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Toward an Estimate of the Soviet Worldview

Part II

Worldview and Policy: Some Interrelationships

The dynamic relationships, defined in Marxist-Leninist terms, that constitute the basis of the Soviet worldview, give Soviet policymakers considerable room for maneuver in the conduct of their foreign policy. This leeway is evident in Soviet relations with the West, particularly the United States; with Third World nations; and with other socialist states, including China. In relations with the United States and the West, a policy of simultaneous confrontation and cooperation may be followed. With Third World nations, selective countries may be supported while others are ignored. In the socialist world, varied degrees of dependence, interdependence, and independence may be tolerated; the Chinese case presents the only aberration of significance.²⁴

The West

When Soviet leaders first chose to seek improved relations with the major capitalist powers during the early 1970s, they were faced with a task of ideological rationalization that at first glance appeared formidable. How could Brezhnev and his colleagues explain expanded trade with a potential enemy, trade that could possibly strengthen that enemy? How could the Kremlin negate charges that it had "gone soft on capitalism" or "abandoned its revolutionary calling"?

In both instances, the Soviet Union maintained that improved relations with the West promoted the causes of the world revolutionary movement more than those of the capitalist world. The possibility of nuclear

conflict had been reduced; the political situation permitting Western and particularly U.S. interventions against national liberation movements had been altered; the climate for new successes by progressive forces within capitalist states had been improved; and economic advance in the socialist states could be accelerated inasmuch as outside capital was being invested. To be sure, capitalist states benefited in that they could surmount some of the economic problems that confronted them. However, the Kremlin argued, in light of the overall political-military-economic advantage that the relaxation of tensions added to the accounts of the Soviet Union and the world revolutionary movement, there was no doubt that such a policy should be pursued. From the Soviet perspective, détente—as it came to be called in the West—accelerated the shift in the international correlation of forces toward the socialist states.

The Kremlin still had to explain, however, why détente was acceptable to Western leaders. If a relaxation of tension favored the Soviet Union, then Western leaders would not accept it unless they lacked intelligence. If they lacked intelligence, then the Soviet claim that capitalists were deadly and dangerous enemies would lose some of its credibility.

The Soviet Union avoided this potential pitfall by asserting that Western leaders for the most part were either "realistic" or "unrealistic."²⁵ Realistic leaders, to the Kremlin, are those who objectively examine the

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²⁴ The Albanian case also presents an aberration, but it may scarcely be classified as significant.

²⁵ Soviet commentary has long divided Western politicians into "sane" and "insane" categories, or "realistic" and "unrealistic" categories. More recently, the Soviets have become more sophisticated in their analysis of Western political systems, going as far as dividing each of the major U.S. political parties into three distinct categories. See V.P. Zolotikhin, "On the Path to the White House," *SSHA: Ekonomika, Politika, Ideologiya*, June 1976, pp. 22-23.

international situation and conclude that, because of the changing international correlation of forces, Western nations, including particularly the United States, no longer dominate the international system and therefore must adapt their policies to the new reality. The Kremlin maintains that these realistic Western leaders realize that Soviet military strength poses great dangers to continued Western "adventurism." These leaders therefore oppose adventurism and favor improved relations with the socialist world. Their fundamental class interests remain opposed to socialism, but they realize that capitalist-socialist cooperation is a short-term necessity. Thus, in essence, the Soviets argue that the West has been *forced* to accept détente.

Soviet commentary on the Nixon-Brezhnev summits and the agreements concluded there regularly stressed that the new American attitude toward relations with the Soviet Union was a result of the realism that Nixon had finally adopted because of the growth of Soviet military capabilities. This realism later reduced U.S. adventurism in Vietnam, the Kremlin maintained, and also precluded U.S. intervention in Angola.

This did not mean, however, that realistic forces had attained permanent preeminence in the United States. Unrealistic forces remained strong despite the ascendancy of realistic politicians, and sought to continue traditional "imperial" foreign policy programs relying on military force without taking into account the alleged shift in the correlation of forces. These unrealistic leaders had been discredited by the Vietnamese war, but remained strong. Indeed, according to one Soviet view, opponents of Nixon's realistic policy toward the Soviet Union forced him to resign from the Presidency. The current debate in the United States about the future of Soviet-American relations is proof of the continued vitality of these unrealistic leaders, the Kremlin argues. Even more foreboding, from the Soviet point of view, is the realization that such forces may again control U.S. policy. It is this possibility that in part necessitated the continued buildup of Soviet military forces even during the height of détente, at least as far as Soviet ideologues are concerned. "Aggressive, reactionary circles" may "regroup and prepare an attack," *Kommunist* has warned, and therefore the Soviet Union must continue its "modernization of arms and combat equipment."²⁶ As the Soviet Union has not yet categorized the Carter

administration as realistic or unrealistic, and is well aware of the different outlooks on relations with the U.S.S.R. vying for preeminence within the current Administration, this necessity remains. Grounds for continued cooperation and confrontation with the United States therefore still coexist, depending both on the subject at issue and the prevailing attitude within the Carter administration.

The Kremlin's explanations of its relations with other Western governments have paralleled its rationale for the U.S.S.R.'s policy toward the United States. Improved relations have been actively pursued with a number of states, particularly France and West Germany, as the Kremlin has sought expanded trade and access to Western technology, among other things. In all cases, the rationale for improved relations is that realistic Western leaders have been forced to accept improved relations with the U.S.S.R., and that the socialist world and world revolutionary movement benefit more from the improved relations than do the capitalist states. Again in all cases, the Kremlin warns that reactionary elements remain strong in the Western nations, and continue as threats to the socialist world, improved Soviet capitalist relations, and world peace.

The Third World

More than any other aspect of Soviet foreign policy, the Kremlin's posture toward the Third World defies categorization. Some Western analysts have looked at the diversity of Soviet policy toward the Third World and concluded that the Kremlin indeed pursues "many foreign policies" toward the developing nations. Again, however, these "many foreign policies" may be understood within the confines of the broader Soviet worldview.

According to the Kremlin, the attitudes of ruling governments in Third World countries toward the socialist world and the imperialist world reflect the class composition of these governments. Governments that are truly progressive favor close relations with the socialist world; those that are not progressive prefer close ties with imperialism. As the composition of the Third World governments change, Moscow argues, their foreign policies also change. The U.S.S.R. in turn responds to these changes, extending moral and material support as individual cases warrant.

Soviet policy toward the Third World consequently appears dominated by pragmatic considerations. However, to the Kremlin, its worldview provides a ready-made explanation for all contingencies vis-à-vis Third World governments. Sudden reversals in Soviet policy toward individual states in the Third World may be

²⁶ "The Leninist Course of the CPSU's Foreign Policy," *Kommunist*, June 1972, p. 79; and A. Grechko, "Militant Cooperation of the Armies of the Socialist States," *Kommunist*, October 1972, pp. 34-50.

explained as dependent on changing class compositions of governments within the Third World. The most stunning recent example of such a reversal was the Kremlin's extreme support for Ethiopia in its war against Somalia, an erstwhile Soviet client. Other Soviet foreign policy successes in the Third World—Mozambique, Angola, and Afghanistan—may be explained by positing that progressive forces in these societies have come to the fore. Failures of policy—Egypt, Indonesia, Ghana, and the Sudan—may be dismissed by declaring that regressive forces have temporarily regained power.

In recent years Soviet activities throughout the Third World have expanded considerably. The Kremlin has not confined its interest to any single geographic area or region, maintaining that its "international duty" to support national liberation movements and progressive governments obligates it to undertake a broad scope of action. While its efforts to support such movements and governments have by no means met with universal success, the Kremlin has nevertheless clearly become interested in expanding its influence in areas remote from the U.S.S.R. By appealing to its international duty to oppose imperialism (subsumed within its worldview) the Kremlin believes that its presence in remote areas can be justified.

Increased Soviet activity in Third World areas to a great extent may be attributed to expanded Soviet military and economic capabilities. The 1973 airlift to the Middle East, the 1974-75 airlift to Angola, and the 1977-78 airlift to Ethiopia were indications of the new Soviet capability to influence distant situations. It must be realized, however, that neither the Soviet worldview nor the growth of the Kremlin's capabilities exist in a vacuum. Both exist in a setting that must take into account prevailing local factors. The very flexibility afforded Soviet foreign policy toward the Third World by the Kremlin's worldview elicits considerable mistrust of Soviet motives from numerous countries within the Third World, who view the flexibility primarily as a cover for Soviet "expansionism."²⁷ Similarly, in some nations, the presence of Soviet military and economic missions are viewed as precursors of Soviet socialist imperialism. Perpetual Soviet denials that the socialist commonwealth has any obligation to help rectify the worsening economic plight of the have-not nations accentuate this mistrust. While the Kremlin rationalizes its position by claiming

that the Third World's economic condition is a product of imperialist exploitation and therefore should be rectified by the imperialists, many Third World countries—despite the Kremlin's claims to the contrary—reject the U.S.S.R.'s protestations that the Kremlin has their interests at heart.

The Kremlin is aware of this phenomenon, and actively seeks to reduce the credibility of the charges of Soviet imperialism. Soviet support for large-scale Cuban involvement in Africa, involvements that furthered both Soviet and Cuban interests, may perhaps be best viewed in this light. At the same time, the Kremlin attempts to resurrect the specter of Western imperialism as a means both to reduce Western influence in the Third World and to offset the Third World's fears of Soviet imperialism.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to assess the degree of success or failure of this Soviet effort. Nonetheless, Moscow's ability to maintain and improve the credibility of its worldview—and perhaps even more importantly, the credibility of the virtually unlimited policy options that can flow from that worldview—may go far in determining the future course of many Third World nations. Machel, Neto, and Mengistu may serve as valuable and persuasive evidence of the legitimacy of the Soviet worldview and the advantages of Soviet support, but Allende, Sadat, and Siad-Barre are just as eloquent testimonies of shortcomings and dangers.

Other Socialist States

Soviet relations with other socialist states present a picture almost as varied as Soviet relations with Third World countries. Although socialist-socialist relations allegedly are based on "proletarian internationalism," i.e., the Marxist-Leninist concept of the unity of interests of workers throughout the world, a startling diversity marks those relationships, ranging from Bulgaria's fawning adherence to the Soviet line on almost all international issues, to China's outright hostility to the Soviet Union and its policies.

The Soviet Union rationalizes these diversities by explaining that the process of building socialist cooperation is a "many faceted process" that is complicated by the "distinctions in the level of economies and social development, in the class structure and in national traditions" that lead to "differing understanding . . . of internal and external policy" and "dissimilar approaches to the solution of these problems."²⁸ With this rationale, the Kremlin to its own satisfaction

²⁷ Although it was discussed in veiled terms, this mistrust was quite apparent during the recently concluded Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Belgrade. It has also been evident at recent sessions of the Organization of African Unity.

²⁸ I. D. Ovsyany, et al., *A Study of Soviet Foreign Policy* (Moscow: Progress, 1975), pp. 40-41.

justifies the categorization of numerous national economic systems, social approaches, and foreign policies as socialist. The vagaries of Rumanian foreign policy, the liberalism of the Hungarian economic system, the tolerance of Polish Communists for Catholicism, and the nonalignment of the Yugoslavian leadership are all fitted within this rationalization.

However, there are certain limits beyond which socialist states may not go. The Soviet Union argues that it is "essential for each socialist country to be mindful of the common interests of the revolutionary movement."²⁹ Awareness of this common interest not only maximizes socialist influence within the world revolutionary movement, but also enables the socialist states themselves to cooperate more effectively within intersocialist organizations such as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA).

When socialist states place national interests above the common socialist interest, socialist dogma calls for precipitous action to defend the common interest. For all practical purposes, this is what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Who determines when national interest has usurped the rightful leading position of common interest? Although socialist literature regularly asserts that the community as a whole arrives at such an estimate and determines what actions should be taken, equally frequent assertions that the Soviet Union's longer experience with building socialism enables it to serve as a model for the socialist community lend weight to the argument that the Soviet Union in fact sets policy for the community. Thus, to many, "socialist cooperation" is little more than a cover for Soviet predominance. The 1975 increase in price of energy resources exported by the Soviet Union to the East European countries, apparently undertaken as a unilateral Soviet initiative and presented to CMEA as a *fait accompli*, is often pointed to as proof of this position, as is the Kremlin's more recent decision to increase its sale of petroleum to the West at the prevailing world market prices rather than to its East European allies at lower, less financially alluring prices.

However, even though the Kremlin recognizes that "bourgeois nationalism" and "national chauvinism" survive within the socialist world, the Soviet leaders deny that the U.S.S.R.'s policies are influenced by either factor. Both must be struggled against as they undermine socialist cooperation and could lead to counterrevolution, the Kremlin maintains. In view of these dangers, the Soviets assert that "nothing can justify antisocialist divisive activities" or "refusal to

abide by the coordinated foreign policy line of the fraternal parties."³⁰

Soviet leaders believe that their worldview provides a framework sufficient both to explain the differences of sociocultural outlook; the disparities of economic development; and the diversities of political approach that exist within the socialist world; and to define the boundaries that these differences, disparities, and diversities may not exceed. Even the challenge to Soviet leadership presented by Eurocommunism may be explained—and limited—within this framework. While the Soviets undoubtedly are not pleased by the independence which the Eurocommunists show, the Soviets have so far seen fit to interpret the phenomenon within their existing worldview.

As difficult as it may be to comprehend, much the same is true of the Soviet attitude toward China. Of all the foreign policy problems and predicaments that confront the Soviet leadership, none is as perplexing as China. At one time recognized as a legitimate socialist state, China has become pariah within the socialist movement, at least according to Moscow. Brezhnev himself underlined the depth of Soviet-Chinese enmity in his address to the 25th CPSU Congress, declaring that "it is far too little to say that Maoist ideology and policy are incompatible with Marxist-Leninist teaching; they are directly hostile to it." Since Mao's death, this enmity has increased. Moscow consequently has had considerable difficulty reconciling its worldview with the reality of the Chinese aberration. The Soviet Union consistently denies that it is engaged in a "class struggle" with China, but at the same time observes that the Chinese revolution has retrogressed considerably, even opening the possibility that "a fascist or near-fascist dictatorship" may eventuate.³¹ To the Soviets, China is in fact still socialist even though chauvinistic, anti-Soviet, pro-bourgeois elements have come to the fore in China. The Kremlin, in turn, argues that it is struggling on behalf of the true Chinese Communists. In light of the antipathy of Sino-Soviet relations, this is an exceedingly weak—and unconvincing—explanation.

It is doubtful that any events in recent times distressed the Soviet leaders as much as President Nixon's 1972 trip to China and President Carter's 1978 recognition of China. Following the announcement of Nixon's visit, Western officials in Moscow described the Russian leaders as "stunned." One can

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁰ Ovsyany, p. 47.

³¹ See, for example, "The Maoist Regime of the New Stage," *Kommunist*, August 1975; and "Some Topical Questions in Marxist Sinology," *Far Eastern Affairs (Moscow)*, January 1976, p. 11.

well imagine the fears of Sino-American encirclement and a potential two-front war that the Soviet leaders conjured up.

Even before the United States recognized China, the similarity of Chinese and U.S. policies toward a number of issues gave rise to Soviet concerns that the two nations "form[ed] a virtual bloc."³² With the American recognition of China, these concerns took on new poignancy. With rumors circulating that various European nations are contemplating arms sales to China, the Soviet leaders must believe that their earlier decisions to continue the U.S.S.R.'s military buildup were wise indeed.

Conclusion

The fundamental issue of foreign affairs as seen from the Kremlin remains the contradiction between the socialist and capitalist system. This, in turn, presents myriad challenges, opportunities, and threats to the U.S.S.R. The major challenges include reestablishing Soviet credibility as the leader of the world Communist movement without giving rise to renewed claims of hegemonical intent; supporting its allies and/or sympathizers throughout the world without eliciting a direct military confrontation with either the United States or China; and maintaining economic growth in light of slowed population growth, decreased per capita productivity, and increased resource costs.

How well the Kremlin copes with these challenges may determine the degree of success the Kremlin has in its efforts to take advantage of its opportunities. These opportunities, again as seen from Moscow, center on the possibility for expanded political-military influence that has been brought about by a number of factors, including apparent U.S. retrenchment following Vietnam; the worldwide economic stagnation of capitalist countries; the political disarray of several key European and Third World countries; and a military balance that for the first time is not heavily weighted against the Soviet Union.

Looming over both the challenges and the opportunities are several distinct threats, including Soviet economic stagnation; American and Chinese military action against the U.S.S.R., either individually or in alliance; and, perhaps most disturbing of all, the appeal of certain aspects of Western politics, economics, and culture to the Soviet population.

Thus, to the men in the Kremlin, the international scene is not as bright as Soviet ideologues or Western alarmists would have us believe. The global picture is,

if anything, as mottled from Moscow's perspective as from Washington's.

Neither can it be argued that the Kremlin's Marxist-Leninist worldview motivates Soviet policy or serves merely as a cover for more pragmatic interests. There is simply insufficient evidence to reach such definitive conclusions. While a reasonable conclusion may be that the Soviet worldview varies from leader to leader and that its effect on Soviet policy is similarly diverse, the paucity of objective information available to Western analysts about Soviet foreign policy formulation renders even this conclusion highly subjective.

Rather, the conclusion that can be reached is that the current Soviet worldview presents Moscow with sufficient freedom to interpret ongoing developments so that, in its policies toward the West, the Third World, and other socialist states, the Soviet Union may proceed almost unconstrained by its worldview, *and still be consistent with it.*

This observation requires close analysis. In most cases, the Soviet worldview provides rationale for a range of policy options. These options extend from direct large-scale involvement as took place in Ethiopia during the Ethiopian-Somali war to almost total non-involvement as occurred in Chile during the months before Allende's overthrow. Both policies were consistent with the demands imposed by the Marxist-Leninist worldview. Indeed, almost any policy would have been.

This does not imply, however, that Soviet foreign policy proceeds unconstrained by worldview.

Before the Soviet Union can act in foreign affairs—and regardless of the motivation behind the desire to act—it must first develop a justification for its action within the context of its worldview. Soviet activities in Angola and Ethiopia amply support this observation. At the very least, a time constraint may develop that delays the implementation of Soviet policy, a delay that may render the policy ineffective or irrelevant.

It is also significant that Moscow's theoretical global construct provides the rationale for abrupt changes and even about-faces of policy, all without necessarily creating policy contradiction. The U.S.S.R. may implement different policies at different times toward the same country, or different policies at the same time toward different countries, and still contend that it has not violated its Marxist-Leninist precepts. To those who comprehend the dynamic nature of the dialectic as the Kremlin applies it to foreign policy, this is a legitimate claim.

For American policymakers, the importance of this realization is twofold. First, even though no light has been shed on the question of motivation behind Soviet foreign policy, it should be clear that Soviet policy-

³² L. Dadiani, "Peking's Middle East Policy," *International Affairs (Moscow)*, May 1978, p. 49. See also *Pravda*, 13 June 1978.

makers have an opportunity to present their foreign policy to their domestic constituencies as a consistent entity. Whether the effort is accepted as credible is open to debate. Nonetheless, for U.S. policymakers, themselves scarred by the experience of inconsistencies of policy in Vietnam and elsewhere, the advantage of apparent consistency should be well apparent.

Second, from a strictly pragmatic point of view, improved understanding of Soviet perceptions better equips the United States to design and implement policies that can more adequately protect U.S. security interests throughout the world. Soviet policies emanate from a worldview that is consistent, not contradictory; comprehensive, not confined to Europe; flexible, not bound by past policy; and perhaps insidious, but by no means perfidious. Although it is a large task to adapt U.S. policy so that it may more successfully respond to the types of challenges the Soviet Union's

worldview and policies inevitably create, it is a critical task, one that must be undertaken with a degree of understanding of the Soviet world outlook. This essay has sought to contribute to that understanding.

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