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China backs East Europe links

By MICHAEL BOCIURKIW
CHINA appears to have dropped its objections to Hongkong developing closer political and economic ties with Eastern Europe.

"As long as the relationship is beneficial we will support it," said a senior Chinese official. "This would be good for Hongkong and its future."

By adopting a more liberal attitude to the prickly diplomatic issue, it could open the door to a far more rapid warming of relations with the Communist world than previously expected.

The statement comes on the heels of a Hongkong Government decision to relax entry requirements for nationals of several Eastern European countries and the announcement of a Hungarian plan to become the first Eastern European country to open a formal representative office in Hongkong.

Senior Hongkong officials said last week the territory had in the past been reluctant to improve the relationship because of Chinese sensitivities.

It has long been believed that Beijing feared Hongkong

being turned into a spy base for Eastern European governments if visa restrictions were relaxed.

"So far we've had a thin response to developments in Eastern Europe," said a senior Government official. "Chinese fears might have had something to do with this."

But the Chinese official denied Beijing has been opposed to closer ties for this reason.

"There is nothing specific we do not like about it," the official said.

Under new rules intro-

duced last month, visitors from East Germany will be treated in the same way as their West German counterparts and allowed to enter Hongkong for up to 30 days without a visa. The changes also permit nationals from Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland to apply for visas for the purposes of tourism and sightseeing.

However, citizens from the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania do not qualify for visas unless they are here for business purposes.

Out of the 4.8 million visi-

tors to Hongkong last year, only 2,019 were from Eastern Europe, according to Hongkong Tourist Association (HKTA) figures.

Ms Penny Byrne, a spokesman for the HKTA, said the territory could benefit from the easing up of restrictions on Soviet citizens.

She said restrictions on visas for people from Eastern Europe has hurt the territory's convention business because large organisations are loathe to select a location which is closed to some of their members.

"No big international or-

ganisation will consider Hongkong as a venue if some of its membership could be excluded," Ms Byrne said.

Mr George Oleksyn, a specialist on Eastern Europe for the Hongkong Trade Development Council, said the body was pleased with the speed in which Hongkong has eased entry requirements for nationals of Eastern European countries.

No Eastern European governments have representation in Hongkong and there are no direct air links with Eastern Europe. The Hongkong Government is current-

ly studying the proposal from the Hungarian Government for a trade office.

Chinese officials said they expect no change in the status of foreign diplomatic posts in Hongkong after 1997 other than some missions scaling down or increasing their operations.

They said several Chinese cities have large foreign consulates and would expect Hongkong to retain the 78 foreign missions currently here. "Some of them may even expand their operations," the official said.