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NOTES FOR PRESENTATION TO THE DPB, 14 July 1988
 "Gorbachev's USSR for the US Defense Planner"

Disarming self-criticism from the Soviets; but who will be disarmed?

Defense planner must take the long view. Russia beginning another period of reform, one of many going back to Middle Ages. Political drama is real even though largely rhetorical, so far. Past pattern has been eventual counterreform, preservation of a system that is autocratic, xenophobic, backward but powerful enough to threaten. Not yet clear what will emerge. Can't know for years. Must remember that Western patterns of decent society rooted in culture going back to Roman Empire. Russia missed all this; cannot recreate in a generation.

Meanwhile, West must preserve strategic/institutional structures for defense (e.g., TRIAD, bases, NATO), while getting sensible deals on security issues. Structures can last, deals may not. Soviet policy aims at dismantling "Cold War" structures that secured the West, claiming that only by doing so can Russia finally, really reform. For us to go along means gambling on an internal and external liberalization without precedent in Russian history.

Who is Gorbachev?

Enigmatic mixture of visionary and machiavellian, like Khrushchev. Knows system is really sick, but has incentive to exaggerate this. Seeks more just, democratic, tolerant society within Leninist one-party system, above all more productive and efficient. Believes collectivist ideal of Russian peasant culture, but "modernized". Can't be too sure what is conviction and what is ploy. Stalin and Khrushchev used visions to get power.

Some unsavory features: Long-time apparatchik, no reformist before 1985 (unlike many of his supporters), authoritarian personality, Russian nationalism underneath, contempt for Western leaders. Some dissidents asking whether Gorbachev really stayed "clean" during years of stagnation and corruption; the KGB knows.

Clearly focused on competing with the US and West.

Truly liberal and humane intelligentsia (e.g., Sakharov) bets on Gorbachev. Small minority. Now have a voice, but little power. Being used by Gorbachev. Will they be betrayed as before?

Reform and the Power Struggle

In Soviet Russian conditions, reform requires draconian power at the top. Brezhnev let power erode out of the Kremlin; Gorbachev needs to get it back. Radicalizing agenda and mobilizing popular pressures to legitimize assault on the bureaucracy is his strategy to become a good, but fearsome tsar (not the first to use this strategy).

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Watch power struggle. New phase: "all power to the Soviets". Transparent power grab, end-run of apparatus. Also need to show toughness toward troublemakers (e.g., in Armenia). Until power consolidated and apparatus purged, Gorbachev can offer little except rhetoric, plans, and media excitement. He needs to neutralize Ligachev and put his man over the KGB. Yeltsin and Andreyeva cases showed his vulnerability and also ability to bounce back. But he has a program, the initiative, and the power of the General Secretaryship.

Reform and the Economy

No significant results yet, except trouble. Some early boon to consumers is clearly needed. Prognosis unclear. No communist system yet has conclusively reformed; jury still out on China. Most of population has bad attitudes: Cynicism, rob the state, resentment of neighbor's wealth, resentment of power but fear of disorder, ethnic hostility, conservatism of partocracy. Free the farmer less viable option than in China; Stalin killed all the farmers. Real reform means redistribution of economic power and, eventually, political power; inevitable challenge to the system. Thus, awful obstacles to real reform.

Only safe assumption for defense planner however: Some increase in efficiency/productivity is possible while system is preserved. USSR will become a more effective competitor within lifetime of major US defense programs. Alternative of sharply weakened USSR is possible (through protracted internal crisis or social revolt), but don't count on it. Old saying: "Russia is never as strong or as weak as she looks."

Foreign Policy: "New Thinking" for Old Goals

Gorbachev very successful in creating new image, deflating threats. Accepts adversaries' agenda, but turns it effectively against him (like JiuJitsu). Better tactics, rhetoric, propaganda. Implicit revision of ideology toward compromise. Clear objective of avoiding "shocks" that have derailed detente in the past; hence focus on "dangerous military activities." Substantial but not yet permanent returns already.

Reality "on the ground" shows much continuity in objectives, priorities, even inhibitions of Soviet foreign policy; its architecture.

Acceptance as superpower. Access to technology and capital via detente. The syllogism of "peace = arms control" toward the West. If arms control flags, USSR has no foreign policy toward the West.

Toward Europe, mainly the peace theme. "Common home" hasn't yet translated into new geopolitical line, new German policy, or willingness to let East Europe go.

Third World policy still rests on arms transfers and Leninist clients, but increasing emphasis on "normal" relations with major countries. Open to settlements, but preserving clients where feasible. Reluctant about new commitments, but no real test yet. (Maybe in Philippines?)

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Seeks detente with China, as did Brezhnev, but more flexibly. (China more flexible because of self-confidence and Western strength, not sentimental about Gorbachev.)

Troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and INF Treaty often cited as dramatic harbingers of major foreign policy change. Dramatic developments in themselves; but not clear what they are harbingers of. Imaginative, pragmatic responses to defeats of prior policies. Soviets likely to continue contesting for power in troubled Afghanistan; may prove more reluctant to ditch other Leninist clients unless they absolutely have to. INF agreement could prove part of a new strategic stability, or part of adjusted strategic architecture giving USSR more usable military preponderance in Eurasia.

Many Soviet inhibitions remain intact: German division, East Europe, Japan's islands, relations with Israel. May see some give on latter soon; Middle East will be an early test of "architectural change". But foreign policy shifts on scale seen in 1922 (Rapallo), 1935 (Popular Front), 1939 (Hitler-Stalin Pact), or 1954-55 (Khrushchev's New Look) not yet seen.

Should not rule out more fundamental, positive change of Soviet policy. But expect little change in basic aim of post-war policy: Get US out and USSR into dominant position on periphery of Eurasia. Dismantling the Cold War structures will do this, unless USSR collapses or truly liberalizes or Europe and Japan become strong military guarantors...none of these likely.

Military Strategy and Arms Control: A New Strategic Architecture?

Politically serious debates going on.

Constrain military for economic revival and military modernization in long term.

Civilian academics seeking self-limiting slogans to promote this internally, and appeal to the West: "reasonable sufficiency" and "defensive defense". Military OK appeal to West, but fear internal impact, loss of their influence.

Perhaps most important shift predates Gorbachev: Marginal but significant shift of emphasis from nuclear to advanced conventional arms (Ogarkov). Conventional the usable, cutting edge, but expensive. Nuclear still needed for pre- and intra-war deterrence and politically. New combination more effective.

Arms control politics, process, agreements can help implement all aspects. More predictable future, more relaxed West. Discredit US nuclear guarantees; block most revolutionary US technological options (e.g., SDI, CDI).

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But what outcome: A benign alternative is plausible (and energetically advertized). More threatening alternative also plausible: Continued Soviet conventional dominance (based less on active forces, more on mobilization base, geography), robust if reduced nuclear forces (at some lower levels, "superiority" may again become possible), plus erosion of NATO defenses/cohesion.

Conclusion

Unless USSR falls into debilitating crisis, expect clearly more formidable foreign policy challenge throughout the Gorbachev era and probably enough economic/technical progress to keep USSR as militarily credible as it has been since World War II. All against the backdrop of efforts to reform and take away image of threat. Western steadiness is key variable in maximizing prospect of good outcome, avoiding profound East-West instabilities.

How do we keep the strategic and institutional structures of defense intact? Need not deny some real change already, possibility of more. But reminders about history and focus on long-term uncertainties are vital. Have to be extremely wary about the political and psychological impact of detente atmospherics. Russia does not have to become Number One militarily, technologically, economically to pose clear and present danger to the West, especially if latter is disorganized and off guard. Very real prospect of instability in the Soviet empire is a danger and case for vigilance.

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