

## CONTAINMENT AND THE DECLINE OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE

### SOME TENTATIVE REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

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We may be coming to the end of the world as we know it. The predominant characteristic of international affairs over the last 40 years has been competition and confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and there is a great deal in the present situation to suggest that this condition could be on the verge of terminal improvement: the incentives for the Soviet Union to reduce its commitment to worldwide revolution are considerable. This could eventually result in the end of the cold war.

#### The development of containment policy: direct and indirect aggression

Central to American foreign and defense policy since World War II has been the policy of containment: the notion that the expansion of international Communism must be opposed. At its base, the containment policy stresses that Communism is a palpable threat: it is aggressive, dynamic, and messianic by nature. Unless opposed, it will spread cancerously throughout the world step by step, domino by domino, until finally it infects and destroys even the United States in one of two ways: through subversion or through outright warfare. The policy is basically practical and self-interested: we must save ourselves from ultimate destruction. As long as international Communism is seen to be a genuine subversive or military threat, support for efforts to oppose it can be mustered. If it seems merely to be a distant evil infecting faraway lands, but not ours, support will be comparatively niggling and infirm.<sup>1</sup>

The policy of containment stresses the lessons drawn from the Munich crisis of 1938--that totalitarian forces like international Communism are aggressive by nature and that their appetite for more territory grows with the feeding. Thus Communism, and particularly Communist expansion, must be opposed.

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<sup>1</sup> Another reason for opposing international Communism is that it is fundamentally evil: people under this system suffer deprivation, are forced to surrender basic human rights and undergo systematic brutality. It seems clear, however, that this argument is far less potent than the argument about threat. For example polls during the Korean and Vietnam wars often asked people why the wars should be supported. Compared to self-interested arguments about stopping the Red tide, arguments about defending the attacked and preventing bloodbaths do very badly indeed. See Mueller 1973, pp. 44, 48-49, 100-01; Mueller 1984a, p. 156. In this the public reflected some official thinking. In a March 1965 memo Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton specifically excluded as a "US aim" in Vietnam the notion that the involvement was "to 'help a friend'" (Sheehan et al. 1971, p. 432). A comparison might be made with American opposition to Hitler's Germany: although the Nazi regime was widely considered to be bad, even monstrous, the United States went into forceful opposition only when the threat became directly pertinent through a surprise attack by a Nazi ally and then by a declaration of war by the Germans.

Even among those who accepted this basic argument after 1945, however, there was debate over two central issues. One of these was geographic: how far should efforts to contain Communism be extended? There was no great sentiment to push the Soviets out of areas they controlled in Eastern Europe, but it soon came to be widely agreed that the United States had important, indeed vital, interests in North America, Western Europe, and Japan, and it seemed clear Communist expansion needed to be opposed in those areas. But to many, the American containment perimeter excluded substantial areas of the globe (see Gaddis 1982, pp. 58-61). The Korean War of 1950-53 engendered the lesson that it was necessary to confront Communist expansion in all sorts of locales, even those not directly tied to American vital interests. But even before Korea, the United States found itself helping threatened anti-Communist regimes in such non-central places as China, Iran, Greece, the Philippines, Malaya, and French Indo-China.

The other issue involved the means to be used in confronting Communism. It was clear fairly early that the Soviet Union's self-professed interest in worldwide revolution, subversion, and wars of liberation was quite serious. Thus efforts to contain this form of what was often called "indirect aggression" were accepted fairly readily. It was less clear to many, however, whether the Soviet Union was interested in "direct aggression" of the Hitlerian sort. Events during the late 1940s, such as the Berlin blockade, suggested to many that the direct military threat should be taken as seriously as the subversive threat. Thus the United States embarked on a re-militarization policy designed to deter major war with the Soviet Union by making the consequences of war so horrendous that the Soviets would never be tempted to start one. The formation of NATO in 1949 was part of this development, but again it was the Korean War that really set militarization into high gear. While some still doubted that the Soviet Union had any intention of starting a major war, the Korean experience was electrifying to many: if the Soviet Union was actually willing to support aggressive war in this corner of the world, it seemed reasonable to most that it might well be tempted to try its hand next at something far more important to it such as Western Europe.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950s and early 1960s, both of these developments continued. Although the most important confrontations of this period were in Western Europe (particularly over Berlin) and in North America (particularly over Cuba), the newly emerging "Third World" became an increasingly significant arena of contest in the battle against indirect aggression, and the United States actively worked in opposition to leftward developments in many odd corners of the globe--Guatemala, Venezuela, Brazil, Iran, the Congo, Laos, and South Vietnam--and actually sent combat troops to two areas: Lebanon in 1958 and the Dominican Republic in early 1965. Much of the perceived heightened importance of the Third World was due to the challenge and rhetoric of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Particularly after the successful launch of the Soviet space satellite, Sputnik, in 1957, Khrushchev confidently proclaimed that his regime was the "wave of the future" and invited the leaders of Third World nations to join his team and to link arms with him at the inevitable funeral of the west and of capitalism. His huge ally in China joined in these sentiments: "the east wind prevails," they assured all listeners. This

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of these developments stressing the capping importance of the Korean War, see Jervis 1980. See also Gaddis 1974 and May 1984.

inspired great alarm in western capitals. There was a frantic scamper to try to catch up with the Russians in the space race, and efforts were made to counter potential or actual Communist encroachments wherever they appeared on the globe: potential dominoes were everywhere. Seeking to match his counterpart in Moscow in rhetoric, and to accept his challenge, President John Kennedy grandly declared in his inauguration speech in 1961, "we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty."

Khrushchev's rhetoric also often seemed militarily threatening. Sputnik was linked to Soviet advances in intercontinental ballistic missiles, and his calm enumeration of how many of his missiles it would take to eliminate Britain or France from the face of the globe struck many as a threat of direct aggression. The arms race continued.

#### Containment in the Third World: Vietnam and indirect aggression

Both the Chinese and the Soviets supported "wars of national liberation" as a valid and beneficial method of pursuing international revolution. For the policy of containment in its opposition to such "indirect aggression", Vietnam became an important "test case": A United States victory in Vietnam would not only help prevent the fall of any immediate dominoes, but might well be discouraging to other Communists world-wide who were carrying out similar efforts.<sup>3</sup>

The chief external enemy in Vietnam was China more than the Soviet Union. China's foreign policy was highly active and threatening--there were even efforts to set up influential Maoist parties in far away Africa. Most importantly, the Chinese forged a pseudo-alliance with the huge Southeast Asian nation of Indonesia, a country led by the demagogic, anti-American Sukarno who was backed by the largest Communist party outside the Communist bloc itself.

It was in this context that the American decisions of 1965 to send hundreds of thousands of troops to Vietnam were made. The anti-Communist side in the war there seemed on the verge of collapse, and preventing that development seemed essential. C. L. Sulzberger of the New York Times (1966) compared the strategic picture to a nutcracker in which the small nations of the area were about to be crushed between two hostile arms: China to the north, Indonesia to the south. Leaders of the many of the dominoes agreed and urged the United States to save the situation. Malaysia's prime minister said in 1965, "In our view it is imperative that the United States does not retire from the scene"; leaders in Australia, New Zealand, Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, and India agreed (Lewy 1978, pp. 421-22; see also Humphrey 1976, p. 333). In the United States there was wide, almost unclouded, agreement with reporter David Halberstam's assessment of Vietnam: "a strategic country in a key area, it is perhaps one of only five or six nations that is truly vital to US interests" (1965, p. 319).

Within a year or two such evaluations were no longer nearly so widely

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<sup>3</sup> In a memo in September 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara stressed "the impact of a Communist South Vietnam not only in Asia, but in the rest of the world, where the South Vietnam conflict is regarded as a test case of US capacity to help a nation meet a Communist 'war of liberation'" (Sheehan et al. 1971, p. 278). See also Lewy 1978, pp. 424-25.

accepted. What happened was not a change of standards but a radical alteration of circumstances. First, toward the end of 1965 there was cataclysm in Indonesia: a Communist coup attempt backfired, and in the countercoup tens of thousands of Communists were killed and the party destroyed. Then, following this catastrophe, China began to turn inward on her self-absorbed and self-destructive Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, an event that preoccupied her for years. When China focused her attention outward, it was not Southeast Asia that felt threatened, but rather the Soviet Union to the north, to the point that in 1969 the two countries moved toward the brink of war.

As a cold war event, then, American intervention in Vietnam lost much of its relevance and resonance; it became an anachronism (see also Mueller 1984b, 1980). No one appreciated this more than the leaders of the dominoes. When Clark Clifford, soon to be Secretary of Defense, visited the area in late 1967, he was startled by the relaxed attitude to the war in neighboring countries: "It was strikingly apparent to me that the other troop-contributing countries no longer shared our degree of concern about the war....Was it possible that our assessment of the danger to the stability of Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific was exaggerated?...Was it possible that we were continuing to be guided by judgments that might once have had validity but were now obsolete?" (1969, pp. 606-07). As McGeorge Bundy has observed, although Vietnam seemed "vital" in 1964 and 1965, "at least from the time of the anti-Communist revolution in Indonesia, late in 1965, that adjective was excessive, and so also was our effort" (1978, p. 293). Others shared Clifford's doubts, and opposition to the war grew both among the public and among the foreign policy elites: increasingly, the war seemed an endless, costly affair that no longer had a purpose.

#### Detente and the mellowing of containment

Meanwhile, as the relevance of a collapse of South Vietnam to American interests became less and less obvious, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, and then those between the US and China, were progressing as if the war didn't exist. The result of these developments was a general decrease in the perceived Communist threat and, in consequence, a further diminution in the belief in the urgency of the containment argument.

In 1963 after the trauma of the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union found itself outclassed militarily, economically, and scientifically by the west, and, still under Khrushchev's leadership, sought better relations with the United States. Directly going against the highly vocal wishes of its Chinese ally, it signed arms control agreements with the west and, in an admission that it could not even feed itself, purchased large quantities of food from the United States. Thus began a period that was later to be dubbed "detente". The two major powers concluded several important arms control and trade agreements and their relations took on a reasonably civil, if not entirely amicable, tone. Negotiations tended to be difficult but productive, and were largely rather businesslike in tone--quite a contrast from the 1950s where most discussion was carried out at a high-pitched, propagandistic level. In addition both sides avoided confrontation--indeed, since 1962 there has been scarcely a crisis between the two powers worthy of the name. While these developments hardly brought deep friendship between the two sides, the arrival and development of detente did help to relax tensions between them, and fears

of major crisis and of major war dwindled.<sup>4</sup> The reduced fear of the Soviets was also impelled by a dawning realization--quite a change from the Sputnik era--that by and large the Soviet Union, far from representing the wave of the future, was the center of a decadent, trouble-racked, ineptly-ruled empire. The space race, which had seemed such a vital test just a few years before, was handily won by the the United States. To some, contempt often seemed a more reasonable reaction to the Soviets than fear.

While this mellowing of US-USSR relations continued, another even more striking change was taking place in the relations between the United States and China. Beginning in the early 1970s, China began to seek better relations. Moving to a more pragmatic position, the Chinese gradually dropped their role as a leader and inspirer of revolutionary movements around the globe and began to concentrate on recovering from their own self-inflicted domestic wounds. Agreement with the west was sought, trade grew, and virtually all foreign adventures (except a few in opposition to the USSR) ceased. China became even less threatening than the Soviets.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, yet another development was occurring: a considerable decline in the fear of Communist subversion at home. Fears of the "concealed enemy," so important an issue in the 1950s, almost completely vanished from the public debate. For example, the number of items under the heading, "Communism-US" in The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature totaled 73 in 1949, 170 in 1954, 37 in 1961, and 6 in the entire decade of the 1970s (see Mueller 1984c).

#### Continuing arms buildups

At the same time, however, arms buildups continued. That is, while tensions between the US and the USSR mellowed considerably and thus presumably while the probability of war between them lessened, both continued, somewhat irrelevantly, to spend huge sums on weapons intended to deter this conflict.

In general, most historical developments in the cold war era seem to have had remarkably little to do with the quantitative realities of the military balance, particularly the nuclear balance. The USSR is clearly a far more potent nuclear opponent now than it was in the 1950s, yet elite support for anti-Communist adventure abroad was comparatively high in the 1950s and seems low now. Moreover, the most dangerous Soviet provocation, the Korean War, was attempted at a time of extreme Soviet nuclear inferiority. So, the often-exquisite numerology of the nuclear arms race seems to have had only limited impact on the important dynamics of the cold war era, most of which have taken place at militarily subtle levels such as subversion, guerrilla war, local uprising, civil war, and diplomatic posturing. As Benjamin S. Lambeth has observed, "The United States has often been circumspect and the Soviet Union adventurous, even though the prevailing asymmetries of the nuclear balance would have suggested that the reverse should have been the case. Indeed, it is perhaps one of the notable ironies of the nuclear age that while both Washington and Moscow have often lauded superiority as a

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<sup>4</sup> For public opinion data on the decline after 1963 in the fear that World War III was imminent, see Mueller 1977, pp. 325-28, Mueller 1979.

<sup>5</sup> By the 1980s the Chinese announced that they had "only ideological and moral relations" with Communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia and expressed their desire to see "stability and prosperity" in the area (New York Times, February 2, 1981, p. A3.)

military force-posture goal, neither has ever behaved as though it really believed superiority significantly mattered in the resolution of international conflicts" (1972, p. 234n). In their extensive study of the use of threat and force since World War II, Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan conclude, "Especially noteworthy is the fact that our data do not support a hypothesis that the strategic weapons balance between the United States and the USSR influences outcomes" (1978, p. 132).

In fact, a major war is all but inconceivable. Major wars are not begun out of casual caprice or idle fancy, but because one power or another decides that it can profit from (not simply win) the war--the combination of risk, gain, and cost appears preferable to peace. As Lebow argues: "History indicates that wars rarely start because one side believes it has a military advantage. Rather they occur when leaders become convinced that force is necessary to achieve important goals" (1984, p. 149). Or Michael Howard: "Wars begin with conscious and reasoned decisions based on the calculation, made by both parties, that they can achieve more by going to war than by remaining at peace" (1984, p. 103; see also Jervis, 1984, ch. 6, and Bueno de Mesquita, 1981, ch. 2). Even allowing considerably for stupidity, ineptness, miscalculation and self-deception in these considerations, it does not appear that major war has been remotely in anyone's interest since 1945. Thus the weapons competition between the US and the USSR that is designed to prevent that war is a sort of anachronism. Although concern about "direct aggression" may have been somewhat understandable at the time of the Korean War (but see B. Kaufman 1986, pp. 31-33), the Soviet Union has done little in the last decades to suggest that it might have any interest in launching a direct military attack. Yet both sides continue in an exercise that resembles nothing so much as a quest for military parody. One nation builds a big, expensive, and profoundly useless weapons system, and the other counters with one that is even bigger, more expensive, and more useless. Meanwhile, political developments percolate along with little relation to the quantitative realities of the military balance, particularly the nuclear balance. (On this issue, see also Mueller 1985a, 1985b).

#### Containment after Vietnam

By cold war standards the immediate post-Vietnam period of the middle and late 1970s marked a banner era for international Communism. For the first time since Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba in 1959, significant areas moved into the international Communist orbit: in Southeast Asia, Communist regimes won in Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Laos; in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, pro-Soviet factions took over in Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Afghanistan, Grenada, Nicaragua, and Mozambique. There were also sharp leftward lurches in Spain and Portugal which sometimes seemed likely to bring pro-Communist governments to power. In containment terms, "indirect aggression" had a field day although, as Hosmer and Wolfe note, these developments do not seem to have been the result so much of preplanned Soviet policy as of a cautious "assertive opportunism" (1983, pp. 66, 135, 168).

While these and other developments injected more hostility into American-Soviet relations, several general lessons seem to have been learned from the experiences of Vietnam, Angola and the other Communist gains of the 1970s, and these may have actually helped to bring the containment doctrine under question in some quarters.

First, it was found that if one country falls to Communism, others will not directly collapse or even teeter very much. The topplings of the 1970s did

not lead to a cascade of further topplings down the line. Nor did they, by themselves, detract from the credibility of American guarantees to areas of central concern like Japan and Western Europe.<sup>6</sup> By the logic of containment, if the collapse of a distant country to Communism does not lead to similar developments in more important, closer countries, then that collapse is of no great consequence to American security.

Second, even countries which do succumb to Communism do not necessarily stay that way. Unless they are directly dominated by Soviet troops, they may well eventually modify their ways and begin to follow a central path or to move back to the embrace of the west--the cases of Mozambique and Portugal seem to be illustrative. Even earlier there had been important instances of such shifts in Egypt, Sudan, Ghana, Guinea, and Somalia. Thus, Communist gains are by no means irreversible over time. Indeed, the Soviets have been greatly concerned about such backsliding and, as Hosmer and Wolfe note, they have found that their "ability to foresee, create, and control events within the Third World is limited;" in fact, "the Soviets have experienced considerable frustration in their attempts to forge a lasting network of reliable client states in the Third World" (1983, pp. 136, 166, also 65-68; see also Haas 1983, pp. 122-23).

Third, as will be discussed more fully in the next section, Soviet gains may have had a sobering impact on the Soviet Union itself. While they may initially have seen their gains as a positive trend (Hosmer and Wolfe 1983, p. 55), a Rand Corporation study under the direction of Charles Wolf suggests that the costs to the Soviet Union of its empire rose considerably during the 1970s and now probably stand at several percent of its GNP (1983, see also M. Kaufman 1983). Indeed the Soviet colossus now seems to be in foundering, overextended disarray--involved in an enervating war in Afghanistan, wary of China, overbudgeted in defense, unable either to abandon its empire in Eastern Europe and elsewhere or to make it work, saddled with an economy notable for its creaking lassitude, plagued within its borders by social and anthropological problems that range from rampant alcoholism to rising Moslem fundamentalism. It seems significant that the Soviet Union has been distinctly wary of taking on Nicaragua as yet another distant, costly, and essentially useless burden, like Cuba.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, countries that continue to accept a form of Communism often do not form very attractive models for other countries. Communist gains have been accompanied mostly by misery in those countries which have gone that route.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover, these developments raised amazingly little alarm in the United States: far from engendering the new era of McCarthyism (the original had supposedly been launched by the fall of China in 1949), the collapse of anti-Communist regimes in these areas--in the case of Indo-China, an utter debacle for American foreign policy--was met largely with shrugging indifference. (On this issue, see Mueller 1984a, pp. 155-56.)

<sup>7</sup> See Krauss and Greenberger 1985. The lesson of the Cuban albatross seems to have been significant to the Soviets at least as early as 1971. It was the main reason the USSR was unwilling to underwrite Allende's Marxist regime in Chile (Hosmer and Wolfe 1983, p. 42).

<sup>8</sup> "The flood of Laotian and Cambodian refugees into Thailand was a great help to the government's counterinsurgency efforts, says [a Thai General]... 'I used to...tell the people what Communism would bring....After the refugees

Moreover, they find that, after alienating the wealthy west, they are tied to the Soviet Union for whatever niggling support the Soviets can afford. Thus, as Hosmer and Wolfe have observed, Third World states "continue to rely on the West for trade, investments, and technological assistance, areas in which Moscow cannot compete effectively or advantageously with the West" (1983, p. 166). And of course the problem-plagued Soviet Union itself no longer furnishes much of an inspiring model either.

Finally, most of the areas that are truly important to the United States--places like Western Europe and Japan--are in comparatively fine shape and, perhaps in partial consequence, support for Communist parties there seems generally to be on the decline (see Markham 1986).

Few people would assert that Soviet-inspired international Communism (as opposed to the Chinese-inspired version) has become tame or benevolent over the last 10 years. But the experiences of the decade do seem to suggest the movement considerably lacks the effective, infectious revolutionary dynamism posited by containment theory. As Dimitri K. Simes has put it: "The modern Soviet state bears a closer resemblance to a superbly armed Austria-Hungary than to Nazi Germany....Soviet global momentum has declined significantly....The Soviet model of development has lost its appeal for the outside world" (1984, pp. 113, 118, 122).

In sum, these lessons and consequences suggest that the fall of distant lands to Communism is often of no real consequence to the United States. From the view of the 1950s that everywhere is important, it now often seems to some that almost nowhere is important.<sup>9</sup> Areas which seem still to retain some distinct connection to American security include North America, Japan and Western Europe, and, probably for reasons more of sentiment than security, South Korea and Israel. The perceived importance of the Persian Gulf area is likely to be tied to the varying need for oil. The rest of the world is, to a considerable degree, beyond the containment pale.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Reagan administration has discovered that getting Congressional and elite support even for rather inexpensive anti-Communist ventures in an area close to

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came...the people would tell me about the Communists. They had learned'" (Sterba and Lesage 1985, p. 28). Most Grenadians, too, seem to have come to regard their brief brush with Marxist leadership with distaste. See also Sterba 1985.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Ernst B. Haas: "Why commit ourselves to maintaining American influence in the Third World?...Soviet power [in those areas]...will not pose a military threat to the United States...[they] do not necessarily threaten our way of life. Crudely put, my argument says: who cares what happens to Ethiopia, Laos, or El Salvador?" (1983, pp. 113-14). Bruce Porter observes: "What the USSR achieved in the Third World between 1973 and 1980 would have been totally unacceptable to the United States only a few years earlier; two decades earlier it might have led to war." Yet, he notes, "The entry of such weak and poorly developed countries as Angola, Ethiopia, Cambodia, and Afghanistan into the Soviet camp does not amount to more than a minor shift in the global balance" (1984, pp. 242, 238).

<sup>10</sup> Quite odd in historical context, and in retrospect, is President Jimmy Carter's declaration in May 1980 that "Soviet aggression in Afghanistan--unless checked--confronts all the world with the most serious strategic challenge since the cold war began."

home--Central America--is very difficult, and the President has been given to arguing that Communist gains in the area are undesirable in part because they "will send millions of refugees north," hardly the sort of contagion feared by containment theorists.

#### Containment and the future of the Soviet empire

Those who accept containment as a policy should logically alter their position if one of two things occurs: 1. they become convinced that international Communism for one reason or another has changed its threatening ways, or 2. they become convinced that international Communism is insufficiently competent to be effective in the threat it poses. For almost everyone, the first has come true with respect to the Chinese who were quickly embraced by even quite fervent anti-Communists once they retracted their enthusiasm for worldwide revolution (and even before they began to moderate their internal totalitarian ways).<sup>11</sup> And for many, the second may seem to apply to the Soviets. It may also transpire that the Soviets will soon begin to follow the Chinese example.

Consider Mikhail Gorbachev's current dilemma: the Soviet Union now rides herd over a vastly over-extended, and largely useless, world empire, and this, together with such things as massively expensive defense outlays, has caused the USSR to neglect major economic and social problems at home. Gorbachev seems fully aware of this neglect and is working to remedy the problem, though few Soviet specialists expect his reforms to be significantly, or at any rate quickly, successful given the entrenchment of the smug, corrupt, self-serving, nepotistic elite that now dominates that theoretically classless society.

But whatever his changes, Gorbachev desperately needs to free up money to spend on such chronic domestic problems as inadequate housing, deteriorating health care, consumer frustration, economic stagnation, ethnic tension, massive alcoholism. The considerable decline in the price of an important Soviet export, oil, will also help to dramatize the issue. Gorbachev may be hoping to gain some funds by reducing defense expenditures, partly linking this to progress in arms control. This may well prove to be a weak reed, however. Arms control agreements don't have much of a history of reducing overall defense spending, and they tend to take forever to consummate: the non-proliferation treaty of 1968, a very mild measure that was clearly in each sides' best interest, was argued for five years. In fact, given the labor shortage in the USSR, Gorbachev really ought to be emphasizing conventional arms reductions, not nuclear ones. (Soviet preoccupation with America's "Star Wars" defense may also be a misdirection of effort--competition in this labor-light area is likely to have a favorable impact on Soviet development in that it would dramatically increase skills in computer and laser technology, something the country sorely needs.)

Whatever the progress in arms control, it seems conceivable that Gorbachev may soon be tempted to look to another possibility for freeing up money: the gradual downgrading or outright abandonment of portions of the Soviet overseas empire.

As Wolf's study makes clear, over the last 15 years the cost to the Soviet Union of its dependencies around the world has grown enormously. The cost is

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<sup>11</sup> A similar phenomenon occurred after 1948 in American relations with the once intensely ideological Yugoslavia.

now several percent of the Soviet GNP, probably far higher than empires have traditionally cost the home country (insofar as the United States can be said to have a comparable "empire" its cost is less than half of one percent of its GNP, calculates Wolf). The new dependencies have provided little in the way of significant gains for Soviet security. Indeed, most of them--Vietnam, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola, South Yemen, and now perhaps Nicaragua--are, to varying degrees, in political and economic chaos.

The Soviet Union has been willing, even eager, to take on these burdens because it still clings to its ideological affection for worldwide revolution. Economic crisis, however, may now make it clear to the new, younger Soviet leaders that this romantic affection is far too costly, and thus they may be impelled to reduce their revolutionary commitment to lip-service, and to begin to abandon much of their overseas empire. A sensible place to start would be Africa where their pet Marxist regimes are shaky anyway: with little loss, the USSR could reduce its presence there and induce Fidel Castro to do likewise. A partial abandonment of its scrappy, but problem-plagued, ally in Vietnam doesn't seem out of the question, a move which would, in addition, do much to improve Sino-Soviet relations, something that Gorbachev sensibly sees to be of great benefit to the USSR, and this in turn might allow it to reduce the costly burden of war-wariness on the countries' long common frontier.

All this would, of course, take an ideological change within the Soviet Union, and there is no guarantee the Soviets are so tormented by their problems that they will be able to convince themselves to go that far. But other, even more devotedly ideological Communist states have been able to make the change in the past when the pressures were high enough--China in the 1970s, Yugoslavia after 1948. Moreover, the recent deaths of such old-line Soviet ideologues as Suslov may make the change easier. And since the change would be merely theological, many in the Soviet elite ought to see it as thing of beauty--a reform that would pump more money into the system without threatening entrenched privilege. Domestically, ideology has long been heavily flavored by a cynical opportunism, and there has been grumbling about the military and economic wisdom of the farflung empire in some Soviet writings in the last few years. For example, one substantial school of thought in the Soviet Union sees Third World nations as "independent (and often ungrateful) actors in international relations" toward which the USSR should conduct "policy based on a careful cost-benefit analysis rather than on outdated ideology." Another school contends that Soviet ventures in the Third World are simply not "useful" and an actual threat to "international equilibrium and peace" (Valkenier 1983, pp. 148-49).

It is interesting in this regard that in his term of office Gorbachev has had remarkably little to say about the importance of the international Communist movement. Moreover, there are signs already that some commitments are being reduced. In Gorbachev's first year there was "a deliberate policy of reducing lending to Socialist countries and the third world" (Kempe 1986).

Should the Soviets make this change, the arms race might well continue to percolate along irrelevantly, but the cold war would essentially come to an end. In the past when the perceived threat from international Communism has waned, the US has usually been quick to respond favorably. As Secretary of State George Schultz noted in a 1985 speech, the United States soon became accommodating when China and Yugoslavia quietly abandoned their commitment to worldwide revolution, even though their internal systems remained at the time as objectionable as ever. As noted, the United States has opposed the Soviets' "evil empire" (and Hitler's too) not because it was evil, but because

its imperial designs seemed threatening. There might still be bloody Marxist revolutions around the world, but if they have no threatening external referent, these revolutions have little consequence for American security--even now little concern is shown for the Maoist rebellion in Peru because those rebels do not relate to more significant bastions of international Communism (there is no longer a Maoist motherland).

In the somewhat longer range quite a few improvements are possible. With Cuba out of Africa, normalization of Cuban-American relations (returning to a process that was begun under the Ford administration in the mid-1970s) seems quite possible and, judging from his recent statements, would be welcomed by Castro. As a result the substantial cost to the Soviet Union--some \$3 billion per year--of its Cuban albatross might be reduced considerably. In an era of better feeling, the US might work with China to help the USSR extricate itself from its enervating and pointless mess in Afghanistan, and perhaps do it before that unfortunate country and culture have been fully destroyed by the war there.

Finally, in the long term and with substantially reduced tensions, a solution to the Soviet Union's imperial problem in Eastern Europe might become possible--perhaps demilitarization and neutralization of its costly, rebellious, and under-productive dependencies there, and maybe even eventually a similar sort of solution for the problem of the two Germans.

It would be a different world, but a much better one. There are certainly no guarantees that these events will come about, but if Gorbachev is alert to the cues and the opportunities, the logic of the situation suggests things may begin now to move in that direction.

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