

UNWANTED VISIONARIES

**THE SOVIET FAILURE IN ASIA
AT THE END OF THE COLD WAR**



SERGEY RADCHENKO

Unwanted Visionaries

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For Onon, the Asia of my innermost thoughts.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This book relied extensively on non-English sources. When transliterating Russian names, I used the Library of Congress system, modified to allow the common sense spelling of *ya andyu*. I shunned the use of umlauts in the English transliteration of Mongolian sources, which resulted in partial obscurity in the spelling of some Mongolian terms in the endnotes. Chinese names are spelled in pinyin in the book, except in the endnotes, where I provided the original characters for those interested in pursuing the sources further. Korean and Japanese sources in the endnotes are also spelled out in Korean and Japanese only. In view of the complexities of the competing spelling systems, Korean names in the text are rendered in their most recognizable form. Vietnamese names are written without accents.

Unwanted Visionaries

Introduction

On a wintry day of March 13, 1985, thousands of mourners gathered under the Kremlin walls to bid farewell to General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko, who had succumbed, at age seventy-three, to a combination of heart, lung, and liver disease. As his casket rolled into Red Square, soldiers stood guard in front of Lenin's mausoleum, keeping away the crowds with black-edged portraits of the deceased leader. New General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev towered atop the mausoleum with other Politburo members. Delegations from foreign countries were seated on the long benches at the flanks. Gorbachev read his eulogy to the "faithful servant of our party and people," while foreign guests stared at the spectacle. Perhaps the only person who truly cared about Chernenko's death was his widow, Anna, who kissed him on the forehead before the casket was lowered into a grave near the Kremlin wall. Afterward, an observer reported, "the Politburo members discarded their red-and-black mourning armbands and returned to the mausoleum to watch soldiers march to shouted commands and military music."¹

Chernenko's death surprised no one. For the brief months that he steered the Soviet Union, the ailing, asthmatic General Secretary struggled to live yet another day, but everyone knew that he was running out of time. Chernenko's death bore with it a promise of change, not only for the Soviet Union but also for the world. That promise was personified by Mikhail Gorbachev, the big unknown with as yet little to boast of but his youth and charm. Foreign dignitaries at the funeral eagerly awaited their chance to meet the new Soviet leader and get a sense of his intentions. There was a brief opportunity to do so at a reception held after Chernenko's burial in the Kremlin's grand St. George's Hall. Hundreds of visitors—from world

statesmen to guerrilla leaders—assembled under the golden chandeliers to shake Gorbachev’s hand and exchange a few words. Foreign correspondents watched carefully as Gorbachev greeted the delegations, counting the seconds he spent with each and making judgments, on this basis, about the new leader’s foreign policy priorities.

The correspondents were in for a surprise. The British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who commanded everyone’s attention at the previous Soviet funeral and had the longest and the warmest conversation with the ailing Chernenko, had to wait in line for half an hour. The Iron Lady “watched coldly” as first the young and charismatic Rajiv Gandhi of India and then the Chinese technocrat Li Peng were each whisked off to the front of the long queue of world leaders in a gesture of unmistakable symbolism: for Gorbachev, Asia came first.² The new Soviet leader looked East with anticipation unseen since the great Asian love affair of Nikita Khrushchev, who thirty years earlier steered his enthusiastic efforts toward an ever closer friendship with the world’s first and second most populous countries. The *ménage à trois* did not last, but the idea survived and was rehabilitated as Gorbachev made his first unsure steps at the helm of an empire.

Gorbachev had been to neither China nor India. His first-hand experience of Asia amounted to two brief trips to Mongolia and Vietnam. But he was fascinated by Asia: by its population, its resources, and its potential. Time and again in his early months and years in power, Gorbachev addressed the subject of Asia’s rise, and the importance of Soviet engagement with the region: “The development of civilization is moving in the direction of the Pacific,” Gorbachev argued at a Politburo meeting in April 1986. And again: “A huge number of various countries and peoples coexist in Asia and in the Pacific Ocean. And we are building a bridge.... Let us raise our assessments of China, India, Japan. This is serious. This is politics. This will stimulate our relations with them.” And on another occasion: “Civilization in the 21st century will move to the East. There are huge forces, huge potential of a future civilization in Asia.”³

In time, all of this was cast aside, and it was the European and the American dimensions of Gorbachev’s foreign policy that captured the imaginations of contemporary observers and, later, historians. The dramatic events of the late 1980s—Reykjavik and Malta, the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, and the fall of the Berlin Wall—have overtaken earlier events, so that in retrospect Gorbachev’s Asian first love appears as nothing but a flirtation, a temporary distraction from the grand European finale of the Cold War. A recent mammoth book by the Gorbachev Foundation entitled “Responding to the Challenges of the Times” explores in some 926 pages the former General Secretary’s foreign policy between 1985 and 1991, but only

the last 137 pages touch on Asia. The region has been all but relegated to a side note even by the leader himself. The end of the Cold War was celebrated in style in Europe, but who can tell what happened to the Asian Cold War, and what happened to that spirit of 1985, when Gorbachev set his sights on closer engagement with the ancient civilizations of the East?

The Cold War ended differently in Asia than it did in Europe. There was no easy closure, no date to celebrate, no great fanfare, no great liberation, and little credit to be had for changing the world. In Asia, 1989 has a different sound to it, a sound of roaring tanks and thumping bullets. Apart from the Tiananmen massacre, all else has been forgotten as somehow irrelevant to the course of world history. The Soviet Union's Asia policy in the 1980s has received scant attention. Maybe it is because Gorbachev failed to make an impact on Asia in the same way he made an impact on Europe. Certainly, his vision of a Soviet pivot to the East went up in smoke, briefly replaced by promising relationships with Western Europe and America. Even the great achievement of the Sino-Soviet normalization, symbolized by Gorbachev's memorable trip to Beijing in May 1989, has faded in historical memory, despite being one symptom of a tectonic change in Asia, a change still taking place.

I watched Chernenko's funeral at home on a black-and-white TV in my family's small one-room flat on the fourth floor of a dilapidated Khrushchev-era building in the town of Korsakov, a bleak outpost on Sakhalin Island. I was only a child and did not appreciate the significance of what was about to happen. But even among the adults, few Sakhaliners realized that the Cold War was ending. It simply faded. On Army and Navy Day I was no longer allowed to run amok with other kids aboard the formidable cruisers docked in the heavily guarded port; the cruisers disappeared one day, never to return. The old Japanese carton factory across the street from our Khrushchevka had its fence rebuilt with fancy metal plates intended for a military helicopter base on the outskirts of town; who knows what happened to the choppers? Then, one day in 1990, I received a present from my father who had for the first time boarded a fishing boat to Japan, just across the Soya Strait: a Nintendo console. The Cold War was over.

Soon, every fishing boat would come from Japan loaded beyond capacity with second-hand cars. They were a wonder at first—these rusting symbols of technological progress—but before long almost every family bought one. Markets were flooded with cheap Chinese goods and angry customers wanting their money back for defective products. Bearded oilmen from Alaska and Texas congregated in the Pacific Café in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, biting into exotic hamburgers. There was a sense of great changes happening, but little did we know that the truly great changes were actually taking

place elsewhere, in China, Japan, South Korea, further out in Southeast Asia. The region was booming and prospering, but Russia was left on the sidelines. It was never able to tap into the Asian miracle. “Civilization”—to use Gorbachev’s vague term—moved to the East. Russia stayed behind.

* * *

This book recounts Soviet policy in Asia between 1982, when Leonid Brezhnev died, and 1991, the year of Soviet collapse. Chapter 1 challenges the conventional wisdom that Sino-Soviet rapprochement, which began in 1982, was a natural or inevitable outcome of Deng Xiaoping’s foreign policy pragmatism and a consequence of China’s reform and opening. Instead, the beginning of the dialogue between the two countries was a reaction to prevailing international circumstances. The early 1980s were a time of dramatic worsening of Soviet-American tensions. The *détente* was dead. In its wake came the Second Cold War, laden with promises of Ronald Reagan’s crusade against the Evil Empire, crisis in Poland, war in Afghanistan, US economic sanctions, and the chilling nuclear missile controversy in Europe. Fearful of growing Soviet international isolation, the aging Soviet leadership arrived at the necessity of breaking new ground with China, although not without an internal struggle and backtracking.

Deng Xiaoping reciprocated Soviet feelers. He had invested himself heavily into a better relationship with the United States, but, with Ronald Reagan in the White House, the sort of strategic partnership Deng had envisioned proved well beyond his reach. The sale of American weapons to Taiwan and Reagan’s reluctance to offer sensitive technology to China exposed Deng to internal criticism that he had done too much for the United States without American reciprocity. Distancing from the United States under the banner of the so-called independent foreign policy, and the beginning of the Sino-Soviet dialogue, helped Deng Xiaoping in redressing criticism from other party leaders while exerting pressure on the Americans to live up to his expectations, a tactic that worked extremely well.

But if there was a lot of tactical thinking in both Moscow and Beijing at the beginning of the Sino-Soviet dialogue, in both countries there were proponents of rapprochement whose sights were set higher than the immediate requirements of the geopolitical poker. For them, the Sino-Soviet normalization was first and foremost an ideological imperative, the natural consequence of the two countries’ adherence to the socialist path. Tactics and strategy therefore combined in unforeseen ways to bring about silent, step-by-step improvement of Sino-Soviet relations from the second half

of 1982. Gorbachev tapped into this dynamic, but the process began years before he had become the General Secretary.

Chapter 2 explores Soviet-Japanese relations from 1982 through 1987. Realizing Japan's growing importance to the region, the Soviet leadership, from Brezhnev to Gorbachev, worked hard to improve relations with Tokyo and tap into Japan's capital and technology, so sorely needed by the Soviet economy. Moreover, the Soviet leadership recognized that frigid political relations with Japan only strengthened the Americans and their system of alliance aimed at containing the Soviet threat. The key problem in the Soviet-Japanese relationship was the disagreement over the fate of the Southern Kurile Islands, called "northern territories" by the Japanese, which had been occupied by the Soviets in the closing days of the Second World War.

In the early 1980s the Soviet leadership briefly considered making concessions in the territorial dispute, hoping to split Japan from the United States and neutralizing it in the context of heightening tensions in East Asia. That did not happen. Japan was too firmly and comfortably lodged within its American alliance to attempt a rapprochement independent of Washington. Gorbachev's arrival on the scene failed to break the territorial deadlock in Soviet-Japanese relations. The Soviets and the Japanese had inflated perceptions of their countries' importance vis-à-vis the other, believing that the other would eventually give in rather than lose out in economic and security terms. Gorbachev failed to find a place for Japan in his global vision. The Japanese leaders, too, often sacrificed better relations with the USSR to appease the United States in the context of divergences over trade and Washington's claims that the Japanese did not do enough to share the burden of defending their country from communist threat.

Chapter 3 explores the rise and fall of Gorbachev's vision for Asia. One of the main pillars of this vision was Moscow's relationship with India. Although India was unaligned during the Cold War, between 1985 and 1987 Gorbachev made impressive inroads with the Indians, thanks to his close relationship with Rajiv Gandhi. A dynamic Soviet-Indian relationship was for Gorbachev the vital core of a new foreign policy, one that he thought should replace the hapless hole-patching of the Soviet octogenarians, the self-entrapping web of increasingly costly commitments that had led the Soviet Union down a blind alley by the early 1980s. Gorbachev labored to bring about a triangle—USSR, India, and China—to offset US influence in the region. This was the new General Secretary's strategy for rescuing the Soviet Union from its increasingly obvious international isolation. Yet Gorbachev overrated his ability to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, for neither China nor India was as keen on triangular politics as Gorbachev

was. The two powers had their own plans for bolstering regional hegemony, ones in which the Soviet Union had no role to play.

Soviet relations with India withered in the late 1980s. This was partly related to the imperative of quitting Afghanistan, and the rapprochement with Pakistan that this entailed for the USSR. The chapter recounts Gorbachev's decision to end the war in Afghanistan, explaining how he hesitated in making a choice between leaving that quagmire and maintaining Soviet credibility in the Third World. The signing of the peace accords on Afghanistan in April 1988 left Rajiv Gandhi out in the cold. India was being bypassed in the train of events that would lead, in a matter of months, to the end of the Cold War and to the death of non-alignment as a strategic concept. Gorbachev realized that his engagement with the West ruled out the sort of geopolitical arrangements he was once so desperate to sell to the Indians. From 1987 his attention was increasingly diverted away from India and China toward Europe and the United States, and, indeed, toward mounting difficulties at home. Gorbachev needed the West and the moral and financial support that a broad-ended engagement with the West could bring to bear on his weakening domestic standing. The divergence between former geopolitical imperatives and the realities of Soviet policy of the late 1980s was most evident in Gorbachev's refusal to sanction the deepening of Soviet-Indian military cooperation and closer ties in the nuclear field. The slow demise of the promising Soviet-Indian relationship was a symptom of Gorbachev's reorientation from the geopolitical thinking that marked his policy from the very beginning toward hope for a superpower détente born of brave but naïve idealism.

Chapter 4 explores the origins of the political settlement in Indochina. Since Vietnam invaded Cambodia to overthrow the Pol Pot regime, the Chinese insisted that Hanoi's withdrawal from Cambodia was a prerequisite for Sino-Soviet normalization. Deng Xiaoping saw the Vietnamese occupation as a part of the Soviet plot to encircle China. This assessment began to change in the mid-1980s thanks to budding rapprochement with Moscow, but Deng kept up the pressure, hoping to use the promise of better relations as an incentive for the Soviets to help China in containing Vietnam's regional ambitions. Gorbachev was not responsive to Deng's probes because he was mindful of the geopolitical importance of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance and did not want to squander his influence by pressing Hanoi to concede to China's demands. Nevertheless, as economic costs of supporting Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia mounted, the Soviets worked behind the scenes to effect a peace settlement.

Chapter 5 looks at the making of the Sino-Soviet summit of 1989. China and the USSR were both on the road with destinations yet unknown.

They were locked in an implicit competition as pioneers of reform socialism. Gorbachev felt upstaged by Deng and criticized the Chinese for their failure to understand that political reforms had to precede reforms in the economic sphere. The Gorbachev phenomenon was initially welcomed in China, although by 1988–89 this assessment was questioned by Chinese conservatives. Events in Eastern Europe influenced the mindset of the Chinese leaders, none more powerfully than the fall of the Berlin Wall and the death of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania. Deng chose to avoid differences over ideology in his landmark meeting with Gorbachev days before the Tiananmen crackdown. For the author of China's rise, the handshake with Gorbachev represented a new departure for China as a player on the international stage.

Gorbachev's visit to Beijing coincided with the student demonstrations in the Tiananmen Square, but the crushing of the protesters on June 4 did not elicit Gorbachev's condemnation. In spite of his personal aversion to the use of force, Gorbachev was all too ready to excuse the violent suppression of dissent in China, and even utilized Tiananmen to expand relations with Beijing at US expense. The Bush Administration was seriously concerned about the turn of the events, as the prospect of a reinvigorated Sino-Soviet alliance loomed large in 1989. Bush misread Chinese foreign policy: 1989 was not 1949. China was not in the game of leaning to one side or the other. Deng steered a neutral course. Not even Yeltsin's rise derailed Beijing's careful policy, for although Yeltsin was detested in Beijing, and the Chinese government secretly sympathized with the planners of the coup d'état, Yeltsin's victory in 1991 was quickly accepted; in a few years China and Russia moved toward a "strategic partnership."

Chapter 6 retells the story of the Soviet Union's engagement with the two Koreas. Under Gorbachev the Soviets' traditional partnership with Pyongyang reached its apogee; the Soviets valued this relationship, because North Korea, like Vietnam, was an important geopolitical asset in the Asian Cold War. But Pyongyang's resistance to political reform irked Gorbachev, while North Korea's persistent requests for military aid took a toll on his patience. By 1988 Gorbachev began to reciprocate South Korea's probes for establishing better relations. For South Korean President Roh Tae-woo, a rapprochement with the USSR was a *sine qua non* of his country's emergence as a prominent regional player; not only would it boost Seoul's international standing, but it would also strengthen South Korea in dealing with the North. On the other hand, rapprochement with USSR would bring huge political dividends to any South Korean politician who could make it happen, and a real competition ensued between 1988 and 1990 amid leading political factions in Seoul for the chance to be the first. Gorbachev, after

resisting South Korea's approaches for longer than necessary, gave in, persuaded by the promise of credits from Seoul desperately needed for the empty Soviet coffers. Soviet–South Korean normalization was not taken kindly in Pyongyang; in the face of its own growing isolation, North Korea sought assurance of survival in the pursuit of a nuclear deterrent.

Chapters 7 and 8 trace the ups and downs of Soviet-Japanese relations until 1991. In 1988 through 1989 Gorbachev appeared willing, for the first time, to discuss the merits of Japan's claims to the "northern territories." This encouraged the Japanese to think that Soviet concessions were within reach. However, evidence suggests that Gorbachev deliberately sought to appear flexible to entice Japan to develop relations despite the territorial deadlock. He had no intention to return the islands. Tokyo's emphasis on economic incentives was misplaced. The Soviets wanted to develop Siberia and the Far East but thought they could do it even without Japan's involvement or by playing the Japanese against their competitors. By the turn of the decade such hopes had proven illusory, highlighting the importance of mending fences with Japan. But a breakthrough was more difficult than ever, as Gorbachev's policy of glasnost gave rise to public opinion that, especially in regions bordering Japan, proved vocally hostile to territorial concessions.

In 1990, inspired by the changes that had just taken place in Europe, a powerful Japanese politician, Ozawa Ichiro, attempted to arrange a secret deal that would involve the transfer of the islands to Japan in return for massive Japanese investments in the Soviet economy. The desperate Soviet economic situation made Ozawa think that Gorbachev would be open to a compromise. He miscalculated the extent to which Gorbachev's opponents—especially Boris Yeltsin—would use the threat of territorial concessions to question Gorbachev's patriotism and undermine his political base. Gorbachev was unwilling to sell the islands, and his visit to Tokyo in April 1991—a long-awaited chance to open a new page in Soviet-Japanese relations—produced little for Tokyo in the way of tangible results. In the closing months of 1991 the Russian leadership maneuvered carefully in an attempt to gain Japanese economic aid in exchange for an unclear promise to return the islands. Yeltsin was not willing to put his nationalist credentials on the line, and the issue went unresolved. Absorbed in back-and-forth haggling over the ownership of the islands, Japan missed out on the chance to improve relations with the USSR. The Cold War's end caught Tokyo by surprise, and it failed to formulate a new foreign policy for the changing era while comfortably relying on the familiar bedrock of US-Japanese alliance.

The main protagonist of this book is Mikhail Gorbachev, remembered for having brought about the end of the Cold War and the Soviet

rapprochement with the West. *Unwanted Visionaries* shows that this was not what he had started out to do. At the outset he looked to China and India as allies in the global struggle against the United States. Gorbachev worked hard to maintain relations with longtime clients like Vietnam and North Korea in order to strengthen Soviet geopolitical standing in Asia. Gorbachev, like his predecessors, saw Asia as a Cold War theater where the Soviet Union could lead by winning the sympathies and loyalties of the regional players. His vision collapsed for lack of followers, however, and Gorbachev turned his attention to Soviet-American dialogue, which in due course led to the dismantling of the Soviet Union's imperial enterprise and the decline of its global influence. Unwelcome in the West, unwanted in Asia, Russia retreated inward, nurturing visions of a comeback recycled from Gorbachev's portfolio of unrealized dreams.

CHAPTER 1

Card Players: The Origins of Sino-Soviet Rapprochement, 1982–85

In March 1982 Soviet General Secretary Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev visited Tashkent, in Uzbekistan, to spend a few days in the company of his friend Sharaf Rashidov, a corrupt local tyrant who had made millions from a massive cotton scam. The official purpose of Brezhnev's trip to the Central Asian republic was to present Uzbekistan with the Order of Lenin on account of Rashidov's successes in cotton-growing, but, in view of Tashkent's proximity to the border with Chinese Xinjiang, Brezhnev planned to make a statement about improving relations with China. It almost never happened. On March 23, Brezhnev was touring an aviation plant with Rashidov when scaffolding bearing numerous onlookers suddenly collapsed, burying the Soviet leader and his entourage. Brezhnev survived but broke his collarbone.¹ It was under these dramatic circumstances that on March 24 the enfeebled and anesthetized General Secretary delivered his policy statement on China, one of the most important policy statements he had ever made.²

Brezhnev said that the Soviet Union was not threatening China and that it would be willing to resume border talks. The Soviet Union, he said, still considered China to be a socialist country and wanted to develop relations with it in all fields without preconditions, if there was reciprocity on China's part. He added that the Soviet Union recognized China's sovereignty over Taiwan.³ While nothing in what the General Secretary said was a spectacular departure from existing policy, Brezhnev's statement was by

far the friendliest since relations with China reached a new low in 1980. Few thought so at the time, but Brezhnev's Tashkent initiative became a new point of departure for Moscow's relationship with Beijing and a turning point for international politics that would change the dynamic of the relationship among China, the USSR, and the United States.

This chapter explores the origins of Sino-Soviet rapprochement between 1982 and 1985, when the two sides took tentative steps to improve relations after more than two decades of hostility. This process cannot be understood except in the broader international context. Indeed, the unseen presence in Sino-Soviet dialogue was that of the United States. Each country approached the other in light of fears and hopes they had for their relations with Washington. The Reagan Administration's hawkish policies vis-à-vis the Chinese and the Soviets in effect strengthened the hand of supporters of Sino-Soviet rapprochement in both countries, paving way to a difficult but ultimately constructive engagement. While the talks that followed Brezhnev's Tashkent probe pursued tactical goals at first, they inadvertently led to something greater, reshaping both countries' foreign policies in the direction of cooperation unseen since the Sino-Soviet alliance fell apart in the 1960s.

THE TASHKENT LINE

Brezhnev was well past the point when he should have made policy statements or even appeared in public. He had experienced physical and mental decline since the mid-1970s, and for the three years before the Tashkent trip was as good as a walking corpse, the subject of endless hypocritical praise in Soviet propaganda and the biting ridicule of the man in the street. Suffering from asthenia and cerebral vascular sclerosis, slurring his speech and unsure in gait, Leonid Il'ich refused to die, starring in the sorry spectacle of Soviet decay, bathing in the sea in the Crimea, reading from his prepared notes on well-timed occasions (as in Tashkent), perhaps not entirely oblivious of what was happening in his country and in the world, but certainly resigned and helpless in altering the course of events.⁴ In the meantime, the Soviet Union slid deeper and deeper into international isolation.

It may or may not have registered in the depths of Brezhnev's dim conscience that, as he was driven around in a black limousine with Rashidov through the streets of Tashkent, Soviet soldiers were losing a war across the border in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union invaded this country in December 1979. The decision bore Brezhnev's signature but he was hardly in a position to appreciate the consequences of Moscow's fatal misadventure;

others in the Politburo had decided for him.⁵ The invasion caused an international uproar, especially in the United States. President Jimmy Carter, who had planted kisses on Brezhnev's bloated cheeks the previous June at the Vienna summit, now refused to submit the hard-bargained nuclear treaty SALT II for ratification to the US Senate. The détente this treaty symbolized was pronounced dead, buried somewhere in the mountains of Afghanistan.

Or, some say, it was already dead before Afghanistan, and "lies buried in the sands of Ogaden," in Ethiopia—in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Adviser. Brzezinski claimed that the Soviets killed détente by their lack of moderation in Third World conflicts and by building up overseas commitments at US expense from the Caribbean to the South China Sea.⁶ If anyone shed tears over the unrealized promise of détente, it was not the anti-Soviet champion Brzezinski, who worked hard to derail a more accommodating policy toward the USSR. Brzezinski schemed tirelessly to undermine his rival in the policy establishment, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who had been careful not to do something that the Soviets would interpret as obviously hostile.⁷

Brzezinski held no inhibitions in this respect. Between 1978 and 1980 he did more than just about anyone else to kill détente and, inadvertently, to precipitate Tashkent, by playing the China card in the face of Moscow's dire warnings. He did so against resistance from the State Department, not least the US Ambassador to the USSR, Thomas J. Watson, who argued for a more "evenhanded" approach to the two communist giants. Watson wondered why the Chinese, "who had a tendency to jump around from bed to bed," received much better treatment than the Soviets.⁸ "You have to remember," Brzezinski told Watson, "that we are very sexy people."⁹ Brzezinski's successful flirtation with China—resulting in the normalization of Sino-US relations on January 1, 1979—had far-reaching consequences, deeply unsettling to keen observers in Soviet policy-making circles.

By 1980 the United States and its allies in Western Europe were providing military technology to China. It was a time when Beijing singled out the Soviet Union as China's number one enemy, fought a war with Soviet ally Vietnam, and helped the anti-Soviet mujahedeen in Afghanistan with weapons and covert training. The Soviets mailed countless letters of protest to the West and resorted to desperate measures to avert China's military modernization, such as forcing their allies in Eastern Europe to curb the flow of technology to the Chinese through a series of export control meetings. After one such meeting in Lovech, Bulgaria, in October 1980, the Hungarian participants noted, "they [the Soviets] are scared of strengthening the Chinese military potential. . . . The Soviet representative generally urged great caution

in all forms of new cooperation proposed by the Chinese . . . in the interest of avoiding harmful leaks of technical-scientific findings.”¹⁰

On October 2, 1980, the Soviet Politburo discussed military cooperation between China and the United States and passed a resolution to counteract this cooperation by explaining (through Soviet ambassadors posted overseas) what China’s long-term designs really were and how the naïve Americans had been taken in by China’s anti-Soviet stand. “[B]eing realistic, one should recognize that a ‘strong’ China will probably choose a different direction for its expansionist plans: it will swallow neighboring countries, take over regions vital for the entire world, and will not serve as an instrument in the hands of the USA or some other country.”¹¹ By helping China’s modernization, the Soviets prophesied, Washington hastened the arrival of America’s own doom. Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who, unlike Brezhnev, had not lost capacity for analytical thinking, memorably said of the West’s cooperation with Beijing, “you may be in a euphoric mood now about China but the time will come when you will all be shedding tears.”¹²

By 1980, when Gromyko “bleated” about isolation in unproductive meetings with the Americans, and Brezhnev passed his time in harmful indulgence in sleeping pills, Sino-Soviet relations were as warm as permafrost and had been so for a generation.¹³ In the early 1960s, Mao Zedong accused Moscow of betraying revolution and abandoning Marxism-Leninism, and the Soviets responded with ideologically charged tirades of their own. It was not long before polemical debates over communist theology gave way to a frigid standoff, punctuated by sudden flares of tensions. In 1969 China and the Soviet Union nearly went to war over a disputed islet on the Ussuri River, and in 1979 the Sino-Vietnamese war necessitated a show of Soviet military force on the border with China for the sake of deterrence. In the intervening years, both sides built up huge military forces at their mutual border, and the Soviets stationed troops in Mongolia and concluded an anti-Chinese defensive pact with Vietnam.

Brezhnev, before his irreversible slide into senility, had become so apprehensive of the Chinese threat that he sought a quasi alliance with the arch-enemy—the American imperialists—to offset the sinister designs of that “perfidious” neighbor that, he conceded, as a “European” he never understood.¹⁴ He had no doubts about his own fate—or that of the other Soviet leaders—at the Chinese hands, should it come to the worst: “For me they have ordained an honorable death. They plan to shoot me. Mr. Kosygin [Prime Minister] they plan to hang, and Mr. Mikoyan [Politburo member] they will boil alive. At least I have an honorable fate, not like Mikoyan, like those who will be boiled alive.”¹⁵ That was said in 1972, when the Chinese and the Soviets were at least talking to each other and were bound by a

treaty of alliance. By 1980, this was no longer the case. China had pulled out from the defunct treaty, moving, in the words of American policy maker Mike Oksenberg, “into a new era of leaning to one side, this time toward the US.”¹⁶

Oksenberg, Brzezinski’s China hand at the National Security Council, had experience in academia, something few Soviet foreign policy experts could boast of, and took a long view of China-US relations that was anything but euphoric. “The Chinese believe the quest for a world order is quixotic,” he wrote to Brzezinski. “They wish to position themselves, as in a horse race, so that [as] our strength ebbs—which they see as inevitable—and as the Soviet power peaks, they will be in a position to surge forward.”¹⁷ This logic would have impressed the more pragmatically inclined minds in the Soviet corridors of power, especially the old China hand Mikhail Stepanovich Kapitsa, who, as Deputy Foreign Minister, played a key role in defining Moscow’s policy toward China at this low ebb in Sino-Soviet relations.

The tall, bald, broad-shouldered, and humorous Kapitsa, nicknamed Mikhstep, was the living legend of the Soviet foreign policy establishment, and not only because of his reputation as a hopeless womanizer, a heavy drinker, and a connoisseur of quality cigars. His occasional lectures for young diplomats at the Foreign Ministry were packed; he was known to say things that bordered on heresy—and get away with it.¹⁸ Above all, he was a pragmatist in the best *realpolitik* tradition of Russia’s foreign policy. He and Oksenberg would have agreed about the general thrust of China’s intentions on the world stage. “The Chinese never befriend anyone for a long time,” Kapitsa pronounced some weeks after Brezhnev’s performance in Tashkent.¹⁹ Whereas for Oksenberg this was a bad thing—“we must harbor no private illusion that the Chinese see this convergence [with the US] as enduring,” he warned Brzezinski²⁰—for Kapitsa, China’s propensity to “jump from bed to bed” was the one great hope for breaking out of the Soviet impasse of the early 1980s.

At a time when few could foresee the consequences of China’s reform and opening, Kapitsa knew the Chinese would abandon socialism. “They have advanced the motto ‘let’s get rich’ and everyone has escaped into trading.” “In ten years,” he ominously predicted in June 1982, “the capitalists and kulaks will multiply, and there will be no other way but to crush them with tanks.”²¹ For a pragmatist like Kapitsa, this did not really matter. Whatever the Chinese did at home was their business. In foreign policy, China’s alignment with the United States was only temporary, because the Chinese “wish to modernize [their] economy using Western technological help and credits, and have no other capital to pay for this help but anti-Sovietism.”²²

At some point, they would realize that one-sided reliance on the United States hurt China's international standing. "Maybe in 10–15 years the Chinese will open their eyes and take up an equal distance from both the US and the USSR," noted Kapitsa.²³ This prediction was borne out by events and occurred much earlier than Mikhstep would have predicted.

In the meantime, after the Chinese announced that they would indefinitely postpone bilateral consultations with the Soviet Union (as a penalty for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) and even refused to send their athletes to the Moscow Olympics, Kapitsa was one of the very few people who would still occasionally go back and forth between Beijing and Moscow. Supposedly he was visiting with the Soviet Ambassador, but in reality he was testing the waters to see if the Chinese were interested in developing a dialogue. Kapitsa turned up in Beijing in March 1980 and met privately with his counterpart in the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Yu Hongliang.²⁴ He repeated the experiment in 1981 and then again in May 1982, when he met with the deputy Foreign Minister Qian Qichen.²⁵ During these meetings, the Chinese insisted that, before Sino-Soviet relations could improve, the Soviets had to remove the "three obstacles" to normalization—first, cut troops at the border and pull forces out of Mongolia; second, make Vietnam withdraw from Cambodia (Vietnam had invaded neighboring Cambodia in December 1978, prompting Chinese accusations of Soviet complicity); and finally, leave Afghanistan. These were ambitious demands, and Kapitsa's one-man missions could not even begin to address them.

This was the context in which Brezhnev made his policy pronouncement, his speaking notes set in big letters for ease of reading. It would be an exaggeration to say that he was fully cognizant of the new policy direction. A good illustration of Brezhnev's mental state was an episode not long after Tashkent when, in a public speech in Azerbaijan, he confused Azerbaijan with Afghanistan and launched into reading a classified memo, not noticing the mistake until his foreign policy aide pulled him by his elbow.²⁶ There was no telling what the General Secretary would sign into policy. Much depended on his aides, who would read this or that memo out to him and then get his signature. But, as Aleksandr Bovin, one of his speech writers and the editor of the national daily *Izvestiya* explained in September 1982, "if you tell him about this memo in the morning, or even about the subject that it is devoted to, he will stare at you, as if this is the first time he is hearing about it, and then will brush you aside like an annoying fly: don't spoil my vacation. He just doesn't remember what he is doing and what he is signing."²⁷

But if Brezhnev's lips uttered those words, who was behind the idea? Bovin, as one of the speech writers, most certainly played a role in the

formulation of what became known as the “Tashkent line.”²⁸ The paragraph about China was “consciously inserted” into that speech, perhaps by Bovin, who had for several years tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Soviet leadership that changes were happening in China after Mao’s death.²⁹ Another candidate for the authorship of the new policy line was Brezhnev’s aide Viktor Golikov, who had gone on record earlier for inserting similar passages into Brezhnev’s speeches, most recently in August 1980.³⁰ Despite some uncertainty as to who pioneered rapprochement with China, there is no doubt as to who opposed it: Oleg Borisovich Rakhmanin.

Rakhmanin was the First Deputy Head of the Department for Relations with Socialist Countries, known simply as The Department, in the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. Born in 1924, he was not even sixty at the time of Tashkent, a relatively young man by the standards of the Soviet ruling elite. Rakhmanin’s professional career began in 1946, when he was posted as a Soviet diplomat to China, then still in the throes of a civil war. In the 1950s he studied and worked in Beijing, reaching the senior position of a counselor at the Soviet Embassy by the turn of that decade, just as the Sino-Soviet friendship went up in smoke. Many Soviet diplomats who had invested themselves heavily into learning China’s language, history, and culture found China, swept up by the tide of the Cultural Revolution, hostile, xenophobic, and anti-Soviet. Many would-be diplomats drowned their sorrows in academia. Rakhmanin, though, made the best of the situation. In 1968 he took up a job at the Central Committee and soon made a name for himself as the top Soviet authority on anything China-related.³¹

During a period when his boss in the Central Committee, Konstantin Rusakov, spent weeks at a time on vacations and in the hospital, Rakhmanin assumed formidable power, since his Department was in charge of relations not just with China but all socialist countries.³² There was also another International Department in the Central Committee, one that liaised with communist parties in the West and in the Third World. Together the two departments played a role similar to that of the National Security Council in the United States; but of the two, The Department was by far the more important. With the ailing Soviet leadership unwilling and unable to shoulder the daily burdens of policy making, Rakhmanin’s influence in the corridors of power soared. Rakhmanin’s pronouncements on China assumed the character of immutable truths, which were delivered through party decisions and publications in flagship journals to the broader audience of academics, journalists, and the Soviet public. Through annual consultations known as “the Interkit,” Rakhmanin’s decrees were passed on to obliging policy communities in the socialist commonwealth.³³

In his many publications Rakhmanin was ferociously critical of the Chinese, even after Mao Zedong, long demonized in Soviet propaganda,

passed from the stage.³⁴ Romanian diplomat Romulus Budura, who had known Rakhmanin in Beijing in the 1950s, noted that “he loved China.”³⁵ “He loved China and the Chinese people, and always believed in their huge potential,” remarked Rakhmanin’s son, who followed in his father’s footsteps to become a China expert at the Soviet Foreign Ministry.³⁶ But his coworkers and acquaintances in the Central Committee remembered a temperamental, heavy-handed man, deaf to opinions different from his own. Georgii Arbatov, one of the Soviet Union’s most prominent public intellectuals, labeled him “a Buddhist bonze.”³⁷ It was an apt characterization of a man the Chinese memorably called “the fourth obstacle to normalization.”

In the run-up to Tashkent, Rakhmanin “was trying to prove that nothing has changed in China after Mao’s death,” Bovin recalled.

Mao had turned away from the socialist road, and there is no sign that the Chinese are amending Mao’s anti-socialist principles. Present-day China has no smell of socialism. Golikov, however, thought that even under Mao China remained socialist even though it cannot be ruled out that the “Great Helmsman” had gone overboard in terms of his revolutionary-ness and anti-Sovietism. We have to support the Chinese who are trying to correct Mao. And it’s time to be friends. . . . I am not sure that Brezhnev understood these details. His logic was simpler: Mao is gone, the “Gang of Four” [who helped orchestrate the Cultural Revolution] is in jail, so something must be changing, and not for the worse. A probe will not hurt.³⁸

The Tashkent probe thrust Rakhmanin into a dilemma. It came at a time when the Soviet Union was running into increasing resistance among its allies to Rakhmanin’s hardline anti-Chinese policy. Economic difficulties in Eastern Europe in the early 1980s prompted interest in increasing trade with China, while the Chinese, despite open hostility toward the Soviet Union, seemed willing to improve relations with the East Europeans.³⁹ Soviet allies hoped that Tashkent would signal change in the rigid Soviet position, which would make it easier for the East Germans, among others, to mend fences with China. Rakhmanin hurried to put an end to such speculations, announcing at a meeting of socialist bloc party functionaries in Moscow in early April that Tashkent did not mean a change of policy for Moscow, that there was full continuity with the past, and that there was a unanimity of views about China’s “rightist, pro-imperialist course” within the Central Committee, the Foreign Ministry, and the Soviet academic institutes.⁴⁰ He was lying.

In May 1982, Rakhmanin left for the annual meeting of the Interkit in Sofia in a bid to reassert his authority over the wavering anti-Chinese ranks

in the Soviet bloc. Interkit had been running into trouble for some time. This time the disagreements could no longer be papered over. The SED (East German Communist Party) delegation had explicit instructions from the East German leader Erich Honecker to pursue an “active policy towards China, corresponding to the long term interests of socialism and peace.”⁴¹ The head of the delegation, Bruno Mahlow, challenged Rakhmanin’s pessimistic take on China and refused to sign the Interkit report.⁴² One of the key disagreements was over the correct interpretation of the Tashkent line—whether (as the East Germans claimed) it was a major departure or whether (as Rakhmanin insisted) it was just a tactical move.⁴³

Rakhmanin returned from Sofia determined to have his line approved by the highest leadership and submitted a report to this end to the Politburo’s Chinese Commission, of which he was the Secretary.⁴⁴ He insisted that efforts to “expose Chinese hegemonism” would have to be continued and interpreted recent developments in China as a “move towards the right.” The Chinese Commission reportedly disagreed on the course of action to take. Yuri Andropov (soon to be the General Secretary) and Boris Ponomarev (the head of International Department) called for a rapprochement with the Chinese—while “giving them a rebuff when needed.” Gromyko, though, “demanded to push the Chinese, not to let them off lightly.” In the end, the Commission adopted a twelve-page document in Rakhmanin’s style, singling out Honecker for criticism and proposing several measures to silence the domestic champions of better Sino-Soviet relations. The Politburo endorsed these measures on May 20, despite Brezhnev’s lip service in defense of the Tashkent line.⁴⁵

Rakhmanin’s Interkit report was clearly directed against Sino-Soviet rapprochement, although the publication on the same day of a relatively softcore *Pravda* editorial by a certain “Igor Aleksandrov” (who quite possibly stood for the KGB)⁴⁶ predicting that “sooner or later unsolved problems [in Sino-Soviet relations] will have to be removed” assured readers that the Tashkent line had not been abandoned.⁴⁷ Rakhmanin, who sought the Politburo’s permission to “toughen” the Aleksandrov article, fell short of his ambitions this time. Nevertheless, the endorsement of his report suggested that the proponents of a rapprochement faced a formidable battle, as Anatolii Chernyaev found out first hand when he refused to sign his name to Rakhmanin’s report. Chernyaev, who was then the Deputy Head of the International Department,⁴⁸ remembered an angry Rakhmanin “storming” into his office, demanding a signature, and even threatening (over the phone) to take up the matter with the higher authorities.⁴⁹

Undaunted, Chernyaev complained to his immediate boss Boris Ponomarev:

I don't know if you are aware of this, but in the last 15 years when Rakhmanin was responsible for China in the CC Department, and especially after he became the First Deputy, he wrote dozens of articles, brochures and even books. And all of this is about one thing: how to smash China. He perfectly understands that if relations changed, all of his "literature" will go into the trash bin. But he has already nominated himself for the elections to the Academy of Sciences and has no intention to abandon this plan. So he will do anything to make sure that our line in relation to China remains such as depicted in his articles and brochures written under his four pen-names. But I think it is not appropriate to surrender this vital area of our state interests to Rakhmanin's personal ambitions.⁵⁰

Ponomarev signaled agreement. He had endorsed Rakhmanin's report at the Chinese Commission and supported it at the Politburo, as did Yuri Andropov, who should have known better than most that Rakhmanin was advising a harmful course of action. Inertia was a strong force, however, and Rakhmanin enjoyed a great clout. Having imposed his opinions on the Politburo, he continued to press for conformity among allies, as he did in a conversation with the Hungarian Ambassador in Moscow, Mátyás Szűrös, on July 7: "Colleagues working in the field...hold excessively positive opinions which may incite the leadership of fraternal Parties toward exaggerated development of relations. The socialist countries could objectively become part of the Chinese 'broad anti-Soviet united front.'" Szűrös asked, anxiously, whether Hungary had fallen out of step and learned, to probable relief, that the Hungarians were doing all right; it was the East Germans who were giving Rakhmanin a headache.⁵¹

Empowered by the May 20 Politburo decision, Rakhmanin ventured to bring Honecker to heel. He had a letter prepared and sent to the East German leader on July 14, 1982. It began "Dear Comrade Erich Honecker," implying a direct personal appeal, as if from Brezhnev to Honecker, but was signed as "the Central Committee of the CPSU."⁵² Odds are Brezhnev never saw this letter. Rakhmanin effectively appropriated the Central Committee for his ends, hijacking China policy, as Brezhnev, reduced to senility, went on a semi-permanent vacation, and other key players in the Soviet leadership jockeyed for the power.

In the letter, Rakhmanin repeated his conventional take on China's duplicity and hostility. "One gets the impression," the letter went, "that the current leaders of the PRC have no desire to conduct a serious political dialogue with us, they are not prepared for it." He noted, however, that Beijing was attempting by means of "small steps" to improve relations with some Eastern European countries at the Soviet Union's expense. Under these circumstances, the Chinese approaches had to be rebuffed resolutely. Should any relations be maintained with China, these

should be limited strictly to trade, science, culture, and sport—party-to-party ties should definitely not be developed. In economic relations, Rakhmanin called on the East Germans to consult with the USSR before taking any steps and certainly not allow anything that could “strengthen the potential of the Chinese hegemonism.” The same conclusion applied to the development of exchange in science, culture, and sport, because, in Rakhmanin’s assessment, Beijing used “people’s diplomacy” to “undermine our friendship and cooperation. Ties, which manifest such intentions, are unacceptable.”⁵³

In conclusion, Rakhmanin wrote:

The CC CPSU believes that the German friends will correctly understand our deep concern about the dangerous consequences of China’s differentiated approach in relations with the fraternal countries, and this policy will be rebuffed. It is clear that if Beijing obtained a basis to speculate on the fact that someone from the closest allies and friends of the USSR shows neutralism or submissiveness with regard to the anti-Soviet “widest united front,” being hammered together by the Chinese leaders, this would have extremely negative consequences for socialism, peace and our bilateral cooperation.⁵⁴

The letter was written in a rather heavy-handed, intimidating manner, interlaced with implicit and explicit threats. It is not difficult to imagine how Honecker felt about receiving it from none other than the “Central Committee of the CPSU,” though he may not have realized the extent to which it reflected Rakhmanin’s personal preferences.⁵⁵ Upon considering Rakhmanin’s letter at the Politburo on July 27, 1982, the East Germans resolved to tell the Soviets off, while moving ahead with the gradual normalization of relations with China.⁵⁶ With the power vacuum increasingly evident in Moscow, Honecker refused to be cowed by Rakhmanin’s threats; his quiet rebellion showed the limits of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe years before this influence formally collapsed. Rakhmanin did not necessarily get the message.

The May 20 Politburo decision also gave Rakhmanin remit to publish an article in the leading Communist Party journal *Kommunist*. The following month the Department submitted a piece that rubbed the Chinese into dust on all counts. Other than repeating the well-known Rakhmaninite claims about the sins of Maoism and the evil plotting of the “Chinese hegemons” in coup with various dark forces, the article specifically addressed heretics among unnamed communist parties that had responded to Beijing’s calls for rapprochement. “A certain ideological closing of ranks between anticommunists like Reagan, social-chauvinists in Beijing and the

opportunists has taken place,” said the article.⁵⁷ Rakhmanin’s team made it unclear who the opportunists were, but Erich Honecker would have known.

The piece went to the *Kommunist*’s editorial committee, which discussed it on June 27, with several members expressing grave concern about the jaw-dropping formulations. “About the word ‘hegemonism’—‘Chinese hegemonism,’ ‘Soviet hegemonism’—this makes a terrible impression,” complained Stepan Salychev, who, as a former KGB agent in Paris, had known better style than Rakhmanin’s—“Maybe we could do without these things.” Another member of the board agreed that the article made a “strange impression” and contained many “contradictions” and “unclear thoughts.” Several people spoke in favor of “postponing” publication despite the “difficult position of the editor”: “One should take into account that this material will be read by very different readers through a huge magnifying glass. This is serious political material; therefore one should approach it very seriously.”⁵⁸

No one knew this better than the editor of *Kommunist*, Richard Kosolapov. Since the article had come from Rakhmanin, it could not be “postponed.” “Accepted for publication with due regard to the comments voiced,” was all that Kosolapov could bring himself to say.⁵⁹ The matter appeared closed, and the Chinese were on track to be served a nasty installment of propaganda at a very fragile time in Sino-Soviet relations. Just then Chernyaev intervened. A member of the editorial board of the *Kommunist*, Chernyaev hardly showed up at the meetings, presumably keeping himself busy at the Central Committee. However, he, too, received Rakhmanin’s article and found that it amounted to “a complete denunciation of Tashkent.” “Shocked,” he phoned Kosolapov, but the editor could only say that “Rakhmanin is sitting on my head.”⁶⁰

Chernyaev took up this matter with Ponomarev, but the tired apparatchik was wary of stirring up trouble:

[PONOMAREV]: Do you know what the Chinese write about us every day? And what a bad speech the Chinese made in the UN?

[CHERNYAEV]: I know. But I also know that they stopped writing much of what they used to write half a year ago. The whole world sees this. It’s enough to flip through TASS [bulletins]. But Rakhmanin is hiding this from the C[entral] C[ommittee]. The main thing, though, is: will Tashkent be continued or not? If yes, then one must not allow for propaganda to diverge from policy.

[PONOMAREV]: A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since Tashkent...

[CHERNYAEV]: Is that so? That means...

[PONOMAREV]: No, no. You misunderstood me (becoming afraid). What am I proposing? Let Kosolapov, if he sympathizes with you, call Andropov. But in general, be careful, one should not make it look as if we (the International Department) are pro-Chinese, and Rakhmanin is the only one who struggles.⁶¹

As a result, Kosolapov took up the matter with his immediate boss in the Central Committee, Mikhail Zimyanin, who discussed it with Rakhmanin's boss, Konstantin Rusakov (the ailing head of The Department) and agreed that the article should be pulled from *Kommunist* and circulated to the Chinese Commission of the Politburo. That was not the end of the story. Andropov was unhappy with Chernyaev's meddling and reproached Ponomarev for allowing his staff to stir up conflicts between CC departments. He also instructed Rakhmanin to amend the article in particular, cutting the criticism of China's domestic affairs. Rakhmanin supplied only marginal amendments but was able to monopolize the editing process so that not only the editorial board (including Chernyaev) but also the editor of *Kommunist* (who in the meantime went on vacation, probably to dodge the trouble) were effectively removed from the process. Chernyaev, after attempting to appeal to Brezhnev and Andropov through their aides and through his good friend Georgii Arbatov (the director of the Institute of USA and Canada Studies), all but gave up, resigning himself to the imminent publication of the "anti-Chinese nonsense."⁶²

On August 6 Ponomarev called up Chernyaev. As the latter recounted, Ponomarev

thr[ew] some text at me with the words "read this. You have won!": It is a note from Brezhnev [who was then vacationing in the Crimea], addressed to Andropov, a very short one, just one paragraph: I am attaching a memorandum by my aide c[omrade] Golikov on Chinese affairs. I think it has reasonable ideas. I request that it is discussed at the Chinese Commission of the Politburo. And Golikov's memo—about 15 pages—says the following: one gets the impression that we are underestimating the importance of normalization with China. Our propaganda does not strongly support the Tashkent line, and sometimes comes out with materials which undermine it. No one wants to notice the changes in China but they are happening. Our main enemy is US imperialism, so the main strike should be made in that direction. Because otherwise what we have is that in terms of negotiations, contacts and exchanges we allow ourselves with the US (even at such a tense moment) what we do not allow ourselves with China. We have to have a strategic, Tashkent-like approach to the problem of China. Every day everything must be done to relieve

the tensions, develop cooperation, achieve mutual understanding, not to push China in the US direction, etc.⁶³

The memorandum was of “completely anti-Rakhmanin essence,” even though it lacked a single mention of the *Kommunist* article. “But who suggested this to Golikov,” mused Chernyaev—“or perhaps he is the source of the Tashkent line? And ‘arrived’ at this memorandum ‘independently,’ maybe without any knowledge of the *Kommunist* article? But he had to know about the Interkit.” Whatever the case, the result of this timely intervention was that Rakhmanin was taken down a peg or two, and Andropov even reportedly threatened that, unless he changed his behavior, “we will have to look for another place for him.”⁶⁴ Rakhmanin, wrote Chernyaev nearly two months after his “victory”—“as well as many others, cannot wait for the Chinese to pull something off that will cause Leonid Il’ich [Brezhnev]’s ‘wrath’ so that the whole Tashkent line—especially the Politburo course adopted in August after Golikov’s memo—would go to hell. Absolute incapacity to think in historical categories, lack of understanding what a state policy is. Yet, the fact that we and Chinese clawed each other for an extra 7–8 years is Rakhmanin’s doing.”⁶⁵

Brezhnev addressed himself to the subject of China in a conversation with Erich Honecker on August 11. Rakhmanin would have been pleased to know that Brezhnev castigated Honecker for sticking his neck out in relations with Beijing. He would have been much less pleased to hear the General Secretary admit that he, too, saw changes happening in China. Brezhnev told his East German visitor: “Don’t get me wrong: we are for normalization of relations with China. But we seek a real normalization, which means not at the cost to third countries, and not at the price of concessions on the questions of war and peace or our revolutionary theory. We have worked and continue to work with an eye to the future.”⁶⁶ Normalization with China was a part of that future, hence Tashkent, hence Brezhnev’s support for Golikov’s intervention to save the fragile sprouts of better Sino-Soviet relations from the winter of Rakhmanin’s sinophobia.

The emergence and the resilience of the Tashkent line cannot be explained by any single circumstance. At least two factors were in play. Probably the most important consideration on the Soviet side was the climate of Soviet-American relations. Things had been on the decline since the late 1970s: the Soviet meddling in Africa and deployment of mid-range nuclear missiles in the European theatre, invasion of Afghanistan, and crackdown against Poland’s Solidarity in 1981 were poorly received in Washington, so that by the time Reagan emerged as President in January 1981, only faint memories remained of Brezhnev’s most treasured foreign policy