

# SOVIET 'NEW THINKING' ON THE WORLD AND FOREIGN POLICY

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The world is changing, and one important aspect of this flux is that the Soviet view of the world is changing as well. The fact that the Soviet leaders have a comprehensive ideology that largely established a distinctive (and, in the judgment of most of us who do not share it, distorted) "worldview" makes any basic change in their perception of the world more difficult. In this context, if and when such a change occurs, it takes on an added significance.

It is useful and appropriate to take as a point of departure the report of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to the 27th Party Congress in February 1986, just a year after he had come to power.<sup>1</sup> The Party Congress, meeting each five years, is the highest Party conclave, and the Central Committee report given by the general secretary is most authoritative. It also provides a bench mark for comparison with previous congresses.

Gorbachev's report was striking for its radical change in content and structure. The preceding report, Leonid Brezhnev's swan song in 1981, had followed a long-standing pattern by opening with a major section "On the International Policy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," comprising subordinate sections on relations with the world socialist system, the newly liberated countries, the world communist movement, and the capitalist states. In startling contrast, Gorbachev's report opened with a major section on "The Contemporary World: Basic Trends and Contradictions." While the various elements in the previous reports are all at least noted, the entire framework and content is drastically revised. For example, in 1981 a separate section on Soviet relations with national liberation movements and newly independent nations of the third world contained thirty-one paragraphs, mentioned over a dozen countries by name — discussing relations with some at length — and concluded with the promise of a consistent course by the Soviet Union "on strengthening the union of world socialism and the national liberation movements." In 1986, the long discourse on the contemporary world had but three sentences of passing reference to the "anti-colonial revolutions and the national liberation movement," with no country named and no promise of support.

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1. M.S. Gorbachev, *Politicheski doklad tsentral'nogo komiteta KPSS XXVII s'yezdu kimmunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soyuza* (Political Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), Moscow: Politizdat, 1986; quotations from pp. 3-4, 7-29, and 80-89.

And there was no section on this subject. Even references to the world socialist system were minimal. (A later section mentions the Warsaw Pact and the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance but not any individual country other than China. It also omits the 1981 discussions of the Eastern European countries, Cuba, Vietnam, Mongolia and North Korea.) Similarly, reference to the world communist movement was downgraded from a long section to three perfunctory paragraphs.

What took the place of these ideologically defined divisions of the world?

Soviet relations with the Western capitalist states, above all the United States, continued to be highlighted. Much of this discussion, to be sure, was harshly critical of the shortcomings, contradictions, and aggressive nature ascribed to imperialism.<sup>2</sup> However, staying power and indeed, growing power was now recognized. And when it came to Soviet relations with the imperialist powers of the capitalist world, the entire stress was on the possibility of and need for peaceful coexistence and peaceful competition.

The new element that dominated the report, both in its discussion of the contemporary world and of Soviet policy, was global interdependence and the need for stable and mutual international security. The very structure of the discussion, as well as the specific content, reflects this change in thinking. The standard Stalinist image of two worlds, socialism and capitalism, only slightly muted in the post-Stalin era, was sharply changed. Gorbachev spoke instead about *one world*. He spoke about problems "of a global scale affecting the very foundation of the existence of civilization." Apart from the crucial need to prevent a nuclear war, he noted among these global problems, "the pollution of the environment, of the atmosphere and waters of the earth, and the depletion of natural resources." Most important, "One cannot resolve these global problems affecting all humanity by the efforts of any one state or group of states. For this, cooperation on a global scale is required, a close constructive collaboration among the majority of countries."

Gorbachev cited President Reagan's comment at Geneva that the Soviet Union and the United States would quickly find a common language if the earth were threatened by the arrival of extraterrestrial beings. "But," argued Gorbachev,

[I]sn't a nuclear catastrophe a more real danger than a landing of unknown extraterrestrials? Is not the ecological threat a big enough threat? Don't all countries have a common interest in finding a sensible and fair approach to the problems of the developing states and peoples?

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2. No doubt Gorbachev and the other Soviet leaders basically believe these criticisms. In addition, Gorbachev may have regarded such harsh criticism of capitalism as useful reassurance to conservative colleagues of his own tough Leninist credentials in view of the unorthodox advocacy of goals of global interdependence and international security that he introduced elsewhere in the report (discussed in following pages). Finally, strong criticism of the performance of the capitalist system was needed to offset the criticisms of Soviet economic performance elsewhere in the report.

Indeed, downplaying ideological differences, he concluded:

The course of history, of social progress, requires ever more insistently establishing a constructive, creative interaction among states and peoples on the scale of the entire world . . . Such interaction is essential in order to prevent a nuclear catastrophe, so that civilization should survive. It is essential in order that other worldwide problems that are growing more acute could be resolved jointly in the interests of all concerned.

What of the continuing clash and competition of the socialist and capitalist worlds? Gorbachev and the other Soviet leaders of course see "the vitality of Marxist-Leninist teachings convincingly confirmed," but also observe that "Any attempt to turn the theory by which we are guided into a collection of ossified schemes and prescriptions valid everywhere and under all circumstances is most definitely contrary to the essence and spirit of Marxism-Leninism."

"We are realists," he said, "and are perfectly aware that the two worlds are divided by many things, and deeply divided. But we also see clearly that the need to resolve the most vital problems affecting all humanity must prompt them to combined action, awakening the heretofore unseen forces of self-preservation of mankind."

The central conclusion of this dilemma is that while the political and ideological competition of the two sides will continue, not only must it be contained within limits short of war, but it also must be combined with the exigencies of interdependence. In Gorbachev's own words: "The realistic dialectics of contemporary development consist of a combination of competition and opposition between the two systems with the growing trend toward interdependence of the states of the world community." And he speaks further of the "contradictory, but interdependent and in many ways integral world that is taking shape."

This unprecedented disquisition on the emergence of global interdependence, it should be recalled, was featured in the basic section of the Central Committee report on the main trends in the contemporary world, introduced by the statement that "It is possible to conduct a correct, scientifically-based policy only with clear understanding of the key trends in current reality."

Gorbachev's report also featured a major section devoted to "The Basic Aims and Directions of the Party's Foreign Policy Strategy." At the outset, "the principal objective" of Soviet foreign policy is "to provide the Soviet people with the opportunity to work under the conditions of a stable peace and freedom." Throughout the entire elaboration of the report, a consistent emphasis on security dominated any other objective.

In the brief references to "progressive" change in the world, and explicitly with respect to the world communist movement, "the Communist Party of the Soviet Union sees as its main international duty the successful progress of our country along the path opened up and laid down by [the] October [Revolution]." Thus, the Soviet leaders see their main "international duty" as

communists not in assisting in the establishment of communist rule around the world, but in developing the Soviet Union itself. Whether they are really that confident in the power of their example may be questioned, but it is clear that the Soviet leaders have found an ideological justification for not risking the security of the Soviet Union in pursuit of revolutionary change in the world. They also provide ideological justification by recalling Lenin's rejection of "the theory of revolutionary war" advocated after the revolution by some Bolshevik leaders seeking to carry socialism from Soviet Russia to other countries. Gorbachev cited this in the report, adding, "Today, too, we are firmly convinced that fueling revolutions from outside, and doubly so by military means, is futile and inadmissible."

The only Third World country mentioned by name in Gorbachev's report was Afghanistan. And it was mentioned not as an example of revolutionary advance, but of imperialist-supported counterrevolutionary challenge. Moreover, Gorbachev referred to the situation not in terms of its significance for revolutionary change in the third world, but in terms of a threat to Soviet security. He characterized Afghanistan as a "bleeding wound," and justified direct Soviet involvement (to his primary audience, the members of the Party and the Soviet people) not as a Soviet sacrifice to world revolutionary progress (although dispatched "at the request of the [Afghan] government"), but because of "our vital *national interest*" in peaceful neighbors and "the *security* of our borders." There is convincing evidence that this was, in fact, the overriding motivation of the Soviet leaders in deciding to intervene in 1979. This reference to direct unilateral action in meeting a Soviet security imperative was, however, an exception to the main thrust of the report.

The central focus and theme of the entire discussion of Soviet foreign policy aims was on security, but it was couched in an unprecedented way. Preventing nuclear war, and promoting disarmament and peaceful coexistence have been prominent Soviet aims advanced in the reports to the three preceding party congresses, but now they are said to be "the main line of the party's activity in the world arena," and have also been given a new context. The heart of Gorbachev's argument is the conclusion that *no* nation can any longer find security in military power, either in defense or deterrence. "The character of contemporary weapons," in Gorbachev's words, "does not leave *any* state hope of protecting itself by military-technical means alone, for example by creating even the most powerful defense." And, while mutual deterrence is more effective than defense, "Security cannot indefinitely be based on fear of retaliation, that is on doctrines of 'deterrence' or 'intimidation.'"

Rather, "The task of insuring security increasingly is a political task, and can be resolved only by political means." Moreover, security cannot be absolute, and can only be mutual, specifically security for the Soviet Union *and* the United States, and "if one takes international relations as a whole, it can only be universal." And building on the earlier discussion of global interdependence, he concluded his discussion of foreign policy by calling for the "creation of a comprehensive system of international security" — military, political, economic and humanitarian.

All in all, as these brief excerpts show, Gorbachev was presenting a quite new assessment of the world and of the policy line that the Soviet Union should pursue. Of course, Soviet leaders pursue *Soviet* interests as they see them. The "new thinking" did not represent a conversion from Marxism-Leninism to globalist altruism. But it represented at the very least a rhetorical shift of breathtaking scope. How this would translate into policies and actions remained to be seen.

It has now been more than two years since Gorbachev made his report to the Party Congress. Have Soviet policy and action changed significantly in the directions he indicated? Has the "new thinking" led to new behavior? It is necessary to pose this question and to address it. In doing so, however, our purpose should not be to reach any premature categorical judgment. The world, after all, is full of intractable problems, even for a superpower with willpower and other forms of power, as the United States well knows. Nor should we formulate a test of complete change, and then in its discovered absence slip into the pitfall of saying that nothing has changed because some things have not.

The principal focus of attention of the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev has been on the internal reformation of the country. *Perestroika* is probably best rendered as "reformation" — it is more than mere "restructuring." This fact reinforces the Soviet leadership's new assessment of the world by contributing to a desire to lessen tensions rather than exacerbate them. Similarly, specific internal demands — most notably for economic reform and greater popular participation (*demokratizatsia*) within a system still dominated and controlled by the Communist Party — also contribute to a desire to reduce external burdens. Nonetheless, the Soviet Union is not and does not aspire to become only a passive participant in world politics.

Despite considerable doubts as to the readiness of the Reagan administration to deal with the so-called "Evil Empire," Gorbachev set out in 1985 to restore a political dialogue with the United States and to reinvigorate the arms control process. At this writing, plans are underway for a fourth summit meeting in Moscow in mid-1988. This would be the first time any American president has held such a sustained series of personal contacts with a Soviet leader. Although a strategic arms reduction agreement seems beyond reach by that time, it will actively remain on the agenda. And the INF Treaty, while of less scope and intrinsic significance, has done much to relegitimate the arms control process after nearly a decade of less than benign neglect and unwarranted charges of failure and breakdown of compliance emanating from this same administration.

The INF Treaty would not have been reached without new thinking in Moscow. It required Soviet concessions on many issues: setting aside from consideration the British and French nuclear forces, American forward-based systems other than land-based missiles, and Chinese nuclear forces. It required giving up larger numbers of missiles on the Soviet side. It required Soviet acceptance of unprecedented extensive and intensive disclosure, inspection and other verification measures. Of course, the Soviet Union also gains from the

treaty or it would not have signed it. Above all, it removes the highly escalatory deployment of the Pershing II missiles, a step in reducing the danger of nuclear war arising from some less than deliberate armed clash in Europe. And it reestablishes a process that can lead to arms reductions.

The INF agreement illustrates an application of several elements of the new thinking: a turn toward political-diplomatic measures, rather than military ones, to enhance security; *glasnost* in military affairs; and a downturn in one aspect of the arms competition. Nor is the INF Treaty the only concrete sign of new thinking in the disarmament field, even though it is the only signed treaty. As part of an initial strategic arms reduction, the Soviet leadership has offered to cut its large MIRVed SS-18 missile force by half in a general 30-50 percent reduction. It also has offered unprecedented verification of a comprehensive nuclear test ban, the abolition of chemical warfare, and a ban on weapons in space. It has proposed asymmetrical reductions in Europe, removing more Soviet tanks and artillery than the West.

Arms limitations and reductions between East and West is but one, although a particularly important, element in a new Soviet foreign policy. The restoration of a political dialogue with the United States and with Western Europe is another. Soviet efforts to develop better relations with Japan are evident, although to date they have not been very successful. Efforts in improving relations with China, begun under Brezhnev in 1982, have intensified. New attention is being given to the conservative and liberal middle powers in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

Less attention and support is being given to radical "revolutionary" states. To be sure, the Soviet Union has continued to provide substantial assistance to established clients like Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Vietnam, and Nicaragua — but below a threshold of political-military commitment, and with increasing signs of a desire to retrench. This builds on a trend begun in the early 1980s under Gorbachev's predecessors.

The most striking departure from traditional policy concerns what is, in many ways, the most complex case: Afghanistan. The Brezhnev leadership in 1979 badly misassessed the situation in Afghanistan and the effects of Soviet military intervention, a fact that soon became evident and has become increasingly debilitating. Gorbachev and the new leadership have decided to cut their losses and disengage. This has been one of the most difficult decisions, and would probably not have been reached without the benefit of the new thinking.

The Soviet leaders have publicly and privately urged the Vietnamese to reach a settlement with Kampuchea, and to withdraw their troops. So far the Soviets have not, however, been prepared to give up their influence in Vietnam by attempting to compel a Vietnamese withdrawal. In Angola, the Soviet Union has continued to supply vast quantities of arms and support to the presence of Cuban troops, but clearly it would prefer a settlement there. In Ethiopia it continues to support Mengitsu, but does not wish to see the fighting expand. In Nicaragua, while supporting the Sandinista government,

the Soviets have refrained from supplying MiGs and have offered a complete cutoff of military supply as a match to comparable American action.

In 1987, the Soviet Union paid up all its overdue payments to the United Nations, including assessments for peacekeeping forces which it had previously opposed. The Soviets now have also urged a larger role for UN peacekeeping, for example in the Persian Gulf.

After stumbling badly in the initial public handling of the nuclear power plant accident at Chernobyl, the Soviet leaders opened up publicity of this incident and subsequent natural disasters and accidents. In addition, the Soviet Union cooperated in reaching an agreement in the International Atomic Energy Agency on measures for handling future nuclear accidents. This was a concrete case of recognition of a global ecological problem of the kind that Gorbachev had mentioned in his report to the Party Congress.

In recognition of the integral nature of the world economy, and notwithstanding Marxist-Leninist dogma and the Stalinist image of the two worlds, the Soviet Union expressed an interest in entering the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The Soviet leaders also sought to establish, as the standard for Soviet production quality, competitive world trade standards. Similarly, steps were taken toward the goal of an internationally convertible ruble.

The Soviet Union even boldly offered to host an international conference on human rights, admitting and moving to correct serious deprivations of rights such as the political use of psychiatry. While there has been a marked upturn in reuniting families, the emigration controls are still tight.

It is not the purpose of this cursory review to judge Soviet performance in any respect, but rather to note that there is a wide range of activity and action in consonance with the sharply changed rhetoric on the nature of the world system and the Soviet role in it. There is evidence to support a conclusion that the new Soviet view of an interdependent world is meaningful to policy and is not mere rhetoric or propaganda.

A word should be said about propaganda and its role, not only in the Soviet Union but in the world at large, including the United States. All countries seek to propagate a favorable image of themselves and to persuade others to support various objectives. Propaganda clearly should not be taken at face value and be assumed to represent accurately the real views and objectives of any country. On the other hand, the fact that a country engages in propaganda for public relations and other purposes does *not* mean that its leaders may not also believe the views they are propagandizing. In short, propaganda — and public policy articulation in general — should neither be accepted, nor rejected without testing.

The Soviet assessment of the world since 1985 has clearly become more realistic, less encrusted by ideological distortion, and more pragmatic than heretofore. The new thinking is not entirely liberated from such distortion but the change is real and potentially far-reaching. It is directly affecting Soviet policy and behavior. The development of Soviet perception, thinking,

policy and action will clearly depend on internal political and socio-economic developments within the Soviet Union. But it will also depend in part on whether the world, most importantly the United States and the Western alliance, permit it to develop in ways that can serve the evolution of a more robust world order.

The United States has recently been experiencing a reverse thrust, away from the development of an interdependent world order toward a more anachronistic and even atavistic attempt to recapture a lost self-reliance. The present American administration has turned its back on the International Court of Justice, the Law of the Sea Convention, and many other cooperative international steps toward building a world order. Most indicative in many respects is President Reagan's nostalgic vision of restoring the lost invulnerability and, hence, independence of the United States by American technological genius and the political will behind a strategic defense shield that would make impotent the threat of nuclear attack — and relieving the United States of the burdens of mutual deterrence and other forms of global interdependence. The vision is just that — an unachievable dream. But it reflects a resurgence of the longing to recapture independence from the entangling alliances of a sinful world. On the other hand, this same administration has also reengaged in a dialogue and arms negotiation with the so recently castigated "Evil Empire." A return to realism in the United States, and a turn to realism in the Soviet Union, may yet come into synchrony. And perhaps none too soon.