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The Soviet Union and the United Nations

What is the significance of the bold new Soviet initiatives concerning the United Nations, and how should the United States respond to them? Dr. Richard Gardner, the Henry L. Moses Professor of Law and International Organization at Columbia University Law School, spoke to students and faculty of the Harriman Institute March 23 about this neglected, yet vital topic in US-Soviet relations. Gardner is currently participating in a joint US-Soviet working group (under the auspices of the UN Association of the United States, and the Soviet UN association) to examine proposals for enhancing the effectiveness of the United Nations and international organizations. The result, to be completed in 1989, will be a statement entitled "The Role of the United Nations System in the 1990s." Gardner emphasized that his academic area of concentration is not the USSR, and that his perspective on this issue was that of a specialist in international law and international organization.

Extraordinary Proposals

For Gardner, the point of departure in evaluating the Soviet Union's position on this issue is an article by General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev that appeared in *Pravda* September 17, 1987. The article contains a "most extraordinary list of proposals" concerning the UN. Some of the highlights include suggestions to enhance the role of the UN Secretary-General in preventive diplomacy, the greater use of peacekeeping forces in regional conflicts, mandatory acceptance of the decisions of the International Court of Justice, a global strategy for environmental protection, and negotiations to bring national laws into conformity with international human rights standards.

Gardner compares these statements to the fundamentally opposite ones of previous Soviet leaders. For example, when serving in the Kennedy Administration in 1961, Gardner remembers that the "Soviets were at war with the Office of the Secretary-General and were opposed to the independent initiatives that Dag Hammarskjöld had taken."

Similarly, from conversations with Soviet jurists in the past thirty years, Gardner remembers that "Russians never would consider any thought of third-party arbitration of bilateral disputes."

In addition to the proposals, Gardner noted how the "rhetoric" has changed in writings and public statements by Soviet officials. But are these initiatives to be taken seriously? And if so, are they indicators of a conceptual shift in Soviet foreign policy? Gardner doesn't pretend to have the definitive answer. He is soliciting interpretations of the "new thinking" which is currently appearing in speeches and writings of Soviet leaders. He said to his audience, "even as a rhetorical matter, does this represent, marginally at least, something new, or can you find it in their speeches of the last thirty years?"

Variety of Explanations

Gardner outlined a range of interpretations of why Gorbachev has made these public overtures. The most skeptical view is that "this is pure propaganda" — Gorbachev is a "master at manipulating Western public opinion" and he is seeking to exploit the current cleavage between the US and international organizations. Gardner pointed out that in recent years the US has ignored World Court decisions, "torpedoed" the Law of the Sea negotiations, and will owe \$400 million to the UN by January 1989. If this amount is not paid, the US faces the prospect of losing its vote in the General Assembly and other UN organs. Hence, "here is a wonderful opportunity for the Soviets to make us look bad."

A second explanation holds that "Gorbachev needs twenty years or more to deal with a sick Soviet economy, to carry out his *perestroika*." He needs a significant period of external stability to complement this concentration on the domestic agenda. Therefore, he is using international institutions as a "face-saving cover to extricate the Soviet Union from overextended positions, such as Afghanistan." A variant of this explanation sees participation in multi-lateral organizations as an active support mechanism for



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Gorbachev's economic reforms. Gorbachev could argue that it is imperative for the USSR as a superpower to participate in global institutions. But a "basic precondition for USSR's acceptance into the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, would be a fundamental change in their economy." Thus, in the struggle against domestic opposition, Gorbachev could claim that *perestroika* is a prerequisite for maintaining its superpower status.

A third interpretation is that "Gorbachev has recognized that the Soviet Union is a military superpower, but politically it has become a pygmy on the world scene." Gardner pointed out that the "Soviets have been frozen out of the diplomatic action in numerous instances, for example, the Middle East." Gorbachev wants his country to "become a major player in diplomacy." If the UN were to play a major role in regional conflicts around the world, it would guarantee the Soviets "a place at the table with full equality."

The final and most optimistic possibility is that "something profound has happened; the new Soviet leaders have really adopted a new philosophy of international relations." The conceptual shift would include the replacement of international class warfare with global interdependence. Moreover, it would mean that they have abandoned the idea of expanding the Soviet system by force. Instead, they would "want to use international organizations to promote cooperation and peace in the world." Gardner said it was premature to assume that this last possibility was likely.

Improving Relations

Throughout his presentation, Gardner noted that despite our inclination to welcome this change in Soviet attitudes, the implementation of these cooperative measures might run counter to American interests. For instance, a

larger role for the United Nations in the Middle East conflict might impinge on the US, which has been the predominant power broker in the region. Currently, "there is a dispute among policy-makers whether we should put pressure on Israel to agree to an international conference" to resolve the numerous conflicts in the area. This move would require the US to accept the Soviet Union as an equal partner in the Middle East.

The discussion topics for the joint US-USSR working group correspond roughly to many of the suggestions in Gorbachev's *Pravda* article. For example, they will consider an "enhanced role" of the Secretary-General in preventive diplomacy. Specifically, this pertains to the role of the new Office for Research and Collection of Information, which "for the first time in thirty years gives the Secretary-General some eyes and ears." (The office is to function as a trouble-shooter, seeking out potential hot-spots around the world and reporting them directly to the Secretary-General.) The working group will also examine the possible installation of a "hotline between the leaders of the five permanent members of the Security Council and the Secretary-General." This instant communications network would facilitate crisis management.

Gardner believes that if Soviet-American relations are to enter a new phase in which both superpowers would refrain from intervening in other nations, then "the United Nations will have a crucial role to play" in maintaining this "live and let live" policy. There is currently no viable process to resolve global disputes; what is needed is an "international agency that can patrol borders, supervise elections, and verify compliance with non-intervention norms." For Gardner, this sort of dispute-resolution system is "the heart of the matter" and, in his dialogue with the Soviets in the working group, he will try to gauge their attitudes toward this concept.

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