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Soviet International Behavior

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THOUGHTS ON "NEW THINKING"

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June 1988

RAND

Occasional Paper OPS-010



THE RAND/UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOVIET INTERNATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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Thoughts on "New Thinking"

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and

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This OPS is being published in cooperation with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.

PREFATORY NOTE

A Russian translation of this article is scheduled to appear in the August 1988 issue of the Soviet journal *USA: Economics, Ideology, Politics*, published by the Institute of the USA and Canada of the USSR Academy of Sciences.

The English-language version is being circulated to potentially interested readers who may not have ready access to this journal. The views expressed are the authors' and should not be ascribed in any way to either The RAND Corporation or the Center for Strategic and International Studies, with which the authors are respectively affiliated.

both Europe and Asia of hundreds of SS-20 missiles in a unilateral buildup that virtually all non-Soviet observers believed was undertaken in order to intimidate Western Europe both politically and militarily. Another was Moscow's continued unwillingness, over more than a decade of negotiations, to consider any but the most marginal, and militarily insignificant, reductions in strategic nuclear forces. American military specialists were particularly concerned by the modernization of the Soviet land-based ballistic missile force, including the highly destabilizing Soviet "heavy missiles," which had no counterpart in the U.S. arsenal.

As for Soviet behavior in the Third World, we contended that U.S. policy was decisively affected by two catalytic events: the Soviet-initiated and -supported use of Cuban proxy forces to give Soviet clients in Africa a crucial military edge in what would otherwise have remained strictly localized power struggles; and the 1979 Soviet invasion of neutral and non-aligned Afghanistan. In American eyes, these actions were drastically inconsistent with the premises and aspirations of "detente." They created a popular and political "backlash" and a set of problems that no U.S. administration elected in 1980, whether led by Ronald Reagan or anyone else, could possibly -- or responsibly -- have ignored.

In his brief comments on our article, Dr. Trofimenko did not directly challenge the claim that American public opinion and policy toward the USSR during the early 1980s are best understood as a response to Soviet behavior in the 1970s. He did, however, summarily dismiss our contention that this behavior violated the "rules of the game" of detente. For him, the Reagan Administration's real reason for objecting to Soviet policies in the 1970s was not that these policies produced one-sided Soviet benefits. Rather, he argued that the United States was unready to accept anything less than one-sided benefits for itself.

What disturbs us most about this disagreement is the doubt it casts on the prospects for a significant improvement in superpower relations on the basis of Soviet "new thinking." Although he expressed considerable confidence that such improvement would occur, Dr. Trofimenko also insisted that "new thinking" is basically a continuation

and extension of the doctrine of "peaceful coexistence." Since this is the same doctrine he invoked to justify the behavior that virtually guaranteed that detente would be reversed, we find it hard to understand why Dr. Trofimenko believes that a "comprehensive security system" is at hand.² Despite such doubts, however, we are not ready to conclude that "new thinking" has nothing to contribute to a relaxation of international tensions.

In reading the works of Soviet "new thinkers," including Dr. Trofimenko, we find certain innovations that suggest that a process of genuine *rethinking* may be under way in at least some parts of the Soviet foreign policy establishment. Moreover, we do not assume that these changes are intended exclusively or even primarily for foreign consumption. One change that has caught our attention is the positive assessment by "new thinkers" of the value of compromise -- a norm that has deep roots in the political culture of the West but has not always been so highly esteemed in the USSR.³ Other concepts have recently become a part of authoritative Soviet discussions of international affairs -- concepts such as "interdependence," "mutual security," and "reasonable military sufficiency" -- also imply a possible repudiation of the zero-sum, *kto-kogo* approach that has characterized Soviet policy in the past and has made lasting improvement in East-West relations so elusive.

Since many tenets of the "new thinking" have long been widely accepted in the West, it is not surprising that recent Soviet statements and writings have a constructive sound to Western ears. So constructive, in fact, that in expressing skepticism about "new

²In his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 23, 1987 Soviet Foreign Minister E. A. Shevardnadze traced "new thinking" to different origins. He said: "All postwar decades have been nothing else but a history of the struggle between outdated political concepts and new political thinking which was born in the agony of war" (*Pravda*, September 24, 1987). We believe that few in the West (and perhaps even fewer in the Soviet Union itself) will be encouraged to learn that J. V. Stalin was the first "new thinker."

³A. Bovin, "From the Art of War to the Art of Negotiations," *Izvestia*, June 4, 1987; see also V. Lefebvre, *Algebra of Conscience: A Comparative Analysis of Soviet and Western Ethical Systems*, 1982.

thinking" Western analysts have focused primarily on "the gap between word and deed."⁴ We share this very legitimate concern and will return to it below. In our opinion, however, it is only one part of the problem of evaluating recent Soviet writings and statements. We also have some *conceptual* reservations about "new thinking," and believe that a discussion should begin with these.

Soviet discussions of a "comprehensive system of security" often divide the subject into several different categories: political-military, economic, ecological, humanitarian, and so on. As far as we can tell, however, the central proposition of the "new thinking is that nuclear weapons themselves are the principal obstacle to a *modus vivendi* between East and West. Any number of international ills are ascribed to the existence of nuclear weapons. For example, in his speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 23, 1987, Soviet Foreign Minister E. A. Shevardnadze declared them to be the reason that the principles of the UN Charter had not been realized, and that the institutions of the UN had not been made meaningful.⁵ We believe that this is a grossly oversimplified analysis and that it involves the same sort of distortion that underlay claims that NATO missile deployments in the early 1980s sharply increased the risk of war. At a minimum, a fixation with nuclear, or even conventional, weapons provides a far too narrow basis for really rethinking, much less restructuring, international relations.

Serious discussion about a "comprehensive system of international security" must begin with discussion of the meaning of security.⁶ The first questions that need to be weighed are these: How do states define their interests? And how do they use their power to advance these interests? There is nothing in the nature of nuclear weapons that makes

⁴*Pravda*, September 17, 1987.

⁵*Pravda*, September 24, 1987.

⁶This has been true in the West as well. Scholars who have studied the very questions that are now prominent in the "new thinking" -- for example, interdependence -- long ago discovered that to treat their subject seriously they first had to explore the nature of security, interests, and power.

it necessary to impose one's own internal system on an entire bloc of states. Yet a state that does so creates an ineradicable source of tension in international relations, for it is driven to use force against other nations and to create an international order in which they cannot effectively assert their independence.

As this suggests, we believe that a crucial test of the adequacy of "new thinking" will be the willingness of Soviet "new thinkers" to seriously and honestly address their country's relationship to the states of Eastern Europe. We do not expect Soviet scholars and officials to endorse President Reagan's proposal of June 1987, to tear down the Berlin Wall as part of a broader program to bring down barriers between the societies of East and West. But they ought to recognize that such proposals raise a fundamental issue. A critical analysis of the political dynamics of Soviet-East European relations is essential to understanding the sources of insecurity and tension in Europe as a whole -- in, as Soviet leaders like to put it, the European "common home." An analysis of the military balance between NATO and the Warsaw Pact alliance is extremely important, but it will never explain why there is a division of Europe in the first place, let alone identify the means to re-unite it.⁷

In our own discussions with Soviet scholars and officials about the division of Europe, we have sometimes been told that the West must respect the security concerns of the Soviet Union. This same message is implied by the assertion that "any attempts, direct or indirect, to influence the development of states that are 'not one's own,' to interfere in this development, should be ruled out."⁸ From our point of

⁷In his book, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, M. S. Gorbachev writes that "the main blame for the continued division of Europe must be placed on those who have turned it into an arena of nuclear missile confrontation and are calling for a revision of the European borders..." (p. 193, American edition, published by Harper and Row, 1987). Leaving aside the question of who bears responsibility for the "nuclear missile confrontation" in Europe, we believe that the real problem is not territorial at all. As President Reagan has said, "Those who claim the issue is boundaries or territory are hoping that the real issues, democracy and independence, will somehow go away. They will not."

⁸*Pravda*, September 17, 1987.

view, however, the problem cannot be solved by the simple injunction "to recognize the objective nature of the national interests of various countries...."⁹ While we agree that Soviet interests have to be taken into account, we would argue that not all interests are in fact "objective": most are defined by subjective choice.¹⁰ The exercise of political domination over other states usually reflects precisely such a choice -- even if the ideological, economic, ethnic or other motivations behind it have the strength of "necessities." Comprehensive security in Europe depends on whether the institutions that have perpetuated such domination are overturned.

The hesitation of "new thinkers" to re-assess Soviet security concepts would perhaps be less serious if Soviet actions were more conducive to a fundamental restructuring of the superpower competition. As M. S. Gorbachev has recently written, "one can speak as much as he pleases about the need for terminating the arms race, uprooting militarism, or about cooperation (but) nothing will change unless we start acting differently."¹¹ We recognize that the transition from words to deeds can be a complex and time-consuming process, especially in the sphere of international relations. Yet "new thinking" has already been under way for a number of years, and it seems legitimate to begin to consider not only its promise but its performance.

None of the changes contemplated in the "new thinking" has been more eagerly anticipated in the West than the re-sizing and reconfiguration of the Soviet armed forces to reflect the alleged shift to a doctrine of "defensive sufficiency." Unfortunately, with the partial exception of Moscow's agreement to eliminate intermediate-

⁹Ye. M. Primakov, "A New Philosophy of Foreign Policy," *Pravda*, July 10, 1987.

¹⁰In this sense we agree with A. Bovin who has written that in interstate negotiations "each partner has a limit for concessions determined by the supreme interests of state security and commitments to allies. But to a considerable extent this limit is subjective because it is determined not by interest per se but by precisely how a given interest is understood and formulated." See "From the Art of War to the Art of Negotiation," *Izvestiya*, June 4, 1987.

¹¹*Pravda*, September 17, 1987.

medium-, and shorter-range nuclear missiles, we have yet to see significant signs of movement in this direction. It is possible that changes have occurred of which we are unaware, but we find it puzzling that Moscow would insist on keeping secret any evidence in support of its own position. If it were true, as one "new thinker" recently told a Western audience, that "plans for [Soviet military] exercises have already been revised and maneuvers have been held where defense and not attack is the focal point," why would it not be in the Soviet Union's interest to provide corroborating evidence?¹² Similarly, Soviet officials have announced that a two- or three-year re-evaluation of defense costs is under way that will permit a realistic comparison of U.S. and Soviet defense expenditures.¹³ This is an interesting development. Yet what degree of confidence are we to have even in new figures, if they continue to be developed in secret and are not related to real openness about the size, characteristics, and disposition of Soviet forces?

Such questions are all the more pointed in light of U.S. government reports that contend that the rate of growth of Soviet defense spending has recently increased, that Soviet expenditures on weapons' procurement have grown even faster, and that the strengthening of the offensive capabilities of the Soviet armed forces continues to receive the highest budgetary and organizational priority.¹⁴ These reports may be incomplete or mistaken on one point or another, but they have proved to be reasonably accurate in the past, and, if anything, have tended to err on the low side. Among Western scholars they have earned high marks for objectivity, and we are not prepared to discount what they tell us about Soviet intentions on the basis of the verbal assurances of "new

¹²*Die Presse* (Vienna), October 15, 1987, p. 2, quoting Daniel Proyektor.

¹³See the speech by Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister V. Petrovskiy at the UN conference on disarmament and development.

¹⁴"Gorbachev's Modernization Program: A Status Report," March 19, 1987, a paper presented by the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency for the Subcommittee on National Security Economics of the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress.

thinkers" that, "in the course of time we will certainly establish defensive structures in our armed forces."¹⁵

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to taking "new thinking" fully seriously has been the Soviet prosecution of the war in Afghanistan. It has been difficult to place much credence in the USSR's commitment to respect the integrity and independence of other countries while Soviet occupation forces conducted or supported scorched-earth operations in Afghanistan and cross-border attacks on Pakistan.¹⁶ Although we (like many Westerners) long ago heard Soviet colleagues say privately that the invasion of Afghanistan was a "mistake" and that it had damaged Soviet interests, official statements continued to assert the contrary.¹⁷ And the Soviet media continued to print unconvincing accounts of the swelling ranks of the PDPA, the success of the "national reconciliation" policy, and so forth.

M. S. Gorbachev's statement of February 8, 1988, has now put Soviet policy more clearly on a path toward withdrawal. The most notable part of this document was perhaps its insistence that the internal composition of the Afghan regime is no business of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ If this view now guides Soviet policy, if a rapid and complete withdrawal actually takes place despite the likely fall of the Afghan Communist regime, we will be less skeptical that new thinking is bridging "the gap between word and deed." Even then, we will probably

¹⁵*Die Presse* (Vienna), October 15, 1987, p. 2.

¹⁶The member states of the UN have noted the sizable discrepancy between the Soviet Union's conduct in Afghanistan and its advocacy of greater respect for the "authority and role of the UN." Resolutions supported by overwhelming majorities of the General Assembly have repeatedly called for an end to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, most recently on November 10, 1987, with the support of 123 nations; only 18 members, including Byelorussia and Ukraine, supported the Soviet Union. (We might also note that similarly large majorities of the UN membership have called for a removal of Vietnamese occupation forces from Cambodia, with equally little change in Vietnamese policy.)

¹⁷In an interview with Western journalists, for example, Marshal S. F. Akhromeyev said of the invasion of Afghanistan, "It was not a mistake." *The New York Times*, October 30, 1987.

¹⁸*Pravda*, February 9, 1988.

want to give a large share of the credit for bridging the gap to the Afghan *mujaheddin*, but this will not detract from our acknowledgment of a positive and practical change in Soviet international priorities.

How Soviet withdrawal is interpreted in the West will, it should be noted, depend in part on how openly it is debated in the Soviet Union and what kinds of conclusions are drawn from it. Will the failure be seen as one of strategy or tactics? Of ends or means? Will those who disagree with the decision to withdraw also have their say? Will Afghanistan become a "blank spot" of history? Without an increase in openness, in short, Western scholars and officials will find it much harder to judge how -- and how fully -- the meaning of Afghanistan has been absorbed into "new thinking."

We would also have far greater confidence in the practical relevance of "new thinking" if the Soviet media were to cease propagating "enemy image stereotypes," "absurd concoctions," and "unscrupulous violations of the truth," as "new thinking" allegedly requires.¹⁹ We are fully aware of and applaud the fact that Soviet citizens have recently been given unprecedented opportunities to read (and hear) the views of certain American and other Western commentators on international issues. We also take the point of a "new thinker" who recently warned us that Soviet efforts "to offer an honest image of the

¹⁹*Pravda*, September 17, 1987. We note that "new thinkers" themselves sometimes contribute to lurid images of the West. One well-known writer, for example, recently suggested that if the current program of restructuring fails, the international balance of power will again shift in favor of the West and the risk of war will rise -- in other words, the West remains eager for a nuclear confrontation that would finish the Soviet Union off. (See A. Bovin, *Izvestia*, July 11, 1987, p. 6.) This is all too reminiscent of the Soviet campaign to stir panic in Western European public opinion by creating a "war scare" in the early 1980's. The theme of this campaign was that the risk of nuclear war was rising, and its obvious purpose was to prevent deployment by NATO of intermediate-range missiles, by inflaming European popular sentiment against them. In retrospect, it is surely clear to everyone that the sharp and sudden rise in the danger of war was a problem that did not really exist. It was a rhetorical threat created to serve political-diplomatic goals, even at the expense of creating unwarranted anxiety in the USSR itself. Once that campaign had failed, there was no reason to perpetuate the atmosphere of extreme public alarm, and the problem of the "war danger" was simply forgotten.

West" would be accompanied by occasional lapses, since "we are no angels."²⁰ Nevertheless, Soviet press intimations that Matthias Rust was on an intelligence-gathering mission when he flew into Soviet airspace were anything but reassuring, especially against the background of the shootdown of KAL flight 007 in September 1983. Like many other Americans who are seriously trying to assess the prospects for "civilized" U.S.-Soviet relations, moreover, we were particularly disgusted by recurrent allegations in the Soviet press that the AIDS virus was loosed upon mankind by a clandestine U.S. biological warfare program.

After Secretary of State Shultz protested these allegations in his October 1987 visit to Moscow, a disavowal soon appeared in *Izvestia* and was reiterated in a press conference held by members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, who insisted that the charge had never been believed by reputable Soviet scientists. Although these corrections were welcome, it seems to us important to go further and ask how it is that these allegations came to be made and to be so frequently repeated (especially if no one believed them). In our opinion, the question for "new thinkers" is what institutional changes are needed to prevent the systematic invention and dissemination of such disinformation. The importance of addressing this institutional question is underscored by the fact that charges that the U.S. government is manufacturing the AIDS virus have been given fresh currency by Radio Moscow in at least two recent broadcasts.²¹

In closing, we should stress that our reservations about the theory and practice of "new thinking" have not led us to conclude that it is merely "old thinking" in an up-to-date disguise. Given the lessons we have drawn from our experience with 1970's-style "detente," however, we are not able to take "new thinking" at face value in the absence of further clarification of exactly what it means and what it portends in the way of changes in Soviet behavior. Meanwhile, we look forward to a

²⁰*Die Presse*, October 15, 1987.

²¹Radio Moscow domestic service, February 13, 1988; and English-language service, March 11, 1988.

continuing exchange of views with Soviet specialists who can help at least to narrow out uncertainties. If this article facilitates such an exchange, we will consider it to have served a worthwhile goal.

