

Soviets hope to build Pacific air 'bridge'

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KHABAROVSK, SOVIET FAR EAST — Air traffic between the Soviet Union and the United States is to triple in the near future as a result of an agreement signed by President George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev during the Washington Summit.

Direct flights will link cities in the United States with Kiev, Riga, Minsk and Tbilisi. At the same time, Soviets will have an opportunity to fly straight to Chicago, Miami, San Francisco and Anchorage.

Trans-Pacific flights will be inaugurated in the first place, linking Khabarovsk and Magadan in the Soviet Far East with the U.S. West Coast.

It was the inscription in Russian and English on a pen that made this real to me recently. It read, "Peoples of Alaska and the Far East — One People." The pen was lying on the desk of Vladimir Skrypnik, 49, who heads the Far Eastern Civil Aviation Administration. It is definitely a sign of the times.

Recently, Skrypnik went on a business trip to Alaska to speed up the "construction" of an air "bridge" between the Soviet Far East and the United States. He took the pen with him.

Skrypnik took me over to the map of the world that was hanging on the wall and showed me the route that the Soviet delegation had traveled before arriving at Anchorage.

After covering more than 4,300 miles from Khabarovsk to Moscow, they took off for Shannon, Ireland, subsequently arriving in Cuba. From there, they traveled to New Mexico and Guadalajara. After making stopovers in San Francisco, Seattle and Juneau, they finally touched down at

Anchorage.

The journey lasted for four and a half days. Skrypnik and his fellow travelers had logged a total of 38 hours in the air.

Like many people here, Skrypnik is sure that it's impossible to develop full-fledged economic and cultural ties between the Soviet Far East and the United States without convenient transport routes.

Experts of the Far Eastern Civil Aviation Administration have proposed establishing several trans-Pacific air routes. Three options have been accepted, and each seems fantastic at first. For example, the Khabarovsk-San Francisco route stretches over those areas which had been classified by the military as top secret.

Khabarovsk experts estimate that a trans-Pacific flight will last some nine to 10 hours. People traveling to the Far East and Middle East, to western Europe, China and Singapore will find this route rather convenient.

After wrangling it out in Khabarovsk and Moscow, the authorities have at least given the go-ahead. On April 1, 1991, the first airliner will take off from Khabarovsk and streak toward San Francisco. The planes will be crewed by Soviet pilots.

Another nonstop air route will connect Khabarovsk and Anchorage. It will take airliners only five and a half hours to cover the distance between the two cities. Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Magadan, Vladivostok, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Anadyr, which had been previously closed to foreigners, will from now on be used by Alaska Airlines and the Far Eastern Civil Aviation Administration as alternate airports.

It also is planned to set up a joint venture pretty soon together with Evergreen Airlines, which has its

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headquarters in Portland, Ore. By the way, Portland is a sister city of Khabarovsk.

Evergreen Airlines carries a lot of cargo all over the United States and the Asia-Pacific region. However, heavy air traffic in the skies over Japan where transit planes have to stop for refueling poses quite a problem. Besides, the company's planes always have to carry extra fuel and rescue equipment.

Khabarovsk can serve as an alternative airport for refueling Evergreen transports. Both sides stand to gain from this, and a preliminary agreement already has been signed.

Experts think that Far Eastern Airlines can hire Boeing jets and Cessna "flying taxis" to good advantage. Cessna planes can be successfully used to develop new territories with difficult terrain. They are cost-effective.

The Khabarovsk Civilian Air Division is now holding talks with duty free representatives in Anchorage to open a chain of stores in the Khabarovsk airport. These are going to sell European and American goods,

not Japanese.

Soviet aviators are short of planes. However, the Soviet side has quite a lot of skilled pilots, navigators and flight engineers.

"We intend to buy and rent aircraft, and we could also 'lease' our crews to U.S. airlines. According to our experts, both nations would only stand to gain from this," said Skrypnik.

While I was talking to Skrypnik, his subordinates came and went all the time. One was getting ready to go to Australia to negotiate the purchase of a brick-making factory for building the new air terminal. Another one was to fly to Anchorage for advanced training at the local airport.

Regrettably, direct flights to that city haven't yet become a reality.

"In ancient times, man traveled all the way from Asia to America across the strip of land where the Bering Strait is now situated. Well, this is what historians say. We want to set up an air bridge, and we may call it "Beringia." It will help bring out two nations, who were divided by the cold winds of confrontation for so long, closer together," Skrypnik said.