

*A turn of fortune offers new opportunities  
for superpower accommodation*

## TOWARD DETENTE II

by Thomas M. Magstadt

Forty years ago, when the world was plunging headlong toward total war, the Soviet Union was America's ally. Ten years later the same Soviet Union was being scorned as the home of "Godless communism" and the enemy of everything sacred to the "free world." With the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the two nations were facing each other across an abyss so large that nuclear war seemed a distinct possibility. Ten years after that, at the Moscow Summit of 1972, an American president with unimpeachable anti-Communist credentials was supping with yesterday's devil in the very capital of world communism; Nixon and his hosts managed to produce an "orgy of agreements" (the phrase is Max Frankel's), including the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) and the start of an era called détente. Within six years another American president was announcing that "America is now free of the inordinate fear of communism." Then came Afghanistan and the Reagan administration, and today it appears we are reverting to the stultifying stereotypes of the early 1950s. Détente is a malodorous word. Yet one may argue—as I shall here—that the attempt at détente came ten years too soon and that the 1980s will witness the emergence of a far more favorable climate for superpower accommodation.

From the cold war to détente, American foreign policy has oscillated between overestimation of the Soviet threat—"the Soviets are bent on world conquest"—and underestimation of Moscow's commitment to revolutionary change—"the Soviets are just 'state capitalists' going about the business of doing business." In like manner, the euphoria of détente at the beginning of the '70s gave way to a new Red Scare toward the end of the decade; while Washington was napping, it was argued, the Soviet Union had caught up with the U.S. in strategic nuclear weapons and would soon surpass us. Suddenly the Soviet Union was ten feet tall again.

Since Ronald Reagan's mandate-sized election victory there have been signs of yet another reappraisal,

with some of the experts now hinting that the Soviet giant may have feet of clay. As Seweryn Bialer wrote in *Foreign Affairs* (Summer, 1981):

The Brezhnev era, particularly from 1965 to approximately 1976, will probably go down in history as the most successful period of Soviet international and domestic development....During the mid-1970s, however, these domestic and international trends were reversed. By the end of the decade, the previously favorable situation had begun to unravel. The 26th Party Congress convened in a new situation marked by the clear short- and medium-range potential for dangerous and unfavorable developments.

In fact, as Bialer correctly concludes, the Soviet Union is neither ten feet tall nor does it have feet of clay. It is, and will remain, a powerful world force with powerful forces arrayed against it. But given the internal and external difficulties Moscow now faces, the reasons for accommodation with the West are, *from Moscow's standpoint*, considerably more compelling than they were ten or twelve years ago. These reasons will become even more compelling in the years immediately ahead.

### BALANCES OF INTEREST

Détente, from its start, had to assume the equality of the two superpowers. "Equality" translated into acceptance of "nuclear parity"—a condition that President Nixon went along with as the basis for Soviet-American strategic arms limitations negotiations. "Essential equivalence" in strategic arms was the theme of a diplomatic dance that eventually involved broadened contacts and exchanges between East and West in other areas as well, most notably commercial and cultural affairs. The volume of East-West trade grew fourfold from about \$13 billion in 1969 to over \$54 billion in 1977. (The U.S. share of this trade, however, remained relatively small, due in part to a recalcitrant U.S. Congress.) These very factors—the Soviet desire for American validation of their superpower status and their growing need for Western technology owing to an inevitable and long overdue shift from an "extensive" mode of economic development (growth based on increases in the labor force and capital stock) to an "intensive" mode (growth result-

---

*Thomas M. Magstadt is Associate Professor of Government at Augustana College, South Dakota. He is completing, with a colleague, a book to be called "The Foundation of Politics."*

ing from improved technology leading to higher productivity)—largely explain the Soviet motive for seeking détente with the United States.

Advocates of détente in America, on the other hand, stressed the leverage it would give the U.S. The whole idea of “linkage” popularized by Henry Kissinger was predicated on the notion that the USSR needed détente more than we did and that we could use trade and other concessions to influence their foreign policy behavior. Opponents of détente, also assuming that the USSR had more to gain from détente than we did, drew the opposite conclusion: Détente was a diplomatic boondoggle that promised lopsided benefits for our chief rival at a time when it was sparing no efforts to catch up with us both economically and militarily.

What both sides in this U.S. foreign policy debate seem to have missed is that the Soviet perception of the “balance of interest” in détente was just the reverse of our own. They believed that we needed détente more than they did. But it was not Nixon (or Kissinger) the Soviets thought they could take advantage of; it was the American predicament. The U.S., they assumed, had more at stake in negotiations because the balance of power had shifted away from America: The “progressive forces” were now gaining ascendancy over the “imperialist forces.” For this the most obvious proof was the frustration and futility of America’s military intervention in Southeast Asia.

In this view, the Vietnam war represented more than the military decline of the American superpower; it also precipitated a deepening domestic social and economic crisis. The tumultuous antiwar movement, the specter of racial violence, the political acrimony symbolized by Spiro Agnew’s ferocious attacks upon the news media, the growing strains in NATO—these signs of mounting trouble had already set the stage for three major shocks to the American system: one military (humiliation in Vietnam), one political (the resignation of Richard Nixon), and one economic (the obvious vulnerability of the U.S. to economic retaliation after the 1973 OPEC oil embargo). These events could only presage a dismal American decade characterized by low economic growth, high inflation, high interest rates, high unemployment, and soaring crime statistics. Meanwhile, the U.S. was assuming a lower profile abroad than at any time since World War II, and all public opinion polls pointed to the loss of American pride, self-confidence, and faith in the future.

While America was undergoing its dismal decade, the Soviet Union was experiencing a period of relatively high economic growth, improved living standards, and rapid military advances. It also scored several impressive foreign policy victories—in Angola, Ethiopia, and Cambodia, for instance—while greatly expanding trade relations with Western Europe and maintaining firm and relatively trouble-free control of its own vast empire, including Eastern Europe. (The exception was Poland in 1970 and 1976.) Finally, the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies (again with the exception of Poland) were relatively immune to the energy shocks that jolted the

West after 1973.

At least in comparison with the United States, then, there can be little doubt that Moscow’s fortunes were on the upturn at the same time that ours were turning down. The Soviet decision to pursue détente appears to have been made in an atmosphere of growing diplomatic and military self-confidence. The extraordinary magnanimity—by Soviet standards—of Moscow’s diplomatic efforts at the 1972 summit conference was a sure sign of this new outlook. If there is one clear conclusion to draw from even a cursory review of the history of Soviet foreign policy since World War II, it is that the Soviet Union does not like to negotiate from a position of weakness any more than we do.

#### **APPEARANCE & REALITY**

Détente as a set of commercial, cultural, and even military agreements was decidedly premature. For such an ambitious and multidimensional attempt at superpower accommodation to succeed, both sides must have a roughly equal stake in the reality as well as the appearance of rapprochement. Both sides would have to be facing more-or-less offsetting domestic and foreign policy problems, problems that were sufficiently pressing to make accommodation attractive but not so critical that either side would be immobilized by fear or paranoia.

A moment’s reflection will reveal that the prevailing conditions of the 1970s were just the opposite of ideal for negotiations. The United States appeared to be on the decline and the Nixon administration was eager to pursue détente in fact as well as in appearance. The Soviet Union felt its star was rising, and the Brezhnev regime was content with pursuing a form of détente that was one part substance and two parts appearance. The substance of détente for the USSR was its hoped-for trade expansion and technology exchanges with Western Europe and Japan. The appearance of détente enabled the Soviets to strike a “peaceloving” pose and to divert attention, particularly among U.S. opinion leaders, from the accelerated development of Soviet strategies and theatre forces.

#### **VITAL SIGNS**

What the Soviets like to call the “correlation of forces” is undergoing significant change. Though our present circumstances do not admit of unbridled optimism, the United States may well be on the brink of a better era. Not only is Vietnam behind us, but little of its “legacy” seems to remain. Whatever else the election of Ronald Reagan signified, it clearly represented a recrudescence of patriotism and national pride among rank-and-file Americans. If the mood of the country continues to reflect the anti-Communist sentiment that helped elect Reagan, Moscow may face a more assertive American presence around the world than at any time since the Vietnam war. The president campaigned hard on the issue of military preparedness and has remained stubbornly faithful to his promise to increase defense spending. In addition, the country has managed to reduce its dependence on

foreign oil somewhat since 1977, and the NATO alliance, under the stimulus of the Soviet SS-20 missile deployment and the re-Stalinization of Poland, has shown signs of revitalization. (The antinuclear movement in Western Europe is a complicating factor, but seems manageable.) Finally, President Reagan inherited a foreign policy relatively free of military entanglements. If our commitment to Israel's survival as an independent and sovereign state is undiminished, the fact remains that the U.S. role in the Middle East has changed from that of patron to patron-mediator.

On the domestic front, most of America's young people are politically quiescent, and racial tensions are nowhere near the level of the 1960s and early '70s. True, our economic vital signs have been weakening—growing unemployment, deepening recession, and a billowing federal deficit—but if the scene is bleak, it is most likely not a permanent condition. The underlying reality is that the United States is still the most powerful economic force on the planet. The question is not *whether* the American economy will be rejuvenated, but *when*, and surely in the present decade.

For the Soviet Union the next decade looks almost as gloomy as the last one was for the U.S. There is general agreement among Western experts that the rate of economic growth in the USSR will continue to decline, with estimates of an average annual growth rate of only 2.5 per cent. The anticipated slowdown in the Soviet economy will be exacerbated by a growing manpower shortage, especially acute in the European part of the Soviet realm where industry is most heavily concentrated. The Soviet energy picture will also put constraints upon economic growth in the 1980s. Finally, the agricultural sector, despite massive infusions of investment capital over fifteen years, will continue hostage to the vagaries of politics and weather. (Soviet grain harvests have varied by as much as 46 million tons from one year to the next in recent times.)

One consequence of the Soviet success story of the past fifteen years is the Soviet citizens' experience of great improvements in their standard of living. Although estimated at only a third to a half of our own, the quality of life in the USSR has nonetheless taken a marked turn for the better. The old adage that "the appetite grows with the eating" applies in the socialist East no less than in the bourgeois capitalist West. According to such Soviet-watchers as Seweryn Bialer, "it will be extremely difficult [for the USSR] to continue its policy of consumption growth, even at the lower rates of the most recent Five Year Plan announced in February."

Then there is the Soviet Union's many faceted Polish problem. The events in Poland prior to the imposition of martial law were little short of earth-shaking: In addition to countenancing an independent trade union movement, the Polish Communist party had conducted an election of its leadership by secret ballot, a first in the history of Communist states. David Broder wrote in his nationally syndicated column that "this extraordinary event, occurring almost literally within sight of the Soviet armies, must send a signal of hope to all other subjected satellites and a

shiver of fear down the spines of those who rule the Kremlin." The Solidarity movement has now been crushed, but the cost to the Soviet Union, both politically and economically, is beyond current estimation. Moscow's fear that Eastern Europe might be "Polonized" will require commitments of Soviet resources at a time when the resource base no longer is expanding rapidly.

Whereas the United States was mired down in Vietnam ten years ago, today it is Moscow that finds itself bogged down in a misadventure beyond its borders. The war in Afghanistan has been raging for over two years now and promises no let up. Afghanistan already has cost the Soviet Union dear in money and manpower. But the overall cost of a prolonged military intervention, as Americans are well aware, cannot be measured simply in rubles or dollars, or even in human lives. The loss of face, the damage to a nation's reputation, these are no less real for being intangible.

Finally, there is the problem of the People's Republic of China. Moscow and Peking have moved no closer to one another since the replacement of Mao's heirs by a more pragmatic leadership group. From every indication, Peking intends to concentrate on the two interrelated objectives of political stability and economic development. Assuming even moderate success on these two fronts, the PRC bids fair to become an even more formidable foe of the Soviet Union in the coming decades. It will continue to tie down half a million Soviet soldiers on the 4,500-mile Sino-Soviet border for many years to come.

Overshadowing all these domestic and foreign policy concerns is the pending changing of the guard in the Soviet Union as Brezhnev's rule reaches an end. The possibility of power struggles and a sustained period of internal instability cannot be ruled out. One thing is certain: The changes in the top Party leadership and administrative elites in this decade will be as striking as were the continuities of the last.

### **EXPLOITING OPPORTUNITY**

All this does not add up to a Gibbous prediction that the Soviet empire is about to crumble and fall. Rather, it appears that the Soviet Union will be encountering serious domestic and foreign policy problems within the next few years that will alter its prospects and make new demands upon its resources. At the same time, one can expect that for the United States the 1980s will be considerably less dismal than were the '70s, and certainly a better decade for the U.S. than it will be for the USSR.

The turn of fortunes presents both nations with challenges and opportunities. We could try to take advantage of their distress and seek to score diplomatic, political, or even military gains at their expense. Or we could try to exploit a unique opportunity to launch a new diplomatic offensive aimed at building a safer world. There is good reason to believe that the Soviet Union, in distress, will perceive a new détente to be very much in its own interest—in strategic and diplomatic as well as economic terms, and not only in appearance but in substance. It is an opportunity that should not be lost, perhaps the chance of a lifetime.