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## U.S. Policy Toward the U.S.S.R. During the Reagan Administration

It takes two to tango, as the old adage goes, and the transformation of U.S.-Soviet relations in the 1980s bears this out. On 28 January 1992, the Honorable Jack Matlock, former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union and currently a senior visiting scholar at the Harriman Institute, discussed the changes in U.S.-Soviet relations during the Reagan Administration. According to Matlock, in actuality two separate changes occurred during this period: the first concerned the development of the Reagan administration's policy toward the U.S.S.R., and the second the emergence of a Soviet leadership willing and able to engage the U.S. in substantive dialogue.

Upon assuming office in January 1981, Ronald Reagan was convinced that the U.S. position was too weak to begin immediate negotiations with the Soviets; hence, the U.S. military buildup was intended not only to match the Soviet buildup of the previous decade, but also, in Reagan's eyes, to give him "some chips to put on the table when he decided to start negotiating." By 1983, Reagan decided that the time had come. Matlock's first personal involvement with the administration's policy came in 1983, when he was recalled from his position as Ambassador to Czechoslovakia and placed in charge of formulating a new U.S. policy toward the U.S.S.R.

The new U.S. policy was meant to correct what Matlock called "structural errors" that had plagued previous policymaking. Certain priorities, such as arms control, dominated the U.S. agenda. The problem with this approach was that the U.S. was being "whipsawed" — an arms control agreement would be signed, the Soviets would invade some country, and the Senate would then refuse to ratify the agreement. The task for U.S. policymakers, then, was to make U.S. policy toward the U.S.S.R. a non-partisan issue, a task which Matlock believes was accomplished, in part, by removing arms control from the center of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union.

The Reagan administration's early approach to the Soviet Union, according to Matlock, could be summed up with three words: realism, strength, and dialogue.

Realism was "calling a spade a spade. We felt that negotiating was not something like making pleasant noises, it was really a hard-nosed bargaining." Strength related to the military buildup and getting the chips on the table. Dialogue expressed the administration's commitment to negotiation. As Matlock described it, "We never walked away from the table, and we kept challenging them to come back. At first, of course, they were skeptical, but gradually it began to sink in."

In Matlock's view, the beginnings of a coherent Reagan administration policy toward the U.S.S.R. came in a presidential speech given in January 1984. The speech set forth a four-part agenda: (1) arms reduction; (2) reducing, and eventually eliminating superpower rivalry in the Third World; (3) respect for human rights; and (4) opening up the Soviet Union. Although the administration refrained from a specific linkage of the four issues, it made clear that significant progress on any one issue would be impossible without improvement in the others.

With this policy conceptualized and formulated, Reagan was now eager to hold a summit in 1984. Unfortunately, the Soviets were then going through their prolonged succession crisis, making such a meeting impossible. Andropov's health rapidly deteriorated in '83, and as for Chernenko, "neither his intellect, nor his political position, nor his health would permit a meeting."

### Challenging Gorbachev

The emergence of Gorbachev removed all of these obstacles. With a new policy in place, the American side finally found an interlocutor prepared to deal. U.S. strategy going into the first Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Geneva (December 1985) was to challenge Gorbachev with several proposals based on Reagan's 1984 speech, and elaborated by further proposals in 1985. Somewhat unexpectedly, Gorbachev accepted many of Reagan's challenges; for instance, increasing the number of stu-



dent exchanges, which Matlock considers one of the most important things to come out of that summit.

Prior to the Geneva summit, the Soviets had already returned to the negotiations on nuclear arms. Considerable progress was made in all four areas of the administration's program. On arms reduction, the U.S. continued to push for the zero option on intermediate range nuclear weapons, which the Soviets agreed to with the signing of the INF agreement in December 1987. On strategic weapons, the administration's original goal was a 50% cut; the Soviets, however, insisted on a linkage between strategic weapons and a halt to the U.S. development of space-based defense systems. Eventually, the Soviets agreed to the U.S. position here as well.

The U.S. also began a series of negotiations with the Soviets on reducing superpower competition in the Third World. Reagan's speech to the United Nations in October 1985 set forth the basis of U.S. policy in this regard. Implicit in the American policy, though not articulated at the time, was the belief that the U.S. could convince the Soviets that acting in certain ways was in their own best interest. The speech had three main points. First, the U.S. expressed its willingness to negotiate a mutual reduction of superpower military involvement in Third World conflicts. Second, the U.S. professed a desire to work with the Soviets in encouraging the parties involved to work toward political resolutions rather than military ones. Third, the U.S. also stated its willingness, when and if possible, to work with the Soviets to rehabilitate the respective country. Significantly, the speech did not blame the Soviets for *creating* problems in the Third World; however, the U.S. did hold the Soviets responsible for *militarizing* these conflicts.

On human rights, Matlock noted that initially there was a "grudging acceptance" on the part of the Soviets to discuss the issue, but matters changed quickly after Eduard Shevardnadze's appointment as foreign minister. In

changing the Soviet position, however, Shevardnadze made it clear that the Soviets were taking these steps because they considered respect for human rights consistent with their own interests, and not because the Americans were forcing such changes on them.

Overall, Matlock considers the administration's Soviet policy a success, for as he noted, "I can think of no major areas in which there was not a Soviet response along the lines of the agenda which we had put forward." In part, this was due to the limited goals of U.S. policy. Matlock pointed out that "We really didn't set out to destroy the Soviet Union . . . we could have done a lot more to stimulate the nationalities [and] . . . to stimulate anti-Russian feeling. We stayed off that almost entirely . . . Many of us realized how fragile it would become if they opened up and how their policies would have to change very radically and be much more respectful of the need for autonomy of other nationalities if they were going to be able to survive in an open and democratic environment."

## The Payoff

The results of the transformation in U.S.-Soviet relations are obvious. On arms control, Matlock noted that we are moving toward "what may become an almost pell-mell process of unilateral reductions." With regard to Third World conflicts in Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Angola, the action is no longer on the battlefield but at the negotiating table; in effect, peace is breaking out everywhere. U.S.-Soviet cooperation has even allowed the convocation of a Middle-East Peace Conference. But driving it all, as Matlock stressed, has not been the success of the many negotiations over the past several years, but the transformation of the Soviet system itself.

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