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Replacing nightmares and dreams

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ARE Americans capable of dealing with the Soviet Union in a mature and responsible fashion? For anyone familiar with the record of the last fifteen years since President Richard Nixon went to Moscow for the May 1972 summit, the answer is far from obvious.

Often the dominant thinking in the US about the USSR has been based on ugly nightmares and sweet dreams rather than on a cold-blooded analysis. The nightmares and the dreams were more reflective of the US political mindset of the moment than of Moscow's conduct at home and abroad. In the early '70s, despite numerous warnings from Leonid I. Brezhnev to the effect that détente did not mean the preservation of the international status quo, the conventional wisdom in the US assumed that the ambitious rival superpower could be contained through diplomacy and marginal economic concessions.

And that was not all. After depriving the Nixon and later the Ford administrations of the ability to challenge Soviet expansionism on the ground, Congress, through the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, denied the executive branch the remaining economic leverage to induce Soviet moderation. With carrots and sticks greatly reduced, all the US could do was to preach to the Soviets the virtues of accommodating the American fashions of the day.

It is no wonder that preaching has fallen on deaf ears. What is surprising is how little - not how much - the Kremlin has exploited its US-surrendered global advantage. The Brezhnev leadership had a higher regard for US greatness than many Americans themselves. And fortunately for the US, at precisely the time the USSR reached the peak of its geopolitical influence, the old men in the Kremlin began to lose the talent for effective governance.

Still, American hopes of US-Soviet harmony were so exaggerated that even Moscow's minor transgressions were viewed in the most apocalyptic light. Increasingly influential neo-conservatives were poor in knowledge of Soviet intentions and capacities but rich in imagination. Americans were told that the Soviets believed they could achieve a meaningful victory in a nuclear war. US strategic deterrence was in tremendous jeopardy due to the so-called "window of vulnerability" of US land-based missiles. The Cubans

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were about to conquer Arabia on the Soviets' behalf. And to make things worse, the Red Army had entered Afghanistan for no other reason but to march straight through that landlocked rebellious country to take over the oil riches of the Persian Gulf. In South Africa the Soviets were charged with pursuing the denial strategy to cut off the West from strategic mineral reserves.

As ridiculous as most of these theories sound in retrospect, they had a major impact on initial assumptions the Reagan administration had about relations with the Soviet Union. And now there is a current and present danger that the pendulum will swing again. Just at the time when the Soviet adversary has acquired a new dynamic and assertive leadership, a growing segment of US opinion appears once more ready for euphoria. Granted, Mikhail S. Gorbachev is an impressive leader. And a growing body of evidence suggests that he may indeed be serious about trans-

forming the USSR into a more efficient, prosperous, and even enlightened society. If Gorbachev succeeds - nobody can be sure - the Soviet people may benefit considerably.

But what is there for the United States? Has the Soviet Union reduced its defense spending? Not according to a recent CIA report, suggesting that in fact there was even a slight increase in 1986. Or maybe the USSR has begun disengaging from its costly imperial commitments? On the contrary, the abundance of evidence indicates that, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua, the Kremlin is prepared to do more, not less, in support of its clients. Nor has Moscow stopped vicious anti-American disinformation efforts. Gorbachev's *glasnost* still does not apply to foreign affairs. Recently the Soviet media accused US intelligence agencies of producing the AIDS virus, masterminding the assassination of former Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, and massacring hundreds of members of the People's Temple in Guyana.

There may be interesting opportunities to reach mutually beneficial understandings with Gorbachev. His creativity and courage are important assets in cutting deals when Soviet and US interests overlap. But these opportunities may be destroyed if Americans fall to the temptation to act impulsively and impatiently.

What the US desperately needs at this historic juncture is a strategic review of its policy toward the (new?) USSR. What Americans get from both the administration and Congress are a series of disjointed, ad hoc decisions devoid of vision and coherence. The right is battling hard to block any agreement with the Russians. The increasingly self-confident left is equally determined to find an escape from global responsibilities.

Will history be allowed to repeat itself?

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