

## *A Citizen's Approach to Soviet-American Relations*

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Citizens who are concerned about the danger of nuclear war find it hard to understand why the United States and the Soviet Union are locked into a conflicted relationship.

They ask, Why are the two countries at swords' points with each other? What are the root causes of the tension between them? Why, even if there are serious differences between the two countries, can they not agree to reduce the danger of nuclear war when it is so obviously in the interests of both countries to do so?

Why is it not possible to have a dialogue between the two leaders along the following lines?

### *An Imaginary Dialogue*

Suppose for a moment that the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States were to meet at some future time, and were able to talk to each other like this:

American president: The present situation is insane. Both your country and mine are pouring vast resources into building weapons of destruction. Not only is it costly, and preventing us from using these resources in more constructive ways, but it is dangerous. Each day we move, both of us, toward weapons that are more destructive, and we are both on edge against the possibility of being attacked, and destroyed. Given the fallibility of human beings and of the weapons, the computers that control them, the sources of our information from radar and satellites, and the very brief time we would each have to make crucial decisions, this is a precarious situation to be in. This is not in the interest of your country or of mine. Can't we back away from this dangerous situation?

Soviet leader: I agree with what you say. It makes no sense at all. But as we see it, your country is mainly responsible for this situation. You have taken the lead in developing new weapons. You have an

economy twice the size of ours, and a much more powerful base in new technology. So long as you keep building new weapons, we have to keep up with you.

American president: But as we see it, your country threatens us. We cannot see that your legitimate defense needs justify so many powerful weapons. We are uneasy about your intentions. Your whole way of thinking, your ideology, is rooted in the notion that your system and ours are historically hostile to each other, and that yours will someday emerge as dominant.

Soviet leader: It is true that our systems are different, and that we believe yours has inner contradictions that will cause its collapse. We also fear that you will use force to try to prevent that from happening. We see your government as trying to undermine our system, and to overpower us. But we believe that the differences between our two systems can be left to the judgment of history, and should not be settled in war.

American president: Let us agree that the two systems are different, and that the two countries have different values and different interests. You say that you are prepared to leave this to the judgment of history, but it doesn't appear to us that this is what you are doing. Everywhere, we are in competition. You arm and encourage revolutionary movements . . .

Soviet leader: Your country sends more arms abroad than we do. You have military bases abroad, some of them quite close to us. Don't we have reasons to worry about your intentions?

American president: But even if we aren't able to resolve the competitive relationship between our two countries, could we not at least agree that a nuclear war would be a disaster for all of us, no matter how it started?

Soviet leader: Of course that is so, and it worries us. But you are ahead of us in many kinds of new nuclear weapons, and you keep planning new ones. We will not disarm while you are arming.

American president: We think your country is ahead in some important respects, and we are trying to protect ourselves against any eventualities. But since neither of us can hope to have enough nuclear weapons to attack the other without being destroyed, why can't we reverse this trend, and move toward an equal balance at lower levels?

Soviet leader: It would make sense. We have often proposed it, even the total elimination of all nuclear weapons.

American president: It is too hard to see how we could do that, but let's not let the best be the enemy of the good. Suppose we were each to reduce our total nuclear weapons by some small amount the first year, and more the second year, and so on, until we were down to lower levels. At least we would reverse the trend.

Soviet leader: It would make good sense. But we would worry that your country has the possibilities in reserve to spring new systems on us in a short time.

American president: Well, frankly we don't trust your country

either. We would each have to verify that the other was making the promised reductions. Can you accept that?

Soviet leader: We have always feared that your demands for on-site inspection would be an excuse for intrusive espionage. But we could probably manage to allow inspection of the reductions.

American president: Since the reductions would be small, neither country would be defenseless, and even if we got down to half of our present levels, we would still have more than enough to destroy each other in retaliation against attack. But if we were both moving downward, there would be less incentive to be developing new weapons.

Soviet leader: If we were both moving downward, we would reach a point at which it would be necessary to bring China and France and Britain into the picture.

American president: Indeed we shall have to try to do that, and also to cooperate to reduce the spread of nuclear weapons to other countries.

Soviet leader: That is correct. Let us begin with these small reductions. There would still be many dangers of conflicts; the world would still not be safe, but it would be better.

American president: Yes, perhaps in time as we developed confidence, we could then do something about conventional weapons too. We are worried about your large armies. Even a conventional war could be very destructive.

Soviet leader: That could be a next step. And we would hope that you would also be willing to move toward better trade relations, and toward consulting with us on the Middle East and other regional problems.

American president: That might become possible. But our first priority is to reduce the danger of nuclear war.

### ***What Are the Obstacles?***

Such a dialogue seems farfetched under present circumstances. Why is this so? Can we understand better what are the obstacles, on the American side and on the Soviet side, to a move in this direction? And what can be done about these obstacles?

### ***The American Side***

Popular hostility toward the Soviet Union goes back to the Soviet Revolution in 1917. The revolutionary ideology of Marxism-Leninism, with its expressed aspirations for the worldwide triumph of Communism, aroused deep suspicions and apprehensions. The fear of Communism became a profound motif in American political life, and a point of orientation for American foreign policy. Episodes of attempts at subversion and espionage, Soviet support for revolutionary activity in the world,

and hostile Soviet propaganda predicting the collapse of capitalism, all contributed to these apprehensions.

For most of the seven decades since the Soviet Revolution, relations between the two countries have been bad, with only a few periods of reduced tension and hope for improvement. One such period came in 1934, at the time diplomatic relations was established between the two countries. But the Soviet pledges of noninterference in the domestic life of other countries were not honored. Another such period came during World War II, when the two countries were linked in the "Grand Alliance." But cooperation during the war was limited by Stalin's suspicions, and as the war ended, the Soviet Union began taking over control of Eastern Europe, in violation of its commitment under the Yalta agreement to guarantee representative governments in these countries. Disillusionment about the expectations that our "gallant Allies" would be partners in the postwar settlements intensified the hostility during the Cold War that followed.

During the brief so-called "détente" period, which had its high point during the 1972 visit of President Nixon to Moscow and the signing of the first SALT treaty and other agreements, there were again expectations of a lasting improvement in the relationship, but the two countries had different understandings of what a "détente" relationship meant. Soviet actions in Angola and Ethiopia, exploiting these local conflict situations to extend their influence in Africa, appeared to Americans as a violation of the restraints they expected of the "détente" relationship. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, although by that time not much was left of the "détente," was a final blow to remaining expectations of improved relations. The Soviet military buildup since 1963 enabled the Soviet Union to achieve strategic parity with the United States by about 1970, but it appeared to the United States that the buildup was continued more than could be justified by any defensive purposes. Soviet violations of basic human rights in the treatment of domestic opposition, Soviet impediments to free emigration from the country, and its antireligious policies contributed to strong popular antipathy toward the Soviet Union.

Problems within the United States intensified this antipathy. The aftereffects of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, and the resulting reaction against interventionist policies, deepened the sense of impotence many Americans felt in the face of Soviet actions

in Angola and Ethiopia. So did the hostage situation in Iran, although this was not related to any action by the Soviet Union. These events and more contributed to a hardening of American attitudes toward the Soviet Union, expressed in the election campaign of 1980.

These developments coincided with a conservative swing in American politics, which, although mainly directed at domestic sentiment resentful of the growth of the federal government, combined with a resurgence of nationalism to harden further attitudes toward the Soviet Union, and to discredit any moves toward improved relations with the Soviet Union as appeasement.

Because the United States for most of its history has been an insular country and its people have relatively little knowledge of other political cultures, discussion of foreign policy problems, including relations with the Soviet Union, tends to be conducted in oversimplified terms. Policy alternatives are cast into polarized stereotypes, between "hard" and "soft," between Cold War and *détente*, based upon cartoon images of the Soviet Union and its political life. Little of the knowledge developed by scholars about the complexities of Soviet society have entered into public discussion, or into decision making by the government.

The process by which decisions are made on foreign policy in the United States has also made it more difficult to have a balanced and coherent policy toward the Soviet Union. As a reaction to years in which presidents tended to act on their own in the determination of foreign policy, particularly during the Vietnam War, Congress has become more assertive in this field, but the weakening of the authority of the leadership of Congress and of its committee chairmen has further limited the capability of the government for concerted decision making.

Also, in decision making regarding defense policy, the process has worked against rational decisions in the national interest. Parochial interests have been stronger than any expression of the overall national interest. The individual military services, the economic interests of the weapons industry, and their supporters in Congress concerned about military jobs in their areas have had more influence in decisions about new weapons systems than any overarching articulation of the national interest.

Starting from traditional American attitudes toward military policy, which go back to reliance on the "six-shooter" at one's

hip as the best form of security on the frontier, the disposition of the country has been to believe that security is best assured by having superiority over any adversary. This belief has been slow to take account of the way nuclear weapons and missiles affect international security. The public constituency in support of arms control has been relatively weak, and there has not been strong presidential leadership to strengthen this constituency. This was demonstrated in the failure of the United States to ratify the SALT II treaty. Although there is widespread concern about the danger of nuclear war, this sentiment has not been strong enough or constant enough to be a politically effective force in this country—and it is inhibited by prevalent mistrust of the Soviet Union.

These are some of the obstacles that would have to be overcome before a president of the United States, even if he were so inclined, could feel that he had sufficient popular support to take the kind of initiative described in our imaginary dialogue.

### *The Soviet Side*

What about the obstacles on the Soviet side? The first and most obvious problem is that the Soviet system has not, until now, been able to solve a prolonged succession problem. It has not been able to produce a strong and vigorous central leadership, and the direction of the country has been in the hands of a group of men, most of whom are in their 70s, set in their ways, limited in their perspectives, capable of reacting to events but not capable of decisive initiatives either in domestic or in foreign policy.

Sooner or later, it was inevitable that a younger generation would come to power, but we still cannot predict with confidence that Gorbachev will necessarily be more pragmatic and flexible than the older leaders have been.

The Soviet system has many serious problems, the most pressing of which is the state of the economy. The Soviet economy has been growing, but at a slower and slower rate in recent years, reflecting low productivity in both agriculture and industry. The extreme centralization of the Soviet political system creates bottlenecks and inhibits innovation, and the Soviet Union has been lagging behind other industrial societies in the development of advanced technology. There is active discussion of the reforms that are needed, but the vast bureaucracy resists change. Many party officials fear that economic reforms

may weaken the authority of the party. Labor morale is low and there is widespread corruption and drunkenness. The population is by and large conservative in its resistance to change.

There are other problems. One is the increasing population ratio of the minority nationalities and their pressure for self-expression; the Russian population is becoming a minority in the Soviet Union.

There is widespread dissatisfaction, particularly over economic shortages, but there is no evidence that this approaches revolutionary intensity. In any case, the political police—the KGB—is large and strong and is capable of controlling any expression of opposition to the regime.

Contrary to the widespread impression in the United States that the Soviet Union has been successfully on the march in the world, prospects for Soviet foreign policy are not promising. In Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union faces restiveness in varying degrees, most acutely in Poland, but also in some degree in Hungary, East Germany, Rumania, and even Bulgaria. It has been a drain on Soviet resources to try to prevent economic shortages in Eastern Europe from triggering political and nationalist manifestations. The Soviet Union has not been able to work out its differences with China, and it fears the day when the Chinese will have a large arsenal of nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union has not been able to turn to advantage strains between the United States and Japan or Western Europe, and its influence in the Middle East and in Southern Africa has diminished. Nowhere in the world today do people find inspiration in the Soviet ideology or the Soviet example as a model to follow.

Within the Soviet Union, the Marxist-Leninist ideology has also lost much of its force. Most younger people regard it with cynicism, and are more interested in materialistic personal goals. Some of the ideas of Marxism-Leninism—such as the belief that capitalism is doomed to decay—still have wide acceptance, but for the most part, Soviet actions in the world are determined by its nation-state interests, although ideological language is often used to rationalize these actions after the fact, and ideological slogans and rhetoric are advanced on national holidays.

In historical perspective, the Soviet Union has been going through a period of virile national growth, like that which other European nations experienced in earlier centuries. It has

emerged on the world stage as a superpower, largely by virtue of its great military power and its progress in outer space—and the fact that other European countries were also weakened in two world wars. The Soviet Union seeks for itself recognition as a superpower of equal status with the United States, and it smarts under the indications that its internal weaknesses prevent it from receiving that recognition. It is determined, however, not to be seen as weak, and it reacts strongly to any challenge to its status.

By putting more than an eighth of its annual product into the military sector, the Soviet Union has achieved parity in strategic weapons with the United States, but it now faces serious decisions about whether to increase this military expenditure to match the continuing military buildup of the United States. It can do so, but at the cost of a still further postponement of any hope of building a modern industrial technology, and a further tightening of standards of living. These costs provide an incentive for the Soviet Union to seek serious arms control negotiations with the United States, but Soviet leaders still are not sure the United States is prepared to negotiate seriously.

The Soviets currently perceive the United States as threatening. They see the United States as having enormous military power and the economic and technological capability to increase it still further. They see the worldwide alliances of the United States, with its weapons deployed abroad in many foreign bases, as a source of intimidating pressure, if not worse, and they feel that the United States is currently seeking to undermine the Soviet regime.

On the Soviet side, these are some of the obstacles to a dialogue with the United States such as we have described.

### *How to Reduce the Danger of Nuclear War?*

During the past thirty years each side has, from time to time, groped toward some improvement in relations with the other. These efforts were generally mounted against domestic opposition, and were not fully developed or consistently applied.

Moreover, with the exception of the 1972 period, the moods of the two countries were not synchronous. While one side was prepared at least to explore the possibilities for some improvement in the relationship, the other was still reacting to earlier challenges and was slow to perceive or accept the possibilities of



change when they appeared. In each case, the depth of the resistance to such efforts and their qualified and equivocal character only illustrate the profound obstacles that have to be overcome to change the relationship sufficiently to reduce the danger of war.

Nevertheless, it is a useful exercise to try to clarify our thinking about what minimum changes in behavior would be needed from each side to make possible a more rational management of the nuclear military competition, even while other aspects of their competitive relationship might continue, as it seems probable they will do for some time.

### ***Changes on the Soviet Side***

The first, most obvious, and most important change would have to be a greater exercise of restraint in *military matters*. The Soviet Union would need to be willing to accept a balance of mutual deterrence at lower levels. This would relieve pressures on Soviet economic resources, and might have support from those who maintain that the strengthening of the base of industrial technology is more important than additions to the arsenal. This would mean restraint in the production of new weapons and in the deployment of existing weapons, ranging from intercontinental to short range.

Greater Soviet cooperation would be required in providing for better methods of verification. This would require acceptance by the Soviet Union of some forms of inspection, in ways that would not be so intrusive as to compromise its legitimate security interests. Some move in this direction was made by the Soviet Union during the negotiations on a comprehensive test ban, when it indicated a willingness to accept on its territory "black boxes" containing seismic recorders. Some limitations would also be desirable in its encryption of telemetry from missile tests, so that the United States could be assured of their nonthreatening character.

Many of these steps would be achieved if the Soviet Union and the United States were able to complete negotiations on a comprehensive test ban and on central strategic weapons and theater nuclear weapons. But even in the absence of such agreements, the steps could be taken unilaterally if they were reciprocated by the other side.

Either way, these steps would require an assertion of political control over military decision making, reversing the recent

trend toward a greater degree of autonomy for the Soviet military in the face of the weaker leadership of the Communist Party. These measures therefore presuppose that Gorbachev will have had time to consolidate his authority.

When it comes to *political competition* in the Third World, other measures of restraint would be necessary. It may be that the Soviet Union will have learned from the experience of other imperial countries, and from its own experience, that empires are costly and that foreign colonies do not yield the advantages they may appear to offer. Whatever validity Soviet leaders may have attached to Lenin's theory of imperialism (that the acquisition of colonies stems from the desire for foreign markets and sources of raw materials), modern Soviet leaders may come to recognize that under present conditions of international politics, it is not necessary or even advantageous to acquire political control over foreign countries in order to have access to their markets or their raw materials.

Moreover, the lessons of recent years suggest that military intervention to produce or prevent political change does not lead to productive relations, and cannot substitute for local political support. The United States learned this lesson in Vietnam, and the Soviet Union is currently finding this to be true in Afghanistan.

Doubtless the political competition will continue, but if the risk of escalation from local conflict situations is to be reduced, it will be necessary to work toward at least tacit limits on the levels and means of intervention by the Soviet Union, and by the United States as well, in those conflicts. Efforts in the past to work out codes of conduct across the board have not been successful, since local conditions and the relative intensity of interest of the two sides vary from one area to another, but on a region-by-region basis it should be possible to agree, tacitly if not explicitly, on what levels of weapons and personnel could be accepted by the two sides, within the reasonable bounds of competition, without leading to a dangerous escalation of the conflict.

Since Soviet intervention in Third World conflicts has been justified by reference to the ideological theme of support for National Liberation Movements, this leads to the more fundamental question of how far modifications in the Soviet *ideology* would be required to reduce the danger of war. It seems evident that, whether in its formal ideological declarations or at

least in its tacit operating beliefs, it would be necessary for the Soviet Union to put behind it the commitment to the idea of conflict in some form between differing social systems.

The Soviet Union has clearly moved a long distance from its early commitment to autarky to a substantial involvement in the world economic system. Under Gorbachev there has begun to be acknowledgment that in this interdependent world, the Soviet economy and its fate are inevitably and inextricably bound up with the global economy, and cannot be separated from the concerns of other nations regarding the global environment.

Perhaps the most far-reaching step, and one that may take longer than any other, would be the acceptance by the Soviet Union of its own self-interest in strengthening the *international system*, which it has tended to regard as hostile to its interests. This does not mean accepting the status quo, but it does mean accepting the principle of peaceful change and the avoidance of force in trying to produce or prevent political change. In the long run, it would be necessary for the Soviet Union to come to the recognition that its own security cannot be separated from, or be in opposition to, the international system—that is, to an acceptance of the restraints on national sovereignty required to strengthen the codification of the accepted behavior of nations in the world against the chaos and violence of international anarchy.

There is one final point that needs to be considered. Some writers argue that certain *internal changes* within the Soviet Union are necessary, in the direction of an observance of human rights and the democratization of the society, if war is to be avoided. Changes in this direction are obviously desirable, but the question is whether they are a necessary condition for peaceful relations. The argument that they are necessary rests upon the proposition that Soviet aggressiveness is inherently rooted in the nature of its system, and that its behavior abroad cannot be modified unless the system is fundamentally changed. But in fact Soviet behavior in the world has been much modified over the past thirty years, in response to the external environment. The lesson of this experience should be that such changes can best be induced by a combination of constraints and incentives. If we were to take as our objective the imposition of fundamental changes in the Soviet system, the result would surely be a mobilization of the Soviet Union and a heightening of its repressive practices, to confront a hostile en-

vironment. On the other hand, an environment that is resistant to Soviet expansionism but is nonthreatening and encourages cooperative behavior is more likely to allow forces for change from within to modify repressive practices.

### *Changes on the United States Side*

From the Soviet point of view, the most important requirement of the United States in the *military* sphere is that it should accept the principles of parity and equal security. By this, the Soviets mean that any arms control agreements should not give the United States superiority, or result in any relative disadvantage to the Soviet Union. But they also have in mind that the U.S.S.R. needs a larger military force than does the United States, to deal with other possible adversaries, including China, France, and the United Kingdom, and also to compensate for the possible unreliability of their East European allies.

This argument does not require larger nuclear forces for the Soviet Union than for the United States, if both sides accept the principle of mutual deterrence, since a gross parity of strategic nuclear weapons would serve to deter each of the Soviet Union's possible adversaries, alone or in combination. The Soviet Union's legitimate security needs would be met if the United States were to make clear in its actions, as well as its declaratory policy, that it does not seek to achieve military superiority over the Soviet Union, and that it recognizes that any agreements should not seek to alter the military balance to the disadvantage of the Soviet Union.

The United States would need genuinely to accept the proposition that its security is best protected by a military balance of stable weapons systems at levels as moderate as can be negotiated. This implies an acceptance of mutual deterrence as defining our strategic military requirements, rather than a nuclear war-fighting capability. It also implies that the United States should opt for stable weapons systems (that is, systems that are relatively invulnerable and do not have to be fired quickly lest they be destroyed), thus making it clear that it is not seeking to acquire the capacity to strike first.

Commitments along these lines would mean not only restraint in the production of new weapons systems, but avoiding systems that are destabilizing, such as the powerful MX land-based missile or the so-called "Strategic Defense Initiative," which would involve antisatellite and antiballistic missile sys-

tems based in space. Nor would the United States deploy systems that are difficult to verify, such as the sea-launched cruise missiles that it has now begun to deploy.

As in the case of the Soviet Union, these measures would follow automatically if agreement were reached on a comprehensive test ban, on central strategic weapons and theater nuclear weapons, and if the United States would not undermine or abrogate the antiballistic missile treaty. But even if it were not possible to complete negotiations on those treaties, the measures could be taken unilaterally, subject to reciprocal action on the part of the Soviet Union.

From our review of the obstacles in the United States to movement in these directions, it is evident that such movement would only be possible if there were strong presidential leadership committed to arms control as a central element of our security policy.

With regard to the *political competition* in the Third World, the first requirement for the United States would be that it recognize the local factors involved in Third World upheavals, and not regard the Soviet Union as responsible for all such eruptions. This implies that the United States would not treat all such local conflicts primarily as East-West confrontations, but would seek to deal with the sources of unrest and protest movements with appropriate and constructive attention to local economic and political conditions.

Further, the United States would have to accept for itself, as it would ask of the Soviet Union, restraint against intervention by force to produce or prevent political change in the Third World. The United States would not need to regard as objectionable every increase of Soviet influence, providing that the Soviet Union not threaten areas of vital interest to the United States or that Soviet strength not be of such a magnitude as to threaten the independence of other countries. In other words, "containment" would not be interpreted to mean that the Soviet Union should be prevented from peaceful expansion of its economic or political relations in nonthreatening ways.

It would also follow that the United States would be prepared to observe the tacit or explicitly agreed-on limits on levels and means of intervention in conflicted areas as worked out on a region-by-region basis with the Soviet Union, with the aim of reducing the risk of escalation.

Although our present exercise does not seek the millennial

goal of transforming the Soviet-American relationship altogether, but is limited to the question of what minimum changes of behavior would be necessary to reduce the danger of war, it cannot leave aside the context of their *political relationship*. It has been evident that measures to moderate the military competition are in practice difficult when political tensions are high, although in logic they are more needed at such times. From the Soviet point of view, the minimum condition that would be required to make possible the kind of changes here discussed would be that America not be committed to a confrontationist policy, or to the objective of seeking to undermine the Soviet system.

Finally, if it is the purpose of the United States to persuade the Soviet Union that its self-interest requires acceptance of and support for the *international system*, the United States would need to recognize more clearly than it has done that the strengthening of the international system is also of cardinal importance to U.S. security and interests. This means that we should not be tempted, in our competition with the Soviet Union, to violate international law or to flout the authority of such international institutions as the World Court.

### ***Conclusion***

Are these measures unrealistic?

It is true they would require substantial changes from present attitudes both in the United States and the Soviet Union. But nothing less than these is likely to reverse the present trends that are leading toward confrontation and the danger of war. Compared with the alternative, the steps proposed cannot be regarded as unrealistic.

There are limits on how far the United States can influence Soviet behavior. If the Soviet Union shows a lack of restraint in its military and foreign policies, the United States will have no choice but to protect its interests, firmly but with reasonable proportionality. But it should never cease to make clear that when and if present or future leaders of the Soviet Union see their self-interest in policies of restraint and responsibility, the United States is also prepared through its own restraint and responsibility to accept a less dangerous and more productive relationship.