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9 September 1985

Moscow's View of the Reagan Administration

The Soviets believe President Reagan and his long-time, closest advisors share a conscious, deep-seated hostility to the Soviet Union and would like to turn back the clock of history if they could. They see the President as much more of an ideological warrior than his predecessors; they believe that while the latter also would have liked the USSR to be different, they thought this impossible to bring about, accepted the Soviet Union as a second superpower, accorded it a grudging respect, and pursued policy lines that acknowledged a Soviet role in all aspects of international affairs. President Reagan, the Soviets believe, accords the USSR no such acceptance and, given the opportunity, he more so than his predecessors would act to roll back Soviet gains in recent decades.

The Soviets find ideological confirmation of this view in the President's muscular support of individualism, private enterprise, less government, and what they term "capitalism" at home and "imperialism" abroad.

They regard references to the USSR as the "evil empire" and jokes about declaring the USSR "illegal" and "start the bombing in five minutes" as indicative of deeply held feelings.

They regard US support for insurgents in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, and elsewhere as rejection of the status quo and attempt to reverse Soviet gains in the Third World.

They believe the Administration's commitment to SDI and the other strategic programs it would like to pursue are aimed at outmoding Soviet strategic forces and regaining US strategic superiority for the purpose of dictating political terms to the USSR.

They think the Administration wishes to create political and military pressures that will undermine the Soviet economy enough to make it unable to compete militarily and force internal changes in the Soviet system that would threaten its very nature.

To be sure, the Soviets do not consider the Administration to be threatening war or even seriously raising the risk of it in the foreseeable future, notwithstanding their frequent rhetoric about the "risk of war." They see the Administration as hostile and tough, but not crazy or violent; their vociferous rhetoric results from their having to face rather unexpectedly, in light of their experience in the 1970s, an adversary that rejected assumptions that implicitly accorded the USSR a global role which Moscow had come to take for granted. Nor does Moscow believe the US has the capability to accomplish any of these goals in the foreseeable future. Beyond this, moreover, the Soviets are encouraged by what they consider Administration vulnerabilities:

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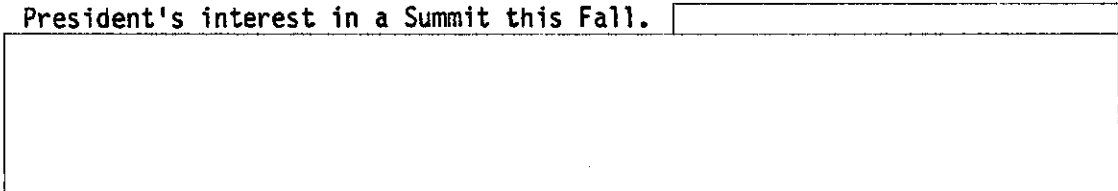
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They believe the US has its own economic problems and that the prevailing high interest rates, budget deficit, and trade deficit could ruin the US economy; and if they do not, it will be at the cost of a lower defense budget and worsened relations with US allies and the Third World.

They believe the American public, pluralist US political system, and the Congress impose severe constraints on the Administration's preferred policies and provide major avenues for Soviet manipulation.

Similarly, Moscow sees the NATO allies and Japan as having concerns and agendas that offer major opportunities to constrain Washington or cause the allies to diverge from Washington to Soviet gain.

The Soviets also may believe the Administration, in its second term, is somewhat more pragmatic and less ideological than it was previously insofar as they perceive US economic problems and domestic and allied pressures for positive developments in US-Soviet relations growing. It is in this light that they understand US willingness to accept last Winter the current framework of the NST discussions at Geneva and the President's interest in a Summit this Fall.



The Soviet leadership nevertheless still fears the steadfastness of the Administration in its positions and the control over US security policy that it does have. Even more important, the Soviets believe the Administration calculates that broadly speaking it has nothing to gain in an atmosphere of greater US-Soviet cooperation and everything to lose. From Moscow's perspective, the Administration prefers an atmosphere charged with hostility, conflict, and tension because this provides an environment more conducive to higher US defense spending, tough anti-Soviet trade policies and greater allied support for them, US political-military diplomacy aimed at curbing Soviet global influence, and tough positions on arms control. To the extent the Administration engages in cooperative diplomacy with the USSR, the Soviets believe, it is the result of domestic and allied pressures. Manipulating and adding to those pressures is, in Moscow's view, the key to managing its America problem.

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If the Soviets can more satisfactorily manage the US during the next several years, they probably believe that the succeeding Administration will not be worse from their point of view, with a fair chance it will be better. The basis for such hope lies in a probable calculation that no likely successor will be more ideological in orientation than President Reagan.

Nevertheless, we have at this point no evidence beyond occasional odd comments that the Soviets are thinking seriously about attempting to wait out the Reagan Administration instead of dealing with it as best they can. Rather the Soviets appear to be feeling considerable pressure from the Administration and seeking relief from it, although they have not yet shown any willingness to make serious accommodations. They still hope to get something for free; if they become convinced they cannot, at that point they will decide whether to offer serious concessions, adopt another cause, or simply try to wait out the Administration and seek to gain unilateral concessions from its successor. The Soviets will regard improved prospects of 1988 Presidential hopefuls less ideologically hostile to the USSR than the President and of Republican losses in the 1986 elections as added pressure on the Administration to compromise its positions before it leaves office.

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