unlikely that Gorbachev expected the Americans to respond positively to his Krasnoyarsk speech. He was aiming to convince the Chinese and Southeast Asian nations that he is genuine in his commitment to demilitarising great-power relations in the Far East, and that the chief obstacle to further progress is the American side. For the fundamental challenge to America's strategic position in the Asian-Pacific region has not come from the "ever-expanding Soviet threat" of which Gaston Sigur speaks. It has come from the growth of indigenous nationalism and the development of the industrial and military power of countries such as China, India and Japan. It is the dynamism of the whole region which is fast bringing to a close the era when Far Eastern waters were an "American Lake".

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