Relations with Soviet Union


Mr Edvard Shevardnadze, the Soviet Foreign Minister, paid an official visit to Japan on Jan. 15–19, 1986, the first by a Soviet Foreign Minister since that of Mr Andrei Gromyko in 1976 [see 27599A]. On his arrival in Tokyo, the Japanese capital, Mr Shevardnadze said that he had high hopes that the two countries would become good neighbours, and that there would be a “wind of change” in bilateral relations. However, officials in Tokyo were said to be refraining from forecasting any substantial progress and pointing out that Mr Shevardnadze's visit was in itself the most important development in Japanese-Soviet relations for many years.

Political dialogue between the Soviet Union and Japan was curtailed in 1978 following the rapprochement between Japan and China [see 29279A]. Japanese participation in sanctions against the Soviet Union resulting from the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 and the Polish crisis of 1981 [see 30381A; pages 31462-63], and the shooting down of a South Korea airliner by a Soviet fighter over Sakhalin island in 1983 [see 32513A], contributed in turn to a further cooling of relations. Visits by Soviet government delegations in the period from 1980 to 1985 were on some occasions prevented from taking place by Japanese refusals to issue diplomatic visas, and otherwise rendered unproductive because of continuing controversy concerning the disputed “Northern Territories” [see below].

Moreover, the militarization of the region around Japan was the subject of polemics maintained throughout the period 1980–85, with Japan criticizing the strengthening of Soviet air and naval capabilities in the Soviet Far East, while the Soviet Union attacked what it deemed “nuclear co-operation” between Japan and the USA, referring to Japan on one occasion as an “arms depot in the Pentagon’s plans for unleashing a nuclear war”. There were also regular protests by Japan against violations of Japanese airspace by Soviet military aircraft, against unannounced firing practice by the Soviet navy, and against the closure of sea areas which included part of Japan's 200-mile exclusive fishery zone for missile firing tests.

Commentators also pointed to what they defined as Soviet neglect of relations with Japan and a tendency by the leadership during the Brezhnev era, particularly by the then Foreign Minister Mr Gromyko to underestimate the global importance of Japan. The Soviet Communist Party daily newspaper Pravda commented on Jan. 12, 1986, that Soviet-Japanese relations “do not correspond either to their political weight in world affairs or their economic potential”.

Le Monde of Jan. 15, 1986, commented that the renewal of Japanese-Soviet contacts “has certainly benefited from the more favourable climate between the USA and the Soviet Union” and “corresponds to a convergence of interests, notably in economic matters, and has been encouraged by the diplomatic ambitions of the two governments”. According to Le Monde the re-opening of a dialogue with Japan could be viewed from the Soviet point of view within the framework of the “diplomatic offensive” launched by Mr Mikhail Gorbachev since he became party leader in March 1985. Japan for its part looked for a possible reduction in Soviet military pressure in the region and new possibilities on the economic front.

The main obstacle to improved relations remained the dispute over the sovereignty of the “Northern Territories”, a term used by Japan to denote the islands of Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan, and the Habomai group, all of which lay at the southern end of the Kurile Island chain, and which had been occupied by the Soviet Union in 1945.

Japanese claims were based on the Treaty of Commerce, Navigation and Delimitation (also known as the Shimoda treaty) signed with the Russian Empire in 1855, which had established the boundary between the two countries as lying immediately to the north of the disputed islands, and also on the 1875 Russo-Japanese treaty under which Japan had conceded Russian sovereignty over Sakhalin in exchange for the Kurile Islands. The Soviet Union contended that these treaties had no present-day significance, arguing that Russian territorial concessions to Japan during this period were exacted under duress and specifically that the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05 nullified all agreements between the two sides. The Soviet Union had occupied the islands in 1945 on the basis of the 1945 Yalta agreement [see 6991A], which provided for the return to the Soviet Union of the Kurile islands and the southern half of Sakhalin (which had been awarded to Japan by the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905). Japan had consistently maintained, however, that the “Northern Territories” were distinct from the Kurile Islands and did not therefore fall within the purview of the Yalta agreement.

In 1956 the Soviet Union and Japan entered into discussions on the conclusion of a peace treaty (the Soviet Union having refused to sign the 1951 Allied-Japan peace treaty). The “Northern Territories” issue eventually caused the breakdown of talks, although agreement on the termination of the state of war and the resumption of diplomatic relations was set out in a joint declaration of Oct. 19, 1956 [see 15195A], which included an agreement in principle for the return of Shikotan and the Habomais upon the conclusion of a peace treaty. Shortly before the signature of the joint declaration the USA openly declared its support for the Japanese position on
the territorial question (ibid.). There had been little progress since 1956. In the communique of a meeting between the then Soviet Communist Party leader Mr Leonid Brezhnev and the then Japanese Prime Minister Mr Kakuei Tanaka on Oct. 10, 1973 [see page 2625], the Soviet side accepted that there were “yet unresolved problems remaining since World War II”. In recent years Japan had sought a reaffirmation of this position, and had rejected Soviet assertions that there was no outstanding territorial issue to resolve.

In an interview in the Washington Post on Jan. 17, 1983, during a visit to the USA, the Japanese Prime Minister Mr Yasuhiro Nakasone stated his support for a stronger military role for his country, provoking a strong warning from the Soviet Union.

Mr Nakasone was quoted as saying that in his view “the whole Japanese archipelago should be like an unsinkable aircraft carrier putting up a tremendous bulwark of defence”. A statement by the official Soviet news agency Tass on Jan. 19 warned that such plans would make Japan “a likely target for a retaliatory strike”; Tass also made it clear that the Soviet Union was already strengthening its own defences in the Far East in response to new US and Japanese deployments.

On Jan. 24, 1983, Mr Toshijiro Nakajima, the Japanese Deputy Foreign Minister, lodged a protest with the Soviet ambassador to Japan over the growing Soviet military presence in the Far East, and over recent Soviet statements concerning the militarization of the region. The protest referred in general terms to the Soviet military build-up in the area, and especially the deployment of modern fighter jets on Etorofu and Kunashiri, and criticized assertions allegedly made by the Soviet media that Japan, South Korea and the USA had formed a military alliance and that militarism was being revived in Japan. However, the Japanese Foreign Ministry appeared most concerned about recent remarks attributed to the then Soviet President Yury Andropov that some of the Soviet Union’s SS-20 nuclear missiles might be moved from the European theatre and targeted against US military bases in Japan.

At the end of two days of talks between Soviet and Japanese Foreign Ministry officials in April 1983 Japanese officials described as “ridiculous” a Soviet proposal for an agreement whereby the Soviet Union would pledge not to use nuclear weapons against Japan in exchange for a Japanese promise not to make or import such weapons. Mr Mikhail Kapitsa, a Deputy Foreign Minister who headed the Soviet delegation to Tokyo, denied that the Soviet Union had SS-20s aimed at Japan, saying that the 100 SS-20s in Soviet Asia were there as a countermeasure against US military forces in the region and were not targeted at any particular nation.

Mr Shevardnadze held his first round of talks with Mr Shintaro Abe, the Japanese Foreign Minister, on Jan. 15, 1986, during which discussion, which was described as “frank and businesslike”, concentrated on such issues as arms control, Japan’s potential participation in the US Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI, or “Star Wars”), and the growing military build-up in the Far East.

Mr Shevardnadze warned Mr Abe against Japan’s participation in the SDI programme, but was advised in his turn that the Japanese government was still studying whether to join in the research phase and would make up its mind independently. Mr Abe was reported to have expressed concern about the deployment of SS-20s and other armaments, and to have requested that the Soviet Union reduce its military arsenal in the Far East as a step towards the reduction of tension in the area.

Mr Abe told reporters that the Soviet delegation had taken a restrained attitude in the discussions, dispensing with denunciations of Japanese-US relations and US nuclear weaponry, and that there was a perceptible change in the manner of Soviet diplomacy under Mr Shevardnadze.

Following the second and third rounds of talks on Jan. 16, Japanese Foreign Ministry officials stated that despite an apparent failure to resolve fundamental differences on the territorial question Mr Shevardnadze and Mr Abe had made progress in the areas of trade and economic co-operation.

Mr Abe had proposed to upgrade the annual working-level trade consultations to Deputy Minister level, while Mr Shevardnadze had expressed the hope that the Soviet Union would reach basic agreement with a Japanese delegation on details of a Sakhalin natural gas project. Mr Abe had told Mr Shevardnadze that while Japan had no plans to conclude a long-term economic co-operation agreement, economic co-operation on a case-by-case basis would still be possible, and had also confirmed Japanese readiness to resume science and technology co-operation talks.

On Jan. 18 Mr Shevardnadze and Mr Abe signed a financial agreement for 1986–90 covering currency, transportation and commodities, trade consultations and ways of solving trade conflict, and extended until the end of 1988 a cultural agreement due to have expired on Jan. 26, 1986.

A joint communique’ was issued on Jan. 19 as the result of an emergency session held by Mr Shevardnadze and Mr Abe on Jan. 17. According to a Japanese Foreign Ministry official the additional meeting focused on the issue of the “ Northern Territories”. Japanese negotiators were believed to be calling for a communique’ along the lines of that issued after the 1973 Brezhnev-Tanaka meeting [see above]. The main points of the communique were as follows:

(1) Acknowledging the importance of political dialogue between their two countries, the two sides reaffirmed their agreement to hold regular Foreign Ministerial consultations alternately in Moscow and Tokyo at least once a year, and agreed that the annual consultations at Deputy Minister level should be continued.

(2) It was agreed that negotiations on the conclusion of a Japan-Soviet peace treaty based on the agreement established in the 1973
Japan's economic sanctions against the Soviet Union in January 1980, in protest against the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, included the suspension of any new credits and an embargo on the export of high technology and strategic goods; in response, Japanese bids for Soviet contracts were turned down. Sanctions were relaxed during 1981 [see pages 30971-72], allowing for conclusion of a credits-for-goods package involving the Siberian forestry industry, and a major deal on the export of steel piping to the Soviet Union, and a five-year trade and payments agreement for 1981–86 was signed in April 1981. However, the imposition of martial law in Poland in December 1981 prompted the Japanese government to announce on Feb. 17, 1982, sanctions which included the scaling-down of scientific co-operation and the suspension of annual consultative meetings. An agreement for the resumption of official trade talks, although not of annual consultations, was announced by the Japanese Foreign Ministry on Aug. 17, 1983.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry announced on June 21, 1983, that Mr Arkady Vinogradov, a first secretary at the Soviet embassy in Tokyo, had been ordered to leave Japan after allegedly engaging in high-technology espionage activities. It was claimed that Mr Vinogradov had tried to obtain confidential information from an executive of the Hitachi computer company.

Foreign Ministry spokesmen said that the expulsion of Mr Vinogradov “may have helped consolidate Western unity in checking leaks of advanced technology to the Soviet Union”, and that the Ministry had studied similar cases in other countries before deciding to expel him (for other incidents connected with the attempted illegal sale of technology to the Soviet bloc see page 33629].

A Japanese businessman, Mr Takashi Kuriyama, was accused of espionage and expelled from the Soviet Union on July 13, 1984. It was alleged that Mr Kuriyama had photographed “facilities of interest to foreign special services” during trips to the Soviet Union. The Japanese embassy in Moscow denied the allegations and said that it had refused to accept a formal protest lodged by the Soviet Union.