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OPINION

Getting on with Gorbachev

By Dimitri K. Simes

IT is important for the United States to start on the right foot with the new Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev. Of course, initially at least, his personal imprint is going to be limited. The new general secretary will be no more than the first among equals on the Politburo where the Old Guard maintains considerable power. Yet Mr. Gorbachev has an opportunity to consolidate his position rather quickly.

With Konstantin U. Chernenko's death, the Politburo has shrunk to 10 members. Several vacancies on this top executive-legislative committee of the Soviet system will have to be filled in the near future. For instance, with the exception of Gorbachev, there is only one member of the key Party Central Committee Secretariat — Grigory V. Romanov — who has a seat on the Politburo. One or two more Central Committee secretaries will have to be added soon. Also, five out of 10 Politburo members are in their seventies. Prime Minister Nikolai A. Tikhonov is 79, Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko is 76. To put the Politburo age factor into perspective, one should take into account that the average longevity of Soviet males is currently just around 62 years. Accordingly, several departures from the ranks of the leadership can be easily anticipated. Finally, the Party Congress is scheduled to convene before the end of this year. And party congresses are traditionally used by the leadership to make personnel changes.

Chances are that at first Gorbachev will have to be careful to consult others in determining additions to the Politburo. But the general secretary's job is uniquely positioned both institutionally and symbolically to allow an accumulation of personal power. Literally in a matter of months, the balance in the Politburo may shift to Gorbachev's advantage, giving him a relatively free hand in making new top appointments. No outsider can predict whether the new leader will move fast to exploit the opportunity to pack the Politburo with his allies and clients. But the opportunity is there and has to be considered by American policymakers.

What can and should the Reagan administration do to impress Mr. Gorbachev with the seriousness of the US intent in seeking a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union? The first thing to do is to avoid ill-conceived gestures which only create confusion and false expectations on both sides. The President's instinct not to attend the Chernenko funeral was correct. He neither knew the man personally nor enjoyed a warm relationship with him. And Chernenko was not a political

giant whose funeral was a must to attend. More importantly, Reagan's encounter with Gorbachev would have to be brief and primarily ceremonial. Nothing of substance could be realistically accomplished.

Instead, the Soviets would be guessing what the President was up to. They would undoubtedly be pleased that the anti-Communist President felt obliged to contribute to the prestige of their regime by paying a visit. Except, being unsentimental and suspicious, they would probably fear that his motive was not to have an opening with the Kremlin but rather, by appearing in a peacenik's mantle, to more effectively sell the MX missile to the US Congress and "star wars" to the West Europeans. Moreover, scores of congressmen and hundreds of media people, feeling obliged to accompany the President would find themselves with little to do in Moscow. Some would go to visit dissidents and Jewish activists, only to be roughed up by Soviet police and security agents. Mutual recriminations would inevitably follow.

No unilateral US concessions to Gorbachev are in order. If he is interested in improving US-Soviet relations there is plenty he can do without surrendering any of the Kremlin's important interests. Engaging in serious negotiations under UN auspices regarding terms of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan could be one encouraging

signal. Releasing Anatoly Shcharansky could be another. But as long as Gorbachev continues the foreign and internal policies of his predecessors which the US found offensive, there is no reason for the Reagan administration to rush toward accommodating him.

There is no need for a major reassessment of the US policy toward the Soviet regime simply because there is a new more vigorous and impressive party leader in Moscow. On the other hand, precisely because the new general Secretary can become both a more formidable rival and a more promising partner, it makes sense to improve the conduct of the administration's Soviet diplomacy and to make sure that Gorbachev clearly understands where the United States stands vis-à-vis his country.

The arms control talks, which started in Geneva last week, provide one important format for communication with the new leader. There are two arms control steps the administration should consider. First, it is time to stop

exuberant rhetoric about the great potential of the Strategic Defense Initiative. Nobody knows exactly what SDI technologies will evolve in the course of the research and development effort. A consensus exists in the US and among the allies that research should continue. Anyway, there is no way that limits on research could be verified through any feasible form of inspection. But the way the President and some of his associates talk about making nuclear weapons obsolete goes considerably beyond the scope of what is being done in practice. Mr. Reagan

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is entitled to his vision of switching from deterrence to an impenetrable defense against everything nuclear. But the gap between what the administration actually does about "star wars" and its pronouncements is counterproductive. It needlessly provokes the Russians, confuses the West Europeans, and creates fertile ground for all kinds of Soviet peace offensives. Nothing would be sacrificed by adopting a more modest and businesslike tone in discussion of the strategic defense options.

Second, the administration should do its best to negotiate an extension of the SALT II treaty which expires on Dec. 31. If the treaty is allowed to lapse, the whole arms control regime is likely to disintegrate, intensifying the nuclear competition and superpower animosity. The US delegation may offer Moscow a trade-off — the extension should be coupled with an amendment allowing the deployment of the second mobile ICBM. Only one is currently permissible. Such an amendment would give a green light to the Midgetman missiles on the American side and would eliminate the controversy regarding the new Soviet SSX-25 missiles. The US claims this missile violates SALT II provisions, while the USSR argues that it is no more than a modernized model of the earlier SS-13. An attempt should also be made to reach some compromise regarding the new Soviet radar currently under construction in the proximity of Krasnoyarsk in Eastern Siberia. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger tells anyone willing to listen that this radar represents a vicious and militarily meaningful violation of the 1972 ABM treaty. A number of CIA experts, however, disagree on both counts. The issue has to be raised with the Soviet delegation. Surely, with some ingenuity, a formula can be found which, without forcing the Soviet Union to stop the construction, will include modifications in the design acceptable to the American side.

Caution in selling the SDI and flexibility on extending SALT II will not require a single substantive concession to the Soviets. On the contrary, by demonstrating good faith on arms control, the administration will be better placed in getting appropriations for strategic programs, some crucial in their own right and some useful as a bargaining chip in Geneva. And arms control talks with Gorbachev would start on a positive note contributing to an overall stabilization of the US-Soviet relationship.

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