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President's Notes

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President's Notes

Security Issues in the Gorbachev Era

The major Soviet security issues of the Gorbachev era are contained in a circle circumscribed by the strength of the economy, the power and ambitions of the Soviet Union as a state, and the quality and stability of its government. By stability I mean the popular consensus to which the party can lay claim, either by the efforts of the present, or by the oppression of the past.

The United States has a circle circumscribed in a somewhat similar way, but without the oppression, and with the very important longstanding customs and institutions of the democratic process.

It is where the two circles overlap or intersect that we find issues of common importance and, often, competition between the two states.

Discussions in the United States commonly focus on the discrete but substantive issues that overlap in the two circles. Examples of issues analyzed in this micro and cumulative approach are:

- The balance of conventional forces on the central front;
- The modernization of short-range nuclear weapons in Europe;
- Soviet influence over Vietnamese actions.

Admiral Kurth spent 17 years in and out of the Soviet Union, including tours as Naval Attaché (1975-1977) and Defense Attaché (1985-1987). He is fluent in Russian and has a Ph.D. from Harvard in government (Soviet Studies).

There is also a single-avenue approach to analysis of the U.S.-Soviet security relationship: the macro view, which, complementing the micro-cumulative method, addresses the whole circle.

In our country, the government may be facing the most formidable challenges in American economic and foreign policy since the election of President Richard Nixon in 1968—and perhaps since the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. The most important influence on the goals of the administration will be its newly developing relationship with the Soviet Union.

For the first time since the Revolution of 1917, the curves of economic and political power and interests of our countries are nearly parallel. Let us do a quick, simple trace that compares those curves.

The relative curves between our countries were of less than earthshaking importance before World War II. The Soviet Union was simply outclassed. With the end of the war, things changed. The Soviet Union's aggressive and expansionist nature was unmasked. After the war, we were stronger than anyone, but, faced with a messianic ideology, backed up by the world's largest military establishment, we came to fear the growth of Soviet power.

U.S. isolationism was drawing to a close, and we began taking on broad interests and responsibilities worldwide. Despite the enormous size of the Soviet armed forces, the strength of our own military power, linked to that of our allies, brought us relative safety. Then, we limped out of a troubling war in Vietnam—our military power much diminished. For a while, the United States turned inward. To many at this time, the Soviets appeared to have gained on us in military power. Their apparent success in pursuit of their goals around the globe was alarming. The curves of power and interests appeared to be mismatched to our disadvantage. But, in the eighties, the United States turned those circumstances around. Our strength grew; the Soviets' did not. The curves of power and interests again became uneven, but this time to our advantage.

Now things are again changing. Both countries face economic constraints. Both need to reorient their political outlooks. Though they have become three dimensional, the curves appear similar in shape. We have never faced such similarities before. But there are several challenges to this momentary similarity. The biggest, in my judgment, is the strength and stability of our capacity to resolve our problems in contrast to the weakness and instability of the Soviets' capacity to resolve theirs. While the shapes of U.S. and Soviet difficulties do bear similarities, there is an order of magnitude of difference between the difficulty in solving the U.S. problems and that in solving the Soviet problems.

The United States could likely resolve its problems, which are chiefly economic, without debilitating national stress. We have just passed through a period of only transfer of power in which Americans take pride. The legislative

judicial and executive branches all took part in the ceremony of transfer. The Constitution is intact, by letter and spirit. Our national structure is rugged in its flexibility, resilience, political consensus and pluralism. But the opposite appears to be true for the Soviet Union. We have long known that its government abides by neither the letter nor the spirit of its constitution and that the transfer of executive power can be precarious. Increasingly, it reveals itself as a weak state structure, lacking the strengths of flexibility, of resilience, of a consensus freely reached, and of pluralism. For lack of these characteristics, the Soviet Union, in stark contrast to the United States and its government, can be shaped, to a great extent, by what the General Secretary wants it to be. When Stalin held that office, the shaping went one way. Now it goes another. If Gorbachev fails because, despite his vision, he cannot lead the Soviet Union toward an increase in political and economic flexibility, in resilience, consensus and pluralism, then the curves I have used in my simile may take on another shape, which could become dangerous.

Let us review for a few moments the circumstances on both sides.

All of us have been reading the advice that is being offered to our President. After last fall's election, *The Providence Journal* featured, on page one, the growing *angst* over the U.S. economic position. The headlines read, "Experts Fear Recession if Steps Not Taken Soon," and "Jittery Markets Want Big Push by Congress, Bush to Shrink Deficits." The opening paragraphs read:

"Unless President-elect George Bush makes quick progress toward a deal with Congress on phasing out Federal budget deficits, financial analysts believe the U.S. economy may soon plunge into a devastating recession.

"A crisis of confidence appears to be brewing that could overwhelm financial markets at any time, causing the U.S. dollar to plummet and interest rates to soar, which would kick the debt-ridden economy into recession virtually overnight."

It is unlikely that the deficit problem to which the newspaper referred can remain unresolved for very long. And, as always, there are other difficulties such as the drug war, energy problems and the environment. Unless we deal well with our problems, our curve could slope into darkness.

Let us return to Mr. Gorbachev's curve. He speaks of his problem as being rooted in the stagnation and corruption that grew under the leadership of his predecessors. He claims that the Soviet socialist experiment was subverted by Stalin and by most of the country's subsequent leaders—until his own accession to power. Gorbachev speaks of the Soviet economic structure as sitting dangerously on the very edge of overwhelming crisis. If the situation is not corrected quickly and radically, he asserts, the Soviet Union will descend to such popular disillusionment and economic weakness that it will find itself just another second-class power. He wants new

thinking, for he sees the change necessary to be of such magnitude as to be equivalent to the October Revolution.

The scope of the Soviet problem is enormous. If I were to encapsulate my own experience in the Soviet Union, with the observations of others whose judgment I value, my shortened list of the major Soviet socioeconomic woes would include the following:

- Their workforce is unmotivated, alienated and unproductive. The Soviet work ethic has been to avoid work whenever possible. How much a worker takes home in pay is often less important than his access to favors (*blat*) and illegal appropriation.

- The younger generation, more skeptical and aloof than their elders, is disillusioned and listless, devoid of faith in their political structure.

- Although starting a project is statistically significant to central planning, completing it is not; the Soviet Union is a wasteland of half-completed projects.

- Soviet investment in its military establishment may not have been 12-16 percent of Soviet GNP as we thought, but perhaps as much as 25 percent, and some believe it was as high as 35 percent.

- Gorbachev's constituency in support of change is composed of intellectuals, but that support may be weakening. He lacks the backing of working men; he is opposed by the millions of middle-level bureaucrats.

- Stalin has been denounced publicly as a political tyrant, as the executioner of millions of innocent Soviet people in the purges. Now he is even judged publicly as a poor generalissimo, one who, in World War II, sacrificed millions unnecessarily. Even the sacred Lenin is increasingly exposed, as George Feifer writes in the October 1988 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, as the man who made Stalinism possible. Coming all at once, this torrent of revelation threatens to dissolve much of the glue which has held this state together.

One conclusion often heard among Soviet intellectuals is that the great Marxist-Leninist social experiment has failed. As Feifer writes, "The new god will fail" because in the Soviet Union "more bad is rooted where we don't see it than good is happening where we do."

Still, for the Soviets, all is not without hope, for the contemporary miracle may be that a man like Gorbachev *did* come along and that there *is* glasnost, and, with more questionable success, democratization in pursuit of perestroika. What I am trying to outline here is the scope of the problem which Gorbachev faces and, as I have said, the order of magnitude of the difference of the curves our two countries are on, despite the similarity in the trajectory of those curves.

To return to my original thesis, I believe that the United States has an abundance of strength in its flexibility, resilience, consensus and pluralism.


and will solve its problem, but I have little confidence that the Soviet Union will do the same.

I am anxious over two major elements in the current circumstances. The first I have already implied. In the past, our two countries have been on well-defined, though conflicting, curves. This period was certainly not devoid of risk, but each nation was careful to cope with the risk. There was some inherent stability to the wary eye we had for each other.

Now the situation is different, and I am concerned that we—Americans and West Europeans—are not ready to recognize potential pitfalls in the changes. Although the United States has the strength, we have little time to solve our problems. A sudden economic crisis or growing social issue—such as the drug war—could distract our attention and distort our perception of what may be developing in Gorbachev's world. We might cease to measure his effort attentively, carefully and objectively.

Meanwhile, with our attention elsewhere, Gorbachev could be failing and failing rapidly, precipitating a socioeconomic breakdown which could tumble into severe civil unrest. Mind you, I am not predicting such a development. I am only speaking on behalf of keeping a careful eye toward the efforts of Gorbachev.

The second element of my anxiety rests on the question of whether international conflict could spring from the unanticipated developments of socioeconomic disappointments and unrest. I am not predicting this either. Again, I am speaking on behalf of keeping our eyes open. My goal is simply to point out that the situation between us—the Soviet Union and the United States—is, once again, a new experience. The challenge lies in our recognizing important changes accurately and in a timely fashion. We need a continuous and always objective assessment of Mr. Gorbachev. Furthermore, we need to support the process which our new administration and the Congress together will design to cope with our own problem. We must not risk losing our focus. We ought not to presume that *we* have a lot of time, and we ought to be very wary should Mr. Gorbachev presume that *he* has.


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