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International Leverage on Soviet Domestic Change

"The conventional wisdom is that the domestic changes that Gorbachev is trying to put through in the Soviet Union today would be healthy for Western security if they succeeded. However, conventional wisdom also holds that there is nothing that the West can do to increase the likelihood that those reforms can succeed," says Professor Jack Snyder. He adds that the first statement is right but that the second is probably wrong. "Gorbachev is carrying out domestic political reforms that are aiming to curtail the power of party ideological institutions and military institutions, which have been some of the main contributors to Soviet expansionism during the post-war period. It's wrong to think that the international community can have no effect on Gorbachev's success or failure in these endeavors."

Snyder, Associate Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, spoke to students and faculty of the Harriman Institute at a lunch-time seminar November 15, 1988. He backed up his contention that "the international environment has had an effect" by looking at evidence from the historic great powers, from Soviet history, and from the USSR today.

Historical Cases

History shows many cases where "the international system has been absolutely decisive for the fate of domestic political coalitions and institutions," most notably in negative situations. For instance, the international depression of 1873 redirected the development of Bismarck's Germany, which had been moving toward a free-trade coalition but suddenly switched to the "iron and rye" economy which later led to militarism. Similarly, both Weimar Germany and Japan were becoming more amenable to the West in the 1920s; open trade gave incentives to Japanese industrialists to democratize their country and cooperate with foreigners. But as the Great Depression cut off of their markets in the 1930s, they became hostile and militaristic.

Snyder also argued that "the international system has had a crucial effect in shaping Soviet domestic politics." For instance, Western intervention in the Russian Civil War against the Bolsheviks became an important factor in "war communism," which then greatly influenced the development of Soviet domestic institutions. The NEP, or New Economic Policy of the 1920s, is another example. "NEP happened when the international intervention ceased and when Britain switched from a strategy of blockade to a policy of promoting trade and economic ties with the new Soviet state." The Bolsheviks implemented the policy primarily for domestic reasons, but "there are some authorities who maintain that part of the NEP idea hinged on arguments in favor of joint ventures." The end of NEP was also related to international developments, "corresponding with a war scare in 1927" when the Soviets decided on a program of quick industrialization.

After 1945, American policies weighed into factional debates in the Soviet Union. Snyder claimed that "a hard-line Western policy discredits whomever is in power in the Soviet Union at the moment," be they hawks or doves. For example, after Stalin's death, the conciliatory line of Malenkov displayed a willingness for a "détente." But the hard-line "massive retaliation" speech of U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles contributed to the downfall of Malenkov and the rise of Nikita Khrushchev.

The "Leaner But Meaner" Myth

In terms of recent history, the buildup of American forces in the late 1970s and early 1980s may have discredited the policies of hard-liners like Brezhnev and Andropov. "My hypothesis is that America's waving the big stick did help Gorbachev come to power, but that continuing to wave the big stick will discredit Gorbachev if we don't switch to another strategy." A conciliatory line, meanwhile, has favorable results if the Soviets support détente "in the



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interest of mutual security," as Gorbachev seems to do, unlike earlier Soviet proponents of a one-sided détente.

One school of thought popular in the West holds that Gorbachev's reforms will make the USSR more capable but no less hostile — "leaner but meaner." If so, the West would have no reason to promote Gorbachev's domestic success. But Snyder cautioned that "a hard-line Western policy aimed at discrediting the Gorbachev domestic reforms will act as a self-fulfilling prophecy," creating a coalition favoring the "leaner, meaner" approach. He pointed to a recent essay by Matthew Evangelista in *The Harriman Institute Forum* which argued that such a coalition between civilian and military reformers has not yet emerged. But "if Western actions serve to discredit Gorbachev's concept of mutual security, then Soviet civilian reformers may resort to a second-best approach to reform," that is, the "leaner, meaner" approach advanced by some military officials, which will be less advantageous for the West.

Gorbachev "believes that détente with the West can be achieved not by overawing us with Soviet power, but in fact the opposite, by convincing the West that the Soviet Union is not threatening." But first he must "break the power" of entrenched Soviet institutions, namely party ideologues and the military. Otherwise, they will snap back and reinstall a new form of Brezhnevism, perhaps guided by a Politburo member like Yegor Ligachev. "In order to succeed, Gorbachev's reforms will have to knock down not only Ligachev personally, but the kinds of institutions that will keep throwing up more Ligachevs as a kind of hydra-headed opposition."

Reining in the Military

The current debate in the Soviet Union about what kind of defense is needed by the USSR — the "reasonable sufficiency" promoted by many civilian defense intellectuals or the "defensive sufficiency" demanded by the military — is a telling conflict. "Civilian control over the military in terms of operational doctrine and strategy has been exceedingly weak," and unless it becomes firmer, new thinking such as "reasonable sufficiency" will not take root. "Part of the problem," Snyder noted, "is that there has never been a strong institutional base for defense analysis by civilians in the Soviet system. There's no Rand Corporation, no Brookings, no National Security Council... and the Soviets are acutely aware of this."

Snyder concluded by emphasizing that the West has a real stake in supporting the Gorbachevites since "there is no coalition between civilian reformers and military reformers with the eventual goal of creating a leaner, meaner Soviet Union. Civilian reformers have an agenda which is antithetical to most of what the military is currently saying and has traditionally wanted." Now is a propitious time for the West to reciprocate Gorbachev's concessions and strengthen his current political coalition, and to head off the "leaner, meaner" approach which may emerge in a few years if international conditions are not as favorable. Snyder warned that "more NATO high-tech threats will not promote civilian control over the military in the Soviet Union — quite the reverse."

Reported by Paul Lerner

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