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### NCSEER NOTE

This paper supplements the author's report, The Evolution of Soviet Perspectives on Third World Security, distributed on February 19, 1992, in which he argues that the change in policy under Gorbachev away from aggressive confrontation was not solely a tactical response to constraints and opportunities, but the product of learning from much experience and therefore is durable. In this supplement he confirms that durability in the event of a major political shift to the right, citing Soviet experiences in Ethiopia, Kampuchea, Angola, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, as well as domestic evolution, in support.

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

**The Durability of Change in Soviet Perspectives**

NCSEER Final Report Supplement

S. Neil MacFarlane

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The considerable instability of post-Soviet Russia and the other components of the former Soviet Union raises some question about the durability of the changes in Soviet foreign policy that occurred during the Gorbachev era. It is at least plausible that President Yeltsin might lose power to a more conservative and traditional military-political grouping, or one that espoused a strong Russian nationalism. On the face of it, this carries some potential for reversal in the positive evolution of Soviet perspectives and policy towards Third World security discussed in report. Such speculation is encouraged further by frequent warnings emanating from Russia to the effect that the Russian polity is at a moment of choice between a preferred orientation of cooperation with and integration into the Western (European) community, and the "eastern" orientation of xenophobic anti-Westernism, in alliance with other alienated "have nots" in the Third World.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to Third World issues, the assessment of this prospect depends largely on one's interpretation of the nature and causes of the Soviet reassessment of Third World conflict and

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<sup>1</sup> One might argue that such dire predictions are attuned to the Western audience and designed to elicit more substantial flows of assistance.

security discussed in this report. To the extent that one perceives it to be a matter of instrumental readjustment rather than cognition, then as instrumental needs change, so too may public Soviet perspectives on the Third World. If on the other hand, one interprets this reassessment as one element of a broader cognitive transformation in Soviet/post-Soviet understanding of international relations, then one may expect it to be quite resistant to reversal.

Likewise, if one perceives the causes of this reevaluation to be predominantly internal in origin, then the transformation is vulnerable to further internal change. If on the other hand, one perceives the roots of the transformation to lie in the external environment, then one might expect internal change to have little impact on it. These distinctions are obviously artificial.<sup>2</sup> Yet for purposes of analysis, it is useful to examine them separately.

Even if one adopts a predominantly instrumental and internal interpretation (i.e. that Soviet and Russian analysts and policy makers, faced with an internal crisis and requiring Western assistance in addressing it, embraced a more moderate perspective

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that instrumental readjustment of justifications for policy may in time become more deeply rooted as a result of political socialization provides an example of linkage between the instrumental and the cognitive. An example of the linkage between internal and external causation lies in the fact that in the Gorbachev era, internal political process greatly facilitated the absorption of lessons drawn from Third World experience by analytical and policy making elites. Glasnost' allowed a much more open and public discussion of failures in policy in the Third World. The replacement of Brezhnevite cadres brought a number of less orthodox analysts of Third World issues into prominent policy making positions, while removing many of those (e.g. Boris Ponomarev and Rostislav Ul'yanovsky) most closely associated with traditional perspectives on the Third World.

on competition in foreign policy), the transformation of Soviet perspectives on Third World security seems quite durable. First, any reactionary group taking power would face a substantial problem of internal pacification, leaving little room in the short and perhaps medium term for foreign policy activism. It would also face a substantial short, medium and long term problem of internal economic reconstruction. Unless it wrote off cooperation with the West entirely, it would have to be cautious about a return to activism in foreign policy.

Perhaps more importantly, however, one would have to ask why such a regime would return to activism in the Third World. It would hardly be an effective means of consolidating domestic political support. The diversion of scarce resources to Third World allies was already unpopular in the pre-Gorbachev era. The deepening of the economic crisis and the greatly increased privation faced by the average Russian citizen in the post-Gorbachev era would merely strengthen popular antipathy to such policy.

Justification of support of left-leaning Third World regimes in terms of a traditional revolutionary Marxist-Leninist mission of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would likely be ineffectual given the thorough discrediting of the Marxist-Leninist world view at home. The collapse of the communist bloc and of the Soviet polity and economy has served to discredit the traditional ideological option abroad as well.

Finally, in terms of elite politics, those most closely associated with this dimension of Soviet foreign policy are dead. There is, therefore, little point in changing policy in order to

curry favour with them. There do not seem to be influential groups in the Russian political spectrum that are sympathetic to a resurrection of the foreign policy component of Soviet Marxism (e.g. global politico-military and ideological competition with the United States and world capitalism). The more effective ideological opposition to "liberal democracy" in Russia appears to be Russian national chauvinism rather than Marxist-Leninist messianism. The nationalist agenda is far more limited in its implications for the Third World.<sup>3</sup>

Turning to cognitive and externally based arguments, the transformation of Soviet (and post-Soviet) thinking and behaviour with regard to Third World conflict is only in part a product of the Gorbachev era. The flowering of new thinking and the foreign policy transformations of the Gorbachev era simply consolidated longer term cognitive processes the roots of which lie in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. The revision of Soviet theory and practice described in this report reflects the accumulation of less than inspiring experience in the Third World during the Brezhnev era and the Andropov and Chernenko interregna, and a reevaluation

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<sup>3</sup> The close interaction between domestic politics and Middle East policy during the Gulf Crisis suggested that events in contiguous areas of the Third World such as the Middle East do impinge in important ways on domestic politics. Russian nationalists, conservatives, and elements of the military used the cooperation between the Soviet government and the West against Iraq as a means of discrediting Shevardnadze and undermining the process of reform. It is important, however, to note that the efforts at mediation undertaken unilaterally by the USSR in early 1991 were quite consistent with the postulates of new thinking. In their emphasis on negotiation, mediation, and the non-use of force, they hardly constituted a return to traditional modes of competition. Moreover, there is no evidence of significant domestic unhappiness with the abandonment of ideological allies farther afield in the Third World.

of theoretical postulates on the basis of that experience.

During the 1970s, operating on the basis of an orthodox and confrontational Marxist worldview, the USSR embarked on a period of forceful expansion in the Third World, a policy informed strongly by traditional Marxist modes of explanation, analysis, and prescription. By the 1980s, the results of this policy suggested that the orthodox Marxist perspective on Third World politics and security obscured more than it revealed, and conduced to actions carrying benefits less than and costs greater than those anticipated by the theory.

The attribution of local conflict to external causes (e.g. imperialism) and the associated underplaying of indigenous roots of conflict favoured an underestimation of the difficulty of attaining durable victories in the Third World. The sixteen year war in Angola subsequent to the MPLA's installation in power, the thirteen year struggle of the Ethiopian government against insurgencies in Tigre and Eritrea, the twelve year Vietnamese war of counterinsurgency in Kampuchea, or for that matter the Soviets' own engagement in Afghanistan, suggested that this component of theory was profoundly misconceived. These experiences also conduced to reconsideration of Soviet perspectives on the utility of force and the merits of negotiation as means to address local conflict.

Experiences such as those <sup>in</sup> Angola, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua suggested, moreover, that victories of the "national liberation movement" were not a source of substantial positive and durable change in the global correlation of forces. Instead, they were reversible, expensive, and given the propensity of socialist-

oriented states to economic disaster, embarrassing.

The behaviour of the United States in instances such as South Africa (e.g. the increasingly strong anti-apartheid stance of the Congress), Nicaragua (e.g. the wavering of congressional support for the Contras), and Ethiopia (e.g. the Carter initiatives on mediation of the civil war) suggested that prior images of the United States as monolithically uncooperative in the quest for sensible solutions to Third World conflicts were inadequate. Soviet policy makers had underestimated the capacity of the United States to participate genuinely and constructively in the search for equitable solutions to crises and conflicts in the Third World.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, the impact of Third World confrontations on the process of detente suggested in practice that the proposition that Third World competition could be compartmentalized and, therefore, that costs in the central US-Soviet relationship stemming from such behaviour could be avoided, was profoundly flawed.

More recently, the role of UN mediation in securing Soviet withdrawal from the Afghan conflict suggested in practice that previous perspectives on the role of international organizations in Third World conflicts had also been inadequately conceptualized in traditional Soviet approaches to Third World conflict. This experience informed the rather belated reassessment of the role of

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<sup>4</sup> This is one small element of a process of reevaluation of the nature of American politics and of the United States as an actor in international politics which dates back into the 1960s, if not farther. See, for example, Franklyn Griffiths, Images, Politics, and Learning in Soviet Behavior towards the United States, Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1972; and Allen Lynch, The Soviet Study of International Relations (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

the United Nations in international security characteristic of the last years of the Gorbachev era.

It would be inappropriate to dismiss out of hand the proposition that much of new thinking was a matter of tactical adaptation in a situation where the USSR needed a reduction in international tension and the assistance of the West in getting its house in order, or to put it another way, that it was a matter of motivated bias. However, the roots of this reevaluation lie in the experiences of the late 1970s and early 1980s and in the Soviet literature analyzing these experiences that preceded the arrival of Gorbachev.<sup>5</sup> The reevaluation is sensitive to - indeed based upon - accumulated experience which disconfirms the traditional cognitive structure informing Soviet interpretation of and reaction to the Third World. What we see during this period is a shift from a cognitive structure which does not conduce to accurate evaluation of external realities to one more capable of accurate assessment of these realities. To put it another way, there is evidence of a process of learning at work in the evolution of Soviet perspectives on Third World security.

As noted earlier, to the extent that "new thinking" and the policies based upon it are simply tactical adaptations to changing circumstances and needs, then as these circumstances and needs change further, further change or reversal of these trends is possible, though for reasons already noted, this seems unlikely.

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<sup>5</sup> This is true of the broader reconsideration of the nature of Third World politics as well. See Elizabeth Valkenier, The USSR and the Third World: An Economic Bind (New York: Praeger, 1983); and Jerry Hough, The Struggle for the Third World (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1986).

However, to the extent that they are a product of learning from experience, they may be more enduring.

First, although political circumstances in the former USSR may alter, the experiences upon which this cognitive reevaluation are based are a matter of historical record. Whatever the nature of the political regime in Russia, the fact of the failure of the use of force in Afghanistan remains. The experience of interminable and costly civil conflict following the installation of pro-Soviet regimes in Angola, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua remains. The fact that victory in the Third World did not conduce to an improvement in the Soviet position in the balance of world power and that that position depended far more centrally on internal economic performance in the USSR and in the West remains.

Second, shared interpretive paradigms are an essential part of a society's efforts to cope with the reality surrounding them. They provide the rules of interpretation and prioritization that guide the analyst and the policy maker in sorting out the important from the trivial as a basis for action. Absent such cognitive structures, the individual or group is left without a basis for sorting, evaluating, and responding to environmental data. The loss or abandonment of such structures results in considerable discomfort and confusion. As such, scholarly and political communities have a great deal invested in cognitive structures and they are deeply resistant to change.

One does not change a world view the way one changes a pair of shoes. Generally, they are abandoned when the discrepancy between reality and the interpretive structure is sufficient to create

substantial costs to the community embracing the paradigm in question. This is why the Soviet Marxist mode of analysis of the Third World was dropped in the first place. One conventional wisdom has succeeded another. Whatever the nature of the political evolution within the former USSR, it is hard to envisage a reversal of this process of learning without the emergence of a new body of experience disconfirming the current conventional wisdom and reconfirming the previous one.

Given the substantial collection of confidently purveyed, but subsequently disproven predictions in the literature on Soviet domestic politics and foreign policy during the past ten years, one would be foolish to exclude the possibility of substantial change in direction, here as elsewhere. However, there is little reason to expect a sudden return to old patterns of thinking and action in the Third World as a result of internal political instability and change.