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The Soviet Union: Ejected From Europe, Rejected in Asia

Henry Trofimenko, chief analyst at the Institute of USA and Canada Studies, spoke on January 31, 1991 at the Harriman Institute on the topic of "The Soviet Union: Ejected From Europe, Rejected in Asia." His talk focused on the evolution of the Soviet "new thinking" on foreign policy and international relations, how the Soviet Union has been influential in the creation of the new international order, and what its future role in this new order will be.

Driving Wedges

Gorbachev's initial forays in foreign policy were influenced by the policies he inherited from his predecessors. At first, Gorbachev shared Yuri Andropov's belief that Soviet policy in Europe could be conducted by excluding the US from any meaningful role in Soviet designs for the "common European home." In the West, this was interpreted as yet another attempt by the Soviets to drive a wedge between the Europeans and the United States. The reality, according to Trofimenko, was quite different: the Soviets were driving a wedge between themselves and the Europeans. The effect of Soviet policies was to drive the Europeans into the arms of the United States. Soon, however, Gorbachev realized that to have good relations with the Europeans, he must first establish good relations with the US. Also in need of much repair was the Soviet relationship with its Eastern European allies. As Trofimenko noted, for many Soviet policy-makers, "Eastern Europe was us, Eastern Europe was ours . . . we might consult with them, but Europe was what was beyond the Oder-Neisse line."

The confusion and ambiguity surrounding the first few years of Gorbachev's foreign policy can be seen in the conflicting signals sent out by the February 1986 Twenty-Seventh Party Congress. According to one story Trofimenko heard, "when Reagan read Gorbachev's report to the Congress on capitalism, in which he quoted Marx in saying that 'the capitalists like to drink from the skulls of their children' Reagan hit the ceiling." Nevertheless, at the same Congress

many new ideas and changes appeared in the CPSU's approach to foreign policy. Most prominent among these was the new Soviet definition of security. Before the congress, the conventional Soviet definition of *bezopasnost'* was the "prevention of danger," achieved through building up one's military strength. Gorbachev, however, developed a new meaning: "lack of danger," which could be achieved through political means. In effect, "if you act differently, you could change the environment . . . and you would not have to invest a lot of money into the military buildup." Other innovations soon followed: the switch to a strategy of reasonable sufficiency in defense, and the primacy of "universal human values," which renounced the class approach to international relations.

The Reykjavik summit in October, 1986, was an important turning point in Gorbachev's thinking. After the summit, Gorbachev abandoned what Trofimenko called his "gorilla tactics," because "He seemed to be understanding Reagan better, . . . They could not press the US into concessions through force or strength, and they would have to be more flexible." After Reykjavik, Gorbachev decided that the arms control must be dealt with on an issue-by-issue basis. The tangible result of this change of policy was the successful conclusion of the INF treaty, which in addition to being the first treaty to eliminate an entire class of nuclear weapons, also contained unprecedented measures for the inspection and monitoring of nuclear weapons on Soviet territory.

The INF treaty began the process of changing European attitudes towards the Soviet Union. For many skeptics, the true test of Gorbachev's foreign policy was his handling of the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe, and, according to Trofimenko, the Soviet Union "passed the test." Although the events in Eastern Europe "took us [the Soviets] unawares . . . Gorbachev had the guts not to interfere." Trofimenko underlined the importance of the generational change in leadership that had occurred in the Soviet Union, for, "had the Soviet marshals of the World War II period not passed from the scene, the Soviet Union would not have accepted German



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unity so easily." In the long run, although the Soviets could postpone the drive for unification, they could not block it indefinitely, and this would only have made German-Soviet relations more difficult in the end.

Ejected from Europe?

Is the Soviet Union being ejected from Europe? To many, the most obvious threat comes from the Common Market. Trofimenko noted that European economic integration has the potential to supplant the former military division of Europe with a new economic division. Also visible is the strong desire among right-wing circles in the United States to move the borders of Europe to the western borders of the Soviet Union, thereby leaving the Soviet Union as some sort of Asiatic power.

Is the Soviet Union contributing to its rejection from Europe? Trofimenko believes so. Part of the problem is the perennial Russian/Soviet desire to punish those who do not agree with them. This punishment takes various forms, for example, asking former trading partners to pay for oil in hard currency, or postponing the withdrawal of Soviet troops from a given country. In the end, however, only a reformed Soviet Union can be a part of the new Europe, in order to be politically and economically compatible with the rest of the continent. The need for reform manifests itself most profoundly in the situation in the Baltic republics. "We treat them as if they are aliens, and not our own people. When Moscow is trying to communicate with the Balts by spreading leaflets from helicopters, then it is an alien country. You deal with Iraq in this way."

Trofimenko claims that, just as the Soviet Union needs Europe, there cannot be a new Europe without the Soviet Union. Culturally and philosophically, it is an integral part of Europe. Moreover, Trofimenko feels that if the Soviet Union were ejected from Europe, the same fate would soon befall the United States, as the economic power of Europe came into conflict with American interests. He sees the prevention of this danger as a common interest of the US and the Soviet Union.

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Rejected in Asia?

Asia is more important for Mikhail Gorbachev than it was for any of his predecessors. Soviet policy in Asia was plagued by the same combination of inflexibility and inertia that marked Soviet policy in Europe. The Soviets had created what Trofimenko called many "built-in obstacles" for their Asian policy over the years: the huge troop buildup along the Chinese border, the Soviet occupation of the Japanese northern territories, the Afghan invasion. Though Gorbachev has achieved much during his tenure, such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Sino-Soviet rapprochement, and the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, future Soviet policy is limited by several factors. Politically, Trofimenko believes there will be no quick resolution to issues such as the northern territories dispute because Gorbachev's freedom to maneuver has been drastically reduced. Hard-liners feel that Gorbachev has already given up too much by withdrawing from Eastern Europe, making further concessions by Gorbachev more difficult. Economically, the Soviets are a "very poor player," and are in desperate need for foreign assistance to develop their far-eastern provinces. The proposed free economic zones at this point are more a dream than a reality.

Interests versus Commitments

As a result of their difficulties, Trofimenko noted that the Soviets have decided "to put our national interests ahead of our commitments." For example, the Soviet Union for many years refused to deal with South Korea out of deference to its northern communist counterpart. Now, out of a combination of greater realism and the need to obtain economic assistance, the Soviets recently established relations with the South. Nevertheless, Soviet options and capabilities in Asia are limited. While Soviet participation in determining future security arrangements prevent them from being "rejected in Asia," they have neither the economic nor the political wherewithal to play a vigorous role in the area.

—Reported by Gordon N. Bardos

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