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NEW CONCEPTS OF EAST-WEST RELATIONS

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Introduction

We now have had more than seventy years' experience observing, analyzing, and interacting with the Soviet regime. During that long period, East-West relations have followed a recurring cyclical pattern with depressing regularity. Time and again, periods of détente fostered extravagant expectations in the West that a turning point had been reached in the development of the Soviet regime, opening the way for a termination of cold war rivalry. The adoption of N.E.P., Stalin's victory over Trotsky, Soviet support for collective security in the 1930s, the Grand Alliance of World War II, Stalin's death, Khrushchev's proclamation of peaceful coexistence, and Brezhnev's embrace of détente were all hailed as representing the deradicalization of Soviet foreign policy. Yet on each occasion, these optimistic hopes were dashed. By the early 1980s, East-West relations were once again mired in confrontation and conflict. The fruits of seven decades of interaction have been disappointingly meager.

There is an obvious lesson to be learned from all this. We must avoid wishful thinking, and we should recognize the many deep-seated problems that stand in the way of a rapid and durable improvement in East-West relations. Gorbachev is not the first Soviet leader to launch a charm offensive, and we need to see tangible results before we can justifiably conclude that new thinking truly reigns in the Kremlin.

Yet this is not the only lesson to be learned. So great is the disillusionment resulting from past attempts to improve East-West

relations, and so frequently is the warning sounded that the West must avoid succumbing to "détente euphoria" and "summit fever," there is a danger of becoming too cynical and too skeptical about Gorbachev's reforms. It would be a mistake to prejudge the outcome of the historic experiment in reconstruction currently underway in the Soviet Union. We should use past experience, not to erect a closed, deterministic theory of unvarying Soviet malevolence, but as a lens for analyzing the forces motivating Soviet conduct and as a benchmark for pragmatically judging when fundamental change has or has not occurred.

This paper argues that a genuine attempt is being made within the Soviet leadership to re-examine and re-think the fundamentals of Soviet foreign policy. While there is no guarantee that this process will continue or that it will produce far-reaching and irreversible changes in Soviet conduct, the fact that foreign policy reform is in harmony with--and the product of--similar changes in Soviet society and political culture suggests that what we are witnessing goes far beyond a transient charm offensive.

There are, of course, many reasons why the West has found it so difficult to deal with Moscow and to achieve a sustained improvement in East-West relations. Without claiming to present a complete and exhaustive analysis, this paper focuses on five interrelated characteristics of the Soviet posture toward the outside world that have contributed to the virulence of cold war tension: 1) sense of mission; 2) self-righteousness; 3) obsessive secrecy; 4) excessive optimism about favorable shifts in the international balance of power (what the Soviets call the "correlation of forces"); and 5) deep feelings of insecurity.

It is my contention that as the attitudinal factors promoting a suspicious and confrontational stance toward the West wane, a real possibility arises for fundamental change in Soviet foreign policy. The more modest and constructive posture that Moscow has adopted under Gorbachev can best be understood as the outcome of a complex process of societal change and maturation. It should not be dismissed as a duplicitous tactical shift that can effortlessly be turned on or off at will by the Soviet leadership. We need to recognize the powerful forces at work in the Soviet Union promoting the reform of that country's foreign policy, even while acknowledging that no one can predict how successful and durable this reform effort ultimately will turn out to be.

The Sense of Mission

The Soviet regime was born with an international mission. Lenin and his Bolshevik colleagues were convinced that a true revolutionary had to dedicate himself not just to the overthrow of capitalism in his own country, but also to the support of revolutionary forces throughout the world. After coming to power, the Soviet leadership quickly learned the need for caution and flexibility so as to protect the precarious position of the Soviet state within a hostile environment of vastly more powerful capitalist states. But this need for circumspection did not cause the sense of mission to wither away. On the contrary, it was continually nourished by the dogmatic conviction that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, armed with the scientific teachings of Marxism-Leninism, had discovered the one true path to revolution, which all nations should be encouraged to follow.

One of the most significant developments of the Gorbachev period is

the erosion of this dogmatic posture. The development of socialism in the Soviet Union is no longer seen as a smooth and flawless process. It is now acknowledged that many grave errors were committed and much unnecessary suffering was inflicted upon the Soviet people. In effect, it is now admitted that the Soviet Union lost its way long ago, as far back as the 1920s when N.E.P. was disbanded, and it is suggested that the Soviet people must now retrace their steps and begin anew. In this sense, "the Soviet model" is not even being held up as the model for the Soviet Union, let alone for the rest of the world! Reflecting this sentiment, the well-connected reformist journalist Aleksandr Bovin has written: "The long reign of dogmatic thought and our limited experience caused particular temporary features to be viewed as universal, mandatory definitions of socialism."¹ In his view, despite the Soviet Union's many successes, "We had not created a society that in every respect was capable of serving as an example, as a model for imitation, and as a stimulus in the struggle for the socialist transformation of the world."² Even Anatolii Dobrynin, the head of the International Department, freely admitted to a gathering of communist and socialist parties that socialism has yet "to provide the masses in Western countries with a convincing example of a profoundly democratized society and a radical, unsurpassed resolution of economic problems."³ Gorbachev, in his authoritative speech commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the Revolution pointedly stated that "... socialism does not, and cannot have, a model against which all are compared."⁴ Speaking the following day to the representatives of the communist and socialist parties who had attended the anniversary celebration, he denounced the "arrogance of a belief in one's omniscience," and he criticized the "tenacious habit of rejecting out

of hand other points of view."⁵

How are we to explain these statements? No doubt, improved public relations skills and a more sophisticated appreciation of the sensitivities of foreign communist leaders were significant factors prompting these pronouncements. But something more fundamental is at work as well. There is a close congruence between what is happening within the Soviet Union and its stance toward the outside world. In both realms, there is a new-found toleration of diversity which is quite remarkable when compared to previous Soviet practice.

The clearest manifestation of this is the unprecedented openness that has burst forth in the Soviet press. One after another, long-standing taboos have been shattered. Stalin is assailed for establishing a "totalitarian" system, Dr. Zhivago has been published along with many other long-suppressed works (such as We, Animal Farm and excerpts from 1984), the attack on Stalin has been pressed with great vigour, the privileges of the Party elite have been questioned, and even Lenin has not been spared criticism.

These developments are related to the maturation of Soviet society and the emergence of a more sophisticated political culture that is impatient with dogmatism and recognizes the value of open discussion, dialogue, and debate. Gorbachev's style of leadership is both a product of this trend and a major factor reinforcing it. Thus we see that despite the discomfort of conservative forces within the Party, Gorbachev has explicitly embraced the long-scorned concept of "pluralism."⁶ He has praised diversity, bemoaned the lack of a more tolerant "political culture," and called for more open debate. For example, in addressing representatives from the media, Gorbachev stated:

The most controversial questions need to be debated while having respect for one another. In even the most extreme point of view there is something valuable, something rational, because a person who defends his point of view honestly displays concern for the common cause....I do not see any drama in polemics, in the confrontation of points of view. It is normal. We are now, as it were, going through the school of democracy afresh. We are learning. Our political culture is still inadequate. Our standard of debate is inadequate; our ability to respect the point of view of even our friend and comrade--even that is inadequate.

Similarly, in November 1987, Gorbachev proclaimed:

Our premise is that socialism is a society of growing diversity in people's views, mutual inter-relations and activity. Each person has his social experience, his level of knowledge and education, and his own particular ways of perceiving events. Thus, there is an enormous range of opinions, convictions, and assessments, which naturally require careful consideration and comparison. We are in favor of a diversity of public opinion and of richness of intellectual life.

At the meeting of the Central Committee in February 1988, he stated: "Questions of theory cannot and should not be resolved by decrees of any kind. A free competition of minds is needed."⁹ In his view, people should be organized "not by lining them up evenly as if for a parade, but on the basis of the diversity of human potential, desires, interests and capabilities."¹⁰ It is hard to imagine Brezhnev, let alone Stalin, telling a meeting of key figures in the media: "I am talking to you about my own profound convictions; I may be in error about some things--I make no claim to absolute truth."¹¹

Soviet appeals for international cooperation in the struggle for peace and social progress now embody a much more tolerant and ecumenical approach than was previously the case. For example, Yuri Krasin, the Rector of the Institute of Social Science of the Central Committee, denounced the "haughtiness of the former claim to know all the answers" and stated:

The times when the experience and conceptions of the non-communist social forces were looked down upon are now past. Life has proved that the activity of those forces--Socialists, Social Democrats,

Greens, or other mass democratic organizations--shows important aspects of the many-faceted reality and supplies the material for comprehending contemporary problems in all their aspects.¹²

It would be a mistake to dismiss pronouncements such as these as just improved public relations. In appraising these statements, we should take onto account not just the West's unhappy experience with past Soviet peace campaigns (such as the abortive Popular Front of the 1930s) but the powerful social, psychological, and political forces that are stirring throughout Soviet society.

Another factor attenuating the Soviet sense of international mission is the vastly increased salience of domestic problems and needs. In the closed atmosphere that existed prior to Gorbachev, it was easy for the Soviet leadership to ignore--or even be ignorant of--pressing domestic problems. With glasnost' this is no longer possible. When it is openly stated that the Soviet Union stands fiftieth in the world in terms of infant mortality, that its abortion rate is several times higher than that of other developed nations, and that its level of agricultural and industrial productivity is far below American standards, it is much more difficult for Soviet leaders to stick their heads in the sand and resist a reallocation of resources away from foreign adventures toward domestic needs.

Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze has been especially outspoken in his indictment of the failings of past polices and in his call for Soviet foreign policy to make a greater contribution to the Soviet economy. In addressing Soviet diplomatic personnel on 27 June 1987, he used some of the bluntest language about the shortcomings of Soviet diplomacy ever to appear in the press.¹³ He acknowledged "the backwardness of our power and its steady loss of its status."¹⁴ In his view, the Soviet Union is "a great

country which in the last 15 years has been steadily losing its position as one of the leading industrially developed countries."¹⁵ After detailing how Soviet foreign policy personnel contributed to this decline, he stated:

If we are finally honest, we frequently encouraged and at times even induced enormous material investments in hopeless foreign policy projects and tacitly promoted actions which both in the direct and the indirect sense have cost the people dearly even to this day....The fact that the foreign policy service--one of the most important and most sensitive links in the system of state management--carried out its obligations out of touch with the country's fundamental vital interests is on our conscience.¹⁶

Shevardnadze's proposed remedy is quite revealing. He stated:

The main thing is that the country not incur additional expenses in connection with the need to maintain defensive capability and protect its lawful foreign policy interests. This means that we must seek ways to limit and reduce military rivalry, eliminate confrontational features in relations with other states, and suppress conflict and crisis situations....[We] must increase the profitability of our foreign policy and try to reach a situation where interrelations among states encumber our economy as little as possible and create a stable psychological atmosphere in which Soviet people can work peacefully.¹⁷

Whereas in the past, Soviet domestic needs were often sacrificed in the pursuit of an overly ambitious foreign policy, Shevardnadze has called for a very different conception of the relationship between domestic and foreign policy. As he stated in a speech to the staff of the Foreign Ministry on 4 July 1987: "...the most important function of our foreign policy is to create the optimal conditions for the economic and social development of our country."¹⁸ On yet another occasion, he declared:

The restructuring in diplomatic work is primarily the fundamental awareness, to a greater depth than ever before, of the interrelationship between the foreign and domestic policy of the Soviet Union....Without an awareness of the fact that diplomacy must create for domestic restructuring a favorable foreign policy environment and conditions, we do not have and cannot have today a qualified, competent diplomat or a competent diplomatic service.¹⁹

Another factor undercutting the Soviet sense of mission is increased realism about the Third World. There is a heightened awareness--not just

among specialists but among a broader circle of policy-makers as well--of just how resistant the countries of the Third World are to Soviet-style socialism. The Soviet press has criticized wishful thinking about the Third World and the tendency to glorify tyrannical leaders whose main interest is not the construction of socialism but the expansion of their own power and privileges.²⁰ It is acknowledged that the economic backwardness of most Third World countries means that a long capitalist stage must be traversed before they will be ready for socialism. There is increased attention to such considerations as the economic burden of these countries upon the Soviet Union, their endemic political instability which makes the consolidation of durable "fraternal" alliances so difficult, and the bitter tribal, ethnic, and geopolitical rivalries that hamper Soviet policy in Africa and Asia. There is also an increased sensitivity to the adverse effect that the Soviet Union's Third World policies have had on broader Soviet interests, such as détente, arms control, expanded East-West trade, and improved Soviet-American relations. While the Soviet leadership is hesitant to retreat from previously established positions in the Third World, it is being highly cautious about precipitating new confrontations and acquiring additional burdens.²¹

The bold attempt underway in the Soviet Union to re-make the economy, to revitalize society, and to re-shape the political system will take many, many years to accomplish. Gorbachev and his reformist colleagues are staking everything--their careers, privileges and power--on the success of this gamble. It is no wonder that foreign adventures have much less allure for them than such activities had for their predecessors. This turning inward, combined with the rejection of dogmatism and a growing appreciation

of the complexity of the modern world, is a potent force reshaping Soviet foreign policy.

Self-Righteousness

The dogmatism that has animated the Soviet sense of mission has also produced a posture of self-righteousness that has made the Soviet Union especially difficult to deal with. In the past, Soviet officials have refused to admit that Soviet foreign policy was ever in error or that Soviet actions might have contributed to an increase in international tension. Western mistrust of the Soviet Union was said to be the product of bourgeois class hatred for a rival system rather than a consequence of anything the Soviet Union might have done, and Western fears of Soviet aggression were dismissed as totally groundless. This self-righteous posture impeded fruitful discussion between Western officials and their Soviet counterparts, made it difficult for Soviet policy-makers to understand the roots of Western policy toward the Soviet Union, and prevented them from taking an honest look at their own conduct and learning from past mistakes.

Public criticism of the regime's foreign policy has always been an especially delicate issue. During past periods of de-Stalinization (i.e., in 1956-57 and 1961-62), when Stalin's domestic repression was sharply criticized, almost nothing was said publicly about the shortcomings of his foreign policy. Even now, with glasnost' flourishing, Soviet analysts must tread very carefully when discussing the record of their country's diplomacy. But more and more, voices are being raised in criticism of this situation, and slowly it is beginning to change. For example, an article in Sovetskaya kultura complained that while mistakes in domestic policy can

be discussed, foreign policy errors remain off limits for Soviet reporters. In the author's view, this situation "does not suit television viewers, radio listeners, or readers. It nauseates even the journalists themselves."²² He calls for "a complete and objective analysis of our past foreign policy."²³ Even Shevardnadze has criticized this situation in a speech delivered on 27 June 1987:

Bold, interesting, and controversial articles have appeared on many basic questions of domestic life in all its manifestations, party and state construction, the economy, culture, art, and science. But there is nothing like it in the field of foreign policy. Is it really because everything is correct with us and variants other than those which are being implemented do not exist?²⁴

In the period since Shevardnadze's speech, this situation has begun to change. Slowly but surely, Soviet analysts are beginning to criticize past foreign policy. Although Soviet commentators cannot go into much detail and have to be very careful how they phrase their comments, it has been suggested that: it was a mistake for the Soviet Union to acquire so many SS-20s and to have walked out of the Geneva arms talks in late 1983; it was a major error to have sent troops into Afghanistan; it was wrong to have attempted to conceal the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962 and to have lied about their presence there; Stalin's erroneous policy of fighting the German Social Democrats contributed to Hitler's rise to power; and it was a criminal mistake for the Soviet Union to have concluded the 1939 non-aggression pact with Hitler.²⁵ A discussion of Soviet summit diplomacy criticized both Khrushchev and Brezhnev. Khrushchev was accused of advocating "impractical" plans for general and complete disarmament, being unnecessarily fearful of arms control verification, and exaggerating Soviet prospects for overtaking the United States economically by 1970.²⁶ Brezhnev was faulted for "exaggerated optimism" concerning the prospects

for Soviet-American relations and for embracing détente not only as "a vitally important goal but also [as] a sort of pacifier, used consciously or unconsciously, [as] a stimulus for a feeling of well-being in a society in which stagnant phenomena were building."²⁷

Under Gorbachev, the public discussion of Soviet foreign policy has evolved through several phases. During the first phase, up until mid-1987, the press was full of pious statements stressing the need for all nations to embrace "new thinking" and abandon outmoded stereotypes. However, specific examples of past Soviet errors were generally not cited. In the latter part of 1987, a second phase began, and a number of Soviet commentators spoke out in criticism of this situation. They argued that it was unacceptable to have a double standard whereby domestic policy could be discussed with increasing candor, while foreign policy was considered beyond reproach. The Soviet press was also criticized for its simplistic and distorted coverage of foreign events. By late 1987 and early 1988, articles began to appear in which specific aspects of past policy were subjected to criticism. However, the criticism was generally limited to just a few sentences and usually pertained to policies that had been abandoned and were now considered an embarrassment (e.g., the invasion of Afghanistan or the buildup of SS-20s).

Although it is too early to know for certain, it appears that a third phase involving a more fundamental re-examination of past foreign policy may have begun in May 1988. The theses approved by the Central Committee on 23 May 1988 contained the sharpest critique of past Soviet foreign policy issued to date at such an authoritative level. As part of an extended discussion of the Soviet Union's new thinking in foreign affairs,

the theses stated:

A critical analysis of the past has been made to show that our foreign policy, too, did not escape dogmatic and subjective attitudes. It trailed behind fundamental changes that occurred in the world and missed chances to reduce tensions and enhance understanding among nations. In our bid for military-strategic parity we occasionally failed to use opportunities available to attain security for our nation by political means, and, as a result, allowed ourselves to be lured into an arms race, which could not but affect this country's social²⁸ and economic progress and its standing on the international scene.

These theses have given reformist journalists and scholars added scope to broaden their critical appraisal of Soviet foreign policy.²⁹

An even more dramatic development also occurred in May 1988. A lengthy article appeared in Literaturnaya gazeta on 18 May 1988 which constitutes what is probably the most fundamental critique of Soviet foreign policy to have been published in that country in more than half a century. Unlike previous discussions of foreign policy which were generally limited to just a few negative comments, this article--which was written by a relatively unknown historian named Vyacheslav Dashichev--put forth an extended, hard-hitting critique of the whole thrust of foreign policy under Stalin and Brezhnev.³⁰

Due to the unprecedented, path-breaking nature of this article, it is worth quoting from it at some length. In discussing Stalin's policies, Dashichev boldly declared:

Lenin's principles of not only domestic but also foreign policy were seriously distorted during the time of Stalin's rule. In essence, the foreign policy practice of Stalin and his closest associates was based on the ultraleftist ideas of Blanquism and Trotskyism which are alien to the nature of socialism. What came to the fore, especially after World War II, was the spread of Stalinist socialism wherever possible and its standardization in all countries regardless of their national features. Overcentralization in domestic policy inevitably engendered hegemonism and a great-power mentality in foreign policy....The hegemonist, great-power ambitions of Stalinism which became rooted in foreign policy repeatedly jeopardized political equilibrium between states, especially those of East and West. In the process the

interests of the expansion of social revolution ³¹ pushed into the background the task of preventing the threat of war.

In the author's view, Stalin's policies had a grave impact upon Western perceptions of the Soviet Union which has still not been overcome:

In the eyes of the overwhelming proportion of the Western public the Soviet Union is a dangerous power whose leadership wants to eliminate the bourgeois democracies by military means, ³² and to establish a Soviet-type communist system throughout the world.

This article is equally scathing in its critique of Brezhnev's foreign policy:

[As] the West saw it, the Soviet leadership was actively exploiting détente to build up its own military forces, seeking military parity with the United States and in general with all the opposing powers--a fact without historical precedent....The expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence reached critical limits in the West's eyes with the introduction of Soviet troops into Afghanistan....Could such a severe exacerbation of tension in Soviet-Western relations in the late seventies and early eighties have been avoided? Unquestionably so. It is our conviction that the crisis was caused chiefly by the miscalculations and incompetent approach of the ³³ Brezhnev leadership toward the resolution of foreign policy tasks.

Brezhnev's policy toward the Third World was also condemned:

We were wrong in assessing the global situation in the world and the correlation of forces, and no serious efforts were made to settle the fundamental political contradictions with the West. Though we were politically, militarily (via weapons supplies and advisers), and diplomatically involved in regional conflicts, we disregarded their influence on the relaxation of tension between the U.S.S.R. and the West and on their entire system of relationships. There were no clear ideas of the Soviet Union's true national state interests. These interests lay by no means in chasing petty and essentially formal gains associated with leadership coups in certain developing countries. The genuine interest lay in ensuring a favorable international situation for profound transformation in the Soviet Union's economy and sociopolitical system. However, at that time it was believed that no transformations were needed. ³⁴

The article concluded with a spirited call for the Soviet Union to concentrate on the noble task of internal reconstruction so that it would serve as an inspiring example to the rest of the world: "The Soviet Union can and must influence world social progress exclusively via its economic,

political, scientific, and cultural successes."³⁵ Building upon one of the more innovative elements in Gorbachev's new thinking, the author pointedly declared: "The interests of saving human civilization from nuclear annihilation take precedence over any class, ideological, material, personal, and other interests."³⁶ This article clearly represents a quantum leap forward in the public discussion of foreign policy in the Soviet Union. It suggests that some influential Soviet analysts are willing to re-examine previous policies and learn from past mistakes.

One change that has already occurred in Soviet diplomacy is that Soviet officials are now prepared to hold frank discussions with their Western counterparts on a wide range of issues. Reflecting a new sense of self-confidence, realism, and flexibility, Shevardnadze has called for a "dialogue with our partners and opponents...constructed on fundamentally new principles," one that does "not have any taboos concerning various topics or problems."³⁷ The May 1988 Central Committee theses declared: "The whole style of our foreign policy has changed. Its distinguishing feature is dialogue."³⁸

In the past, Soviet officials responded to Western accusations of human rights abuses by angrily denying that there were any human rights problems in the Soviet Union to be discussed. They referred to "so-called human rights" or put the phrase "human rights" in quotation marks.³⁹ Now they are willing to engage in lively discussions of the issue. Instead of declaring the whole topic off limits, they parry American criticism with their own accusations about human rights abuses in the U.S. They are even willing to acknowledge that there are genuine problems in their own society that they are trying to remedy.

Similarly, there is an increased candor in Soviet discussions of

regional problems (such as Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Africa) and a willingness to acknowledge that the entire developed world--and not just "imperialism"--has a responsibility to deal with the vast gulf that separates the rich and poor nations of the world. Soviet spokesmen are also willing to admit that there are some categories of conventional weaponry in Europe in which the Soviet Union has an advantage over the West and that the officially stated military budget of approximately 20 billion rubles does not cover the full cost of Soviet military expenditures.

Perhaps most significant of all, Soviet spokesmen no longer dismiss Western fears about Soviet aggression and military might as being based upon self-serving fantasies concocted by capitalist warmongers. Even though they accuse hardline elements in the West of deliberately exacerbating these fears, they now acknowledge that broad segments of Western public opinion are genuinely concerned about the possibility of Soviet aggression. They also recognize that these fears are one of the factors promoting the strong military posture of the United States. There is a growing appreciation in Moscow that the traditional Soviet policy of attempting to achieve a more favorable military balance by launching cosmetic peace campaigns and by mobilizing the forces of the left against the military programs of capitalist government is inadequate. It is increasingly realized that the Soviet Union has to change its policies, not just its pronouncements, so that it no longer has the image of the enemy in Western eyes.

Moscow's painful decisions to withdraw from Afghanistan, to abandon its costly investment in intermediate-range nuclear forces, and to allow an unprecedented degree of international inspection of its military

installations should not be viewed as just short-term tactical maneuvers aimed at freeing up badly needed economic resources. They are part of a long-term strategy to create a new identity and a new image for the Soviet Union as a country that is not threatening anyone. If Moscow adheres to this posture for a prolonged period of time, the consequences are likely to be momentous.

Secrecy

A third characteristic of the Soviet system that has seriously complicated efforts to improve East-West relations is the ruling elite's obsessive secrecy. Due to this all-embracing secrecy, it has been difficult for Western observers to have a firm understanding of the regime's goals, priorities, assumptions, perceptions, strengths, and weaknesses. The West has had little definite knowledge of the precise nature of its adversary. Uncertainty abounds, and many analysts and policy-makers have concluded that it is only prudent to plan for the future based upon worst-case assumptions about Soviet intentions and capabilities. There is thus a tendency to overestimate such key factors as the strength of the Soviet military, the priority that international expansion has had over other Soviet objectives, and the degree of unity that characterizes Soviet decision-making. The Soviet regime has attempted to project an image of vast strength, unwavering purpose and monolithic unity, and many people in the West have accepted this as the true face of "the Soviet threat."

In the space of just a few years, Gorbachev's policy of glasnost' has had a major impact upon Western images of the Soviet system. Gorbachev and his associates are presently preoccupied not with foreign expansion but

with their ambitious efforts to transform virtually every facet of Soviet life: the economy, the political system, the intellectual climate, and social relations.

Gorbachev has embarked on a long and perilous enterprise, and if he is unable to deliver tangible results, the stability of the Soviet system, as well as his own position as General Secretary, will be at risk. This development is having a positive effect on East-West relations in two ways. On the one hand, for a prolonged period of time, the Soviet regime will have a strong incentive to avoid international crises and confrontation. On the other hand, Soviet preoccupation with domestic affairs will undercut the tendency of people in the West to assume that the Soviet leaders have little else on their minds other than unceasingly plotting our imminent downfall.

Glasnost' has also undermined the West's acceptance of long-standing Soviet claims about the monolithic unity of its ruling bodies. We can see that Soviet politics is presently characterized by fierce battles between sharply divergent approaches. What we are learning about the on-going battle between reformers and conservatives in the Soviet system is reassuring because it is something that is familiar to us from our own politics. The face of our adversary is no longer so alien, forbidding, and formidable.

Although there are still many limitations on what can be written in the Soviet press, judged by past standards, the changes within the space of just a few years have been truly remarkable. We should be frank in admitting that the degree of openness that presently exists goes far beyond what Western Sovietologists anticipated for the post-Brezhnev period. To

cite just one striking example of this openness, in December 1987 Soviet television aired a discussion with members of an unofficial Soviet peace group that had long been the target of harassment and imprisonment. In the course of this discussion, the following critique of Soviet policy was broadcast:

Whatever policy the United States has, it is controlled by the people. The policy of the Soviet Union, however, is so far, unfortunately, not controlled by the people at all. What I dislike very much is that the declared peace aims are not in accordance with what is actually practiced, and this has been manifested on several occasions: the occupation of Czechoslovakia, a similar occupation of Hungary in 1956, and interference in other countries' affairs, sometimes acting itself and sometimes with the help of satellite regimes--Angola, Nicaragua, and things like that. Kampuchea, too.⁴⁰ The most important thing today is, of course, the war in Afghanistan.

Aleksandr Yakovlev was not too far off the mark when he observed: "What used to be illicit is becoming so commonplace as to be boring."⁴¹

Soviet political practice has long reflected the habits the Bolshevik Party acquired during its early formative years as an underground, conspiratorial Party. Open discussion of problems and errors was banned on the grounds that it would provide valuable ammunition to the Soviet Union's enemies. One of the more promising attitudinal changes that has occurred in recent years is that the Soviet leadership has come to the conclusion that it is self-defeating to try to maintain the pretense that the Soviet system is without warts and blemishes. In fact, they have come to recognize that Soviet prestige has increased rather than diminished as a result of the unprecedented openness about the country's problems. In the words of one commentator: "You hear quite often the idea that we shouldn't lay ourselves bare before the West and show our 'sores' and the shortcomings of our progress. I've seen for myself that it is precisely this openness that helps the growth of our prestige."⁴²

The frank confession of error has had the beneficial effect of demonstrating to the West that the Soviets are not ten feet tall, that inefficiency and incompetence are rife, and that much of the country's energies are currently absorbed in tackling the domestic problems that are discussed so candidly in the press. Thus glasnost' functions not just as a key element in the restructuring of the economic and political system within the Soviet Union, but as a major factor that helps to create an international climate conducive to expanded East-West cooperation.

Optimism Concerning the Correlation of Forces

On several occasions the Soviet leadership has succumbed to excessive optimism about trends in the international correlation of forces, and this has been an important factor hindering East-West détente. Khrushchev's policies were inconsistent and contradictory. On the one hand, he believed that the United States and the Soviet Union, as the world's sole superpowers, enjoyed a special position in international politics and should cooperate to advance shared interests. On the other hand, he was convinced that Soviet power, freed of the shackles of Stalinism, was on the rise and U.S. policy-makers would have no choice but to acquiesce in America's decline as a world power. Khrushchev's irrepressible, innate optimism was fueled by the Soviet Union's dramatic success with Sputnik, by the collapse of colonialism in Asia and Africa, and by the rapid rate of Soviet economic growth achieved in the latter part of the 1950s. Buoyed by this optimism, Khrushchev tried to push the West out of Berlin, attempted to undermine the cohesion of the Western alliance, put missiles into Cuba, and endeavored to make major inroads into the Third World. As a result, repeated confrontations erupted that prevented the improvement of Soviet-

American relations.

Brezhnev originally sought détente in the early 1970s for defensive reasons. He was concerned about conflict on the Sino-Soviet border, instability in Eastern Europe, and growing economic difficulties within the Soviet Union. However, by the mid 1970s, he also fell prey to excessive optimism. Vietnam, Watergate, and the economic dislocations of the early 1970s were seen as evidence of an irreversible decline in American global power. The Soviet achievement of strategic parity was viewed as part of a decisive shift in the correlation of forces favoring the Soviet Union. This faulty reading of the international balance of power fueled Soviet expansionism and was thus a key factor in the death of détente.

At the present time, the Soviet Union is in the midst of an inward-looking phase of consolidation and reconstruction. How long is this mood likely to last? Is a new wave of assertive optimism likely to appear sometime in the not-too-distant future, perhaps five or ten years from now, as happened after earlier periods of retrenchment?

While it is, of course, impossible to divine the future with a high degree of confidence, there are some encouraging signs that suggest the current trend toward inward-looking pragmatism is likely to endure for some time and that it may prevent the Soviet leadership from succumbing yet again to the illusion that the demise of international capitalism is at hand.

There is a growing realism about the strength and durability of the capitalist world. It is openly acknowledged that international capitalism continues to prosper and that capitalist countries have done a better job than the Soviet Union of utilizing the potential of modern technology.

There has also been a major shift in Soviet pronouncements away from a discussion of how to supplant capitalism and toward a pragmatic recognition that international interdependence necessitates close cooperation between all nations regardless of their social system.

A new attitude towards military strength and the arms race also seems to be emerging in Moscow. Brezhnev operated on the principle that the more arms the Soviet Union had in its possession, the better off it would be. Increased military strength was equated with greater security, enhanced international prestige, and an expanded global presence. The current leadership appears to be questioning these assumptions. To a far greater extent than ever before, Soviet policy-makers seem to understand the interactive quality of international politics and to recognize that their actions--especially in the military realm--have a very direct effect on Western policies. The West, it is now recognized, is hostile to the Soviet Union not just because of what the latter is (i.e., a socialist state) but because of what it does.

Given their experience with the Reagan Administration, renewed respect for the vitality and durability of the capitalist system, and frank appraisal of their own system's economic limitations, Soviet policy-makers seem to have recognized that the Soviet Union is not going to win the arms race. As a major component of his new thinking, Gorbachev has stressed the political--as opposed to the military--components of security. Unilateral military measures have been de-emphasized in favour of bilateral and multilateral political measures. Gorbachev has repeatedly declared that the Soviet Union must take into account the anxieties and perceptions of other nations, since the Soviet Union will not be secure until other nations, the United States foremost among them, also feel secure.⁴³

At this time, it is impossible to know for sure whether these changes reflect a temporary shift in mood, the utilization of shrewder public relations techniques, or a genuine process of learning about the arms race and international politics. Noble words still have to be translated into concrete policy. Nonetheless, the interrelated nature of the broad attitudinal changes occurring in both domestic and foreign policy suggest that we may well be witnessing a lasting decline in Soviet optimism about achieving a decisive shift in the international balance of power.

Insecurity

Paradoxically, optimistic expectations about the demise of capitalism have coexisted with deep-seated feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. During the Stalin years, this sense of insecurity reached monumental proportions. This was reflected in official doctrine pertaining to East-West relations, which was built upon the concepts of capitalist encirclement, inevitable war, and the impossibility of achieving the "final" victory of socialism in the Soviet Union without the prior destruction of world capitalism. Even after Khrushchev repudiated these concepts in the 1950s, strong feelings of vulnerability remained.

The sense of insecurity left its mark on official policy. All-encompassing secrecy was maintained in order to prevent the imperialist enemy from knowing about Soviet vulnerabilities. A policy of military overinsurance was followed, and Soviet leaders were more interested in deterring and intimidating the West by brandishing and boasting about their weaponry than they were in assuaging Western fears of Soviet aggression. Very tight control was maintained over Eastern Europe, and in the Third

World an active offense was regarded as the best form of defence.

Under Gorbachev, these deeply rooted feelings of insecurity seem to be waning, and there is a growing confidence in the resilience of the Soviet system. One important manifestation of this is the unprecedented openness of the Soviet press. Many of the economic, social, and political ills of the Soviet system are being graphically revealed for all to see. Concern about how the Soviet Union's adversaries might use or misuse this information is diminishing.

This enhanced self-confidence is evident in the statement made by the editor of Znamya, Georgii Baklanov:

A few years ago, we feared that, if some fact or other were to be reported in the press, the foundations of our system would be shaken. Today everyone talks about everything openly--nothing has happened, the foundations have not been shaken, and we can breathe easier and more freely.⁴⁴

A genuine effort is underway to re-examine long-standing Soviet assumptions about the nature of imperialism and the degree of threat that it poses to the Soviet Union. Gorbachev has sanctioned and encouraged this process. In his speech marking the seventieth anniversary of the Revolution, he stressed the need to "ask ourselves difficult questions" about contemporary capitalism and international politics.⁴⁵ He went on to suggest that militarism should not be regarded as an inherent and inescapable part of modern capitalism. Gorbachev cited the post-World War II period, when Japan, West Germany, and Italy all achieved high rates of economic growth without relying upon military expenditures, and he suggested that there was a growing awareness in the West that a high level of military spending constitutes an undesirable economic burden rather than a stimulus to growth.⁴⁶ He suggested that political considerations--primarily shared concerns about nuclear war and global problems--provided a

powerful incentive for international cooperation which could outweigh the class differences separating East and West.⁴⁷ An article appearing in the January 1988 issue of Kommunist, the most authoritative ideological journal in the Soviet Union, took up Gorbachev's call to ask difficult questions about the nature of contemporary capitalism. The authors of the article subjected traditional Soviet assumptions about the imperialist threat to a searching analysis. They warned against the "absolutizing of past experience," noted how "human thought tends to fall behind rapidly changing realities," and concluded that due to the vastly different circumstances that now exist, there was little danger of a premeditated imperialist attack against the Soviet Union similar to the one launched by Germany in June 1941.⁴⁸

Never before had this thesis been argued so bluntly and forcefully in such an authoritative and public forum. If this interpretation is officially adopted and acted upon, it will have major implications for the Soviet military posture and the level of defence spending. It is sure to discomfort conservative elements within the military and the Party. For these reasons, the authors presented a number of detailed and innovative arguments to buttress their interpretation. They argued that despite the existence of anti-Soviet sentiment in the West, there are at present "no politically influential forces" in Western Europe or the United States that favour an attack upon the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ They also noted the tremendous devastation that would accompany even a non-nuclear war in Europe--because of its high population density, nuclear power plants, huge chemical factories, and fuel depots--and on this basis they asserted: "The very nature of industrial society operated here as a war-restraining factor."⁵⁰

They pointed to the effect of increased education on popular attitudes, and they even suggested that "bourgeois democracy provides a certain obstacle to the outbreak of such a war."⁵¹ Other factors held to inhibit an attack on the Soviet Union were the existing military balance between East and West, and the new image of the USSR emerging in the West, which "could bring about major and even irreversible changes in Western social awareness."⁵² Thus, the authors declared:

The threat of war in Europe, which has still not been entirely removed from the agenda of world politics, is qualitatively different today, at the end of the 20th century, from the one encountered by the nations in the period between the wars or immediately after World War II....This is the first time in the history of our country that a situation has developed in which one could say with a sufficient degree of confidence that no single aggressor, with a sane mind, would attempt something against it.

The authors went on to argue that there are two other threats to Soviet security which are far more serious than the danger of a premeditated attack from the West. These are the danger of inadvertent nuclear war due to accident or misperception, and the possible economic enfeeblement of the Soviet Union. To meet the first danger, they urged a policy that concentrates not on winning war but preventing it. To meet the second threat, they argued against economic autarky, a high level of military expenditures, and the costly burdens of regional conflict.⁵⁴

This article is a striking example of the new thinking that Gorbachev has championed. While the authors are writing for multiple audiences, and one of their purposes undoubtedly is to foster more favourable Western attitudes toward the Soviet Union, it would be a mistake to dismiss this article as mere propaganda. It should be viewed as reflecting an important current of thought within the Soviet leadership. Words are certainly not deeds, but new thinking and new attitudes are a necessary precondition for

policy innovation. Increased confidence in the resilience of the Soviet system and growing realism about the West are important changes that open up new possibilities for putting East-West relations on a more constructive and stable footing.

Conclusion

What are some of the policy implications of the preceding analysis? First, we need to keep an open mind and avoid prejudging the complex changes underway in the Soviet Union. We need to re-examine our basic assumptions about the nature of the political and societal change taking place in the Soviet Union and the impact of this change upon Soviet foreign policy. Already, three of the bedrock principles of the Soviet political system--the supposed scientific infallibility of the C.P.S.U.'s policies, the rejection of pluralism, and the deep mistrust of spontaneity-- have been repudiated by Gorbachev. In view of this, is it really adequate to maintain, as Henry Kissinger and Cyrus Vance do in a jointly authored article in Foreign Affairs, that the main issue between Soviet reformers and conservatives "is, above all, the method of strengthening the Soviet Union?"⁵⁵ Many of our assumptions about Soviet policy retain their validity, but others must be rethought.

A second consequence of the trends discussed in this paper is that Western scholars and policy-makers should begin the crucial task of planning for the future. Depending upon how long Gorbachev remains in power, the nature of his reforms, and their impact on Soviet conduct, the West may find itself facing a very different adversary in the years ahead. Lessons drawn from the past may have diminished applicability to the future. In the past, Western cohesion and unity has been fragile even when

confronted by a clear Soviet threat. If Gorbachev's reforms succeed in permanently altering the face of Soviet politics, it will take creative thinking, flexible policy-making, and close consultation to avoid deep fissures within the Western Alliance. Analysts should begin planning for the various contingencies that may soon arise so that policy-makers are not left to improvise as they scramble to catch up with fast-moving events.

Third, we need to avoid automatic, knee-jerk responses to emerging trends within the Soviet Union. Some hardliners argue that the West should avoid trading with the Soviet Union so that we do not diminish the impetus for reform. They advocate a policy of pressuring the Soviets to make far-reaching concessions while they are in deep economic and political trouble. However, proposals such as these vastly overestimate Western leverage, something we should have learned from past attempts to apply sanctions to the Soviet bloc. The impetus for far-reaching economic reform is internally generated. A modest increase in Western credits and trade is far more likely to reinforce the opening of the Soviet Union to expanded intercourse with the outside world, which is one of the central goals of the reformers, than it is to remove the need for change. Direct outside pressure is likely to stiffen the backs of the Soviets and complicate the task of reformers who will be forced to demonstrate that the changes they advocate do not constitute a retreat from socialism and a capitulation to Western demands. Any concessions that might be rung out of Moscow by Western pressure are likely to create a new set of Soviet grievances whose redress will be high on the Kremlin's agenda as soon as the present time of troubles passes. The Soviet leadership is becoming more receptive to viewing the world as a single, interrelated whole and to joining with the

West in creative problem-solving aimed at dealing with pressing global problems. We should encourage this orientation rather than reinforce traditional zero-sum approaches.

Lastly, we need to address some basic but difficult questions concerning the impact of reform upon Soviet foreign policy and East-West relations. On balance, is it in the interest of the West to see the reformers come out on top? Or should we prefer the victory of the forces arrayed against them? Without exaggerating our influence, what can the West do to facilitate the emergence of trends within the Soviet Union favourable to Western interests? At the very least, if we cannot do much to promote favourable outcomes, are there particular policies that the West should deliberately refrain from so as to avoid undercutting the forces working for the liberalization of Soviet society?

With each passing month, it becomes less and less tenable to repeat the well-worn refrain that the changes underway in the Soviet Union are no more than a temporary tactical retreat aimed at strengthening Moscow's global reach. A more realistic and nuanced assessment is necessary. Now is the appropriate time to stand back and re-examine our understanding of the dynamics of Soviet foreign policy. We must learn from past experience without becoming a prisoner of it.

Notes

¹The Current Digest of the Soviet Press, 1987, no. 28, p. 5. (This journal henceforth cited as "CDSP.")

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 1988, no. 15, p. 15.

⁴Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report: Soviet Union, 3 November 1987, p. 60. (This journal henceforth cited as "FBIS.")

⁵FBIS, 4 November 1987, p. 23.

⁶Archie Brown, "The Soviet Leadership and the Struggle for Reform," The Harriman Institute Forum, vol. 1, no. 4 (April 1988), pp. 2-4.

⁷FBIS, 16 July 1987, p. R3.

⁸FBIS, 3 November 1987, p. 50.

⁹FBIS, 19 February 1988, p. 45.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 46.

¹¹FBIS, 16 July 1987, p. R3.

¹²FBIS, 24 November 1987, p. 5.

¹³FBIS, 27 October 1987, pp. 51-55.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸FBIS, 3 November 1987, p. 91.

¹⁹FBIS, 2 September 1987, pp. 26-27.

²⁰FBIS, 16 October 1987, pp. 38-40.

²¹Neil MacFarlane, "The USSR and the Third World: Continuity and Change under Gorbachev," The Harriman Institute vol. 1, no. 3 (March 1988), pp. 3-7.

²²FBIS, 25 February 1988, p. 54.

²³Ibid.

- ²⁴FBIS, 27 October 1987, p. 54.
- ²⁵FBIS, 18 August 1987, pp. AA6-7; 26 October 1987, p. 26; 8 June 1988, pp. 67-70; CDSP: vol. 39, no. 48 (1987), pp. 8-9; vol. 39, no. 50 (1987), pp. 6-7; vol. 40, no. 11 (1988), p. 13.
- ²⁶CDSP, vol. 39, no. 48 (1987), p. 8.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 9.
- ²⁸Pravda, 27 May 1988, p. 2.
- ²⁹FBIS: 20 June 1988, pp. 56-58; 24 June 1988, pp. 1-3; 27 June 1988, pp. 8-10; 30 June 1988, pp. 4-9; CDSP, vol. 40, no. 24 (1988), pp. 5-6.
- ³⁰FBIS, 20 May 1988, pp. 4-8.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 6.
- ³²Ibid., p. 7.
- ³³Ibid.
- ³⁴Ibid., pp. 7-8.
- ³⁵Ibid., p. 8.
- ³⁶Ibid.
- ³⁷FBIS, 2 September 1987, p. 26.
- ³⁸Pravda, 27 May 1987, p. 3.
- ³⁹FBIS, 18 September 1987, p. 31.
- ⁴⁰FBIS, 14 December 1987, p. 39.
- ⁴¹CDSP, vol. 39, no. 48 (1987), no. 48, p. 4.
- ⁴²FBIS, 1 September 1987, p. 27.
- ⁴³Kommunist, 1986, no. 4, p. 54; Pravda, 22 November 1985, p. 2.
- ⁴⁴CDSP, vol. 40, no. 2 (1988), p. 6.
- ⁴⁵FBIS, 3 November 1987, p. 55.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., p. 56.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 55-56.
- ⁴⁸Kommunist, 1988, no. 1, pp. 43-47.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 45.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 46-47.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 47-50.

⁵⁵Henry Kissinger and Cyrus Vance, "Bipartisan Objectives for American Foreign Policy," Foreign Affairs, vol. 66, no. 5 (Summer 1988), p. 903.