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Negotiating with the Soviets

Andrew E. Gibson

With every new Administration comes a new team of negotiators to go up against the Soviet crew, most of whom are seasoned veterans. While President Bush has assembled a group that may well be the most experienced in recent memory, it may still be appropriate to relate a few of the lessons learned from the past.

I was privileged to serve in the first Nixon administration during 1971 and 1972, which gave me the opportunity to participate extensively in both the maritime and trade negotiations with the U.S.S.R.

On an evening in May of 1972, just prior to President Richard Nixon's scheduled visit to Moscow, I was a guest in the home of the Secretary of Commerce Peter Peterson. The Soviet Trade Minister, Nicholai Patolichev was also a guest for dinner on that occasion. That evening, the President announced the bombing of Hanoi and the mining of Haiphong Harbor. After dinner, a visibly shaken Russian Minister and the rest of us watched a television broadcast of the announcement. Shortly thereafter the Minister left, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who had been with the President, joined us.

Most of us had visions of our work on the trade agreement going up in smoke and were worried that the President's forthcoming visit to the Soviet Union would be cancelled. These concerns were the main focus of the discussion that followed. Secretary Kissinger indicated that he and the President had considered all of this before reaching their decision. He presented a number of reasons why he believed that the trade discussions would continue and that the President's visit would occur as scheduled: most importantly, First Secretary Leonid Brezhnev needed the agreement as much as, or more than, we did. Of course, Secretary Kissinger was right, and I believe the same logic applies to Mikhail Gorbachev today.

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It should be remembered that the President's decision was made at the height of a Vietcong offensive and at that moment the South Vietnamese forces were in full retreat. Kissinger said that more important than the President's visit was his role as leader of the free world and that no American President could go to Moscow "with his hat in his hand." He was confident that the measures taken would end the North Vietnamese advance and as a result the President could go to Moscow and negotiate from a position of strength. The rest is history: The President made a dramatic and positive contribution to U.S.-Soviet relations by his visit, and the trade negotiations were successful.

Following the signing of the trade agreement in October 1972, a parade of American businessmen visited the Department of Commerce seeking advice on how to conduct commercial negotiations with the Russians. The advice we gave was simple. We warned them that the Soviets were excellent negotiators who would outmaneuver them in any way that was possible. Fairness is a limited Western concept not shared by the Communists. We suggested that most Americans, after their second or third trip to Moscow, would feel compelled to come back to this country with an agreement, even if inadequately drafted and based on optimistic assumptions that probably would not be borne out in practice. We reminded them that the only way to negotiate successfully was to be prepared to walk away from an agreement if it was not clearly in their best interest.

A number of lessons can be drawn from the foregoing. One is that we always have the obligation to remember that we are constantly watched by the entire world, both democratic and communist, and that we are continually judged as to our resolve in the defense of the free world. Any inconsistency or wavering can have only a negative impact that is difficult for most Americans to fully understand. Regardless of how much we are subjected to surface criticism and deceitful propaganda, to most of the world we are regarded as the only force that can guarantee that the light of freedom keeps burning.

The second lesson is "no deal is better than a bad deal." Our present problem seems to arise in part from the proposal that we advanced in 1981 to eliminate all nuclear weapons from Western Europe, the so-called zero option. As the Soviets have suggested, we may have been bluffing, for in those days we would count on Andrei Gromyko to reject almost any proposal we put forward. More likely, however, we and our Allies had not thought through the full implications of a Europe stripped of nuclear weapons while the massive Soviet conventional forces stayed in place. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that our objective should have been to cut down the huge force of troops and armor maintained by the Soviets in Eastern Europe so that tactical nuclear weapons would not be needed and could be removed safely. This would seem to be the thrust of future negotiations.

The negotiating role that we once enjoyed *vis-à-vis* the Russians now seems to be changed substantially. In the past we determined the framework of the negotiations. Today we often seem to be reacting to their initiatives. Unfortunately, when your opponent determines the agenda, he has the advantage. Should we attempt in a piecemeal fashion to negotiate comprehensive agreements with broad ramifications, we will be playing in a game where the Soviets hold most of the good cards. The item-by-item approach to such negotiations probably has two disadvantages: it produces tensions among our allies and it fails to produce long-range remedies. I am sure our negotiators are fully aware of all of this, but under the pressure to secure an agreement—a condition which seems never to go away—it is something that must be remembered constantly.

We read a great deal about the changes in the Russian society being brought about by Mr. Gorbachev. It may not be too extreme to call this the second Bolshevik revolution. However, we would have to be extremely naive to believe that the Soviet leader's purpose is to bring peace to our world. Clearly his goal is to strengthen the Soviet economy while hoping that ours will weaken. There is ample evidence that Gorbachev continues to feel hostile toward the capitalist world and holds to the founding myth of the Soviet state which foresees the inevitable demise of Western democracies. In spite of this, we must keep trying to improve our level of understanding to help us convince the Soviets that their ultimate security and national prosperity lie in a world that respects individual rights and freedom.

We can hope that the present Soviet leadership will provide an opportunity for a new beginning. The direction of foreign policy under Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze—and when the United States is involved, probably guided by former Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin—is quite different from that of his predecessor. Dobrynin knows the strengths and weaknesses of this country better than most. Although Dobrynin was removed from his position as head of the international department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party at the time of Gromyko's retirement from the Politburo, there is widespread speculation that he is still influential in the making of US-Soviet policy. There can be no doubt that those currently formulating Soviet strategy are far more knowledgeable than their predecessors in understanding our deep-felt desire to persevere peaceful coexistence through open communication and greater understanding. While their foremost instincts are to attempt to exploit any perceived weakness, such an understanding can also facilitate the development of a future relationship that can provide a sound basis for peace.

