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Gorbachev's Political Offensive
and South Africa's Response

Gorbachev's new political thinking¹, represented by glasnost and perestroika, has far reaching implications for the future of South and southern Africa. A major problem facing South African decision-makers though is the often muddled analyses made of the Gorbachev phenomenon, its impact on Soviet global and regional strategies, and what political responses ought to be considered.

Some conservative analysts suggest that the Soviet Union is fundamentally as strong as ever and that Gorbachev's policy of glasnost is simply a tactic to lull the West into military and political paralysis. This view, however, does little to explain the deep rooted systemic crisis being faced by the Soviet Union, and the resultant change in Soviet policies to deal with this crisis. On the other hand, the leftwing perception of what is happening in the Soviet Union is equally flawed² their perception being that Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika policies are primarily a humanitarian desire on the part of the Soviet Union for peace and progress in world affairs. It is based on a belief that the Soviet leadership has come to accept international stability as a worthy and humane goal in itself. These two perceptions are also reflected internally in South African political thinking³ the far right, which still perceives the Soviets as an expansionist militaristic force that is part of the onslaught⁴ paradigm, and the far left, heaping praise on the Soviet Union's apparent willingness to promote peace in the southern African region and help South Africa solve its problems.

Both views feed on only a superficial understanding of the changing internal dynamics taking place in the Soviet Union, and fail to provide a coherent and logical policy response for South Africa's decision-makers. While South Africans are being urged to revise their own stereotyping of the Soviet Union, this should be done based on a careful assessment of a totalitarian power attempting to extricate itself from economic and social disintegration via the adoption of a new set of internal and external policy agendas.

GORBACHEV⁵ HOW MUCH A REFORMER?

Gorbachev has presided over one of the most successful public relations campaigns yet conducted in modern history by any world leader. In the West he is received with adulation⁶ a man who desires peace and disarmament in a troubled world. In Red China, he was a hero of the pro-democracy⁷ movement, who saw his policies as an example of

what the

Chinese leadership should have been emulating. In West Germany, Gorbachev is more popular than President George Bush. But how far is the Soviet leadership willing to move? In his first two years in power, Gorbachev followed the same path as that of his

predecessors. Indeed, the Brezhnev doctrine â\200\224 which calls for the aggressive expansion of socialism â\200\224 was pursued with continued vigour. When he came into power, for example, Gorbachev gave the Soviet armed forces carte blanche to smash the Afghan resistance movement. Everything short of nuclear weapons were used in this effort. Under Gorbachev, the intensity of the war in Afghanistan increased by a factor of four â\200\224 his decision being directly responsible for the death of over one million Afghan civilians and a further 2-3 million refugees. Arms shipments to regional conflicts rose to new heights. In Angola, Gorbachev gave the go-ahead for the largest conventional offensives seen in Africa since World War II, against UNITA in 1985 and 1987.

Under President Reagan, the US policy response was what became known as the Reagan doctrine, in terms of which the US displayed a willingness to engage both the Soviet Union and its allies, directly and through the granting of assistance to indigenous freedom fighter movements around the world. For the Soviet Union, the Reagan doctrine raised the â\200\234costâ\200\235 of maintaining a presence in regional conflicts to unaffordably high levels, thus successfully containing, if not reversing, expansionist Soviet policies. In the light of the success of the Reagan doctrine, and the economic problems being experienced in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev realised that no further gains were possible and that a new strategy had to be devised.

Within the "new Soviet systemâ\200\235, reform has its limits however. Gorbachev realises that capitalism, at the grass-roots level, threatens the legitimacy of the party machine, the strength of which is drawn from its total control over the economy. He is willing to lease land to farmers, but has admitted that if collective farming was scrapped - socialism would die. The party is already cracking down on â\200\234black marketeeringâ\200\235, or the informal market, in order to restrict the size of non-state economic activity.

Political freedom is also at odds with Gorbachevâ\200\231s objectives. For example, the popular Moscow politician, Boris Yeltsin, who won his seat in the recent Soviet â\200\234electionsâ\200\235, was continually threatened by the KGB â\200\224 the reason for this being that his political programme included calls for:

- â\200\224 Discussions on a multi party democracy;
- â\200\224 Cutting Soviet military strength; and
- â\200\224 Giving land back to the peasants.

This democratic liberal agenda does not coincide with Gorbachevâ\200\231s own agenda. He has already ruled out a multiparty system. The survival of socialism, not its dismantlement, is uppermost in the mind of the Soviet's â\200\234new political thinkingâ\200\235.

With respect to ethnic violence the Soviet responses have recently been ruthless. On 19 April 1989, for example, mustard gas and tanks were used against demonstrating Georgians â\200\224 killing 20 and injuring more than 200. At the end of 1988, the â\200\234Black Beretsâ\200\235 (special forces) were created for the sole purpose of breaking up demonstrations. The â\200\234Black Beretsâ\200\235 fall under the ambit of the Ministry of the Interior, which is under the direct control of Gorbachev. The penal system has also been changed to include penalties for criticism of the system.

To ensure the survival of the Soviet Union, however, which currently faces its worst systemic crisis in history, Gorbachev has been forced to institute some important changes that will have far reaching ramifications for the future of the Soviet Union and Soviet global policy. These changes are geared at providing what the Soviets call "perestroika" a breathing space to restructure the socialist system. The Brezhnev doctrine, though not officially renounced, has been put on hold indefinitely. Paradoxically, the "class adversary" (capitalists) have now come to be viewed as necessary partners in the Soviet Union's struggle for survival.

SOVIETS NEW STRATEGY: PARASITIC COEXISTENCE

Western intelligence analysts have coined a new phrase for the slowly evolving, but discernible, policy currently being formulated by Gorbachev â\200\224 parasitic coexistence. It is realised by the Soviet leadership that for the foreseeable future, the Soviet Union cannot â\200\234buryâ\200\235 the West. Instead, the Soviet Unionâ\200\231s economic survival is now dependent upon massively increased mutual cooperation with the West. West Germany and the United States have been specifically targeted.

Parasitic coexistence is reliant upon two important components. The first is that Gorbachev aims to revamp the Soviet economy, not only through Western technology transfers and credits, but also through joint ventures, in order to inject the West's management skills into the Soviet economy. The second is a massive investment in political influence operations to alter Western perceptions of the Soviet Union. These will be targeted primarily at Western voters. Without the Soviet Union shedding its totalitarian image, there will be little hope of Western participation in its economy â\200\224 hence glasnost (openness) to complement perestroika (restructuring) internally.

The battle of perceptions

At a conference in Moscow in July 1988, Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet Foreign Minister, outlined the framework of the Sovietâ\200\231s â\200\234new political thinkingâ\200\235. He called for â\200\234an increasing shift in efforts to ensure security from the sphere of military-political solutions to the sphere of political cooperationâ\200\235. A shift, in other words, from the threat of force to political influence operations. To do this however, the West must be â\200\234denied an enemyâ\200\235. This has been the single most important objective of Mikhail Gorbachev. Speaking to the Congress of the Soviet Trade Unions in February 1987, he stated that â\200\234 . . . the words perestroika and glasnost are considered everywhere abroad to be synonymous with the words progress and peaceâ\200\235.

In July 1988, Albert Vlasov â\200\224 then first deputy head of the Propaganda Department (now renamed The Ideology Department) â\200\224 said: â\200\234that the stereo type of the â\200\230Soviet threatâ\200\231 and the enemy image has been steadily on the wane is to the credit not only of staff members of foreign policy propagandists. It is the direct result of perestroika and revolutionary changes in Soviet domestic and foreign affairsâ\200\235. This new improved Soviet image is designed to facilitate the policy of â\200\234cooperation and mutual understandingâ\200\235 with the West â\200\224 simply because the changing correlation of forces requires from the Soviets the projection of a new benevolent international stance. At an international peace forum in Moscow in March 1987, Gorbachev reinforced this policy change when he stated: â\200\234our foreign policy is today to a greater extent than ever before determined by domestic policyâ\200\235. This statement importantly deemphasises the importance of global military power projection and wars of â\200\234national liberationâ\200\235.

Economic recuperation

The critical state of the Soviet economy has been documented in previous Freedom

Bulletins (see numbers 6/1987 and 3/1989). In order to emerge from their economic morass the Soviet Union now needs finance, technology, design, engineering, manufacturing and quality control know-how. They need to take scientific facts and theories and apply them toward an industrial process. Joint ventures, where foreigners can own up to 100% in the companies, are being aggressively promoted with Western corporations. Most importantly, to make them more efficient, the Soviets want the joint ventures to be run by Western managers.

Gorbachev knows that the best way to cement a lasting relationship with Western countries is to entice large, initial investments from lenders. These sources will then protect their investment by any means either a) by influencing policies of the debtor country; or b) by

providing further lending if the initial investment does not turn a profit. Despite Soviet-bloc debt now standing at \$127 billion, new foreign capital infusions in the region now amount to some \$2 billion every month.

One important objective of perestroika is to isolate the benefits of Western involvement in the economy from the Soviet citizenry. According to Edward Hewett, a scholar at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, joint ventures are designed primarily to export products manufactured in the Soviet Union to Western markets. Joint ventures will not be geared to produce consumer goods for the Soviet Union's civilian sector, but to strengthen and modernise the heavy industrial and high technology sectors of the Soviet economy and to generate much-needed hard currency earnings.

The military dimension

Due to the priority being accorded the resuscitation of the Soviet economy, a new military doctrine of 'reasonable sufficiency' has emerged. The growth of the Soviet military, which has crippled consumer spending and consumption, will have to be reduced but will remain competitive with the West by inducing a reduction in Western military modernisation programmes. The emphasis is now on qualitative, rather than quantitative, features. In an interview with Die Welt on 17 October 1988, Soviet Defence Minister, Dimitriy Yazov, stressed that 'emphasising quantitative features, is not only becoming increasingly expensive but increasingly ineffective from both a military-political and the actual military point of view'. Yazov's statement not only reflects upon the economic cost of maintaining the Soviet military establishment, but also upon the billions of dollars that have been spent on military equipment for no-win wars as a result of the successful implementation of the Reagan doctrine.

In the light of the Soviet's shift to qualitative superiority, Gorbachev's arms reduction proposals are aimed at cutting 'deadwood' - expendable obsolete weaponry - from the Soviet armed forces and, via arms control agreements, curtailing further Western development of high technology weapon systems that the Soviets will have difficulty in matching. The promulgation of Gorbachev's new military strategy will, in the long run, offer the Soviet military establishment a modernized and stronger military/industrial complex, capable of providing the qualitative means with which to match the new weapons technology emerging in the West. As a result, US intelligence analysts believe that the Soviet Union will emerge militarily stronger in the 1990's - once the current restructuring of the Soviet armed forces is complete.

Parasitic coexistence, with respect to the acquisition of Western technology, will be crucial to help upgrade the qualitative status of the Soviet armed forces. Furthermore, the Soviets will become even more dependent on the illegal acquisition of technology from the West.

THE SOVIET INTELLIGENCE OFFENSIVE

Following the shift in Soviet policy from economic autarky to parasitic coexistence, and from the threat of force to political influence operations, there has been a substantial increase in Soviet multi-purpose intelligence operations - primarily targeted at active

measuresâ\200\235â\200\231 and the theft of sensitive Western technology. Of particular interest to South African policy analysts is the massive shake-up which has taken place in the Soviet Unionâ\200\231s active measures apparatus, combined with the emphasis on active measures as a key component of evolving Soviet strategy.

Structural changes

On 30 September 1988, six new commissions, falling directly under the control of the secretariat of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) were created. Three of these have direct responsibility for, amongst other things, the Soviet Unionâ\200\231s active measures apparatus.

The ideology Commission is directed by Vadim A Medvedev, who, from 1970-1978, served as deputy head of the Propaganda Department (now the Ideology Department) of the Central Committee. Falling under the direct control of the Ideology Commission is the Ideology Department headed by Aleksandr Kapto, who is responsible for the control of all publications, radio and television. The Legal Policy Commission, headed by former KGB chairman, Viktor M Cherbrikov, directs the work of a number of government organisations, including the KGB. Finally, the International Policies Commission, headed by propaganda - expert and close associate of Gorbachev, Aleksandr N Yakovlev, oversees the work of the International Department, headed by Valentin M Falen. The International Department (ID), in turn, oversees Soviet Communist Party affiliates and Soviet front groups worldwide, as well as a host of academic and policy institutes internally.

Active measures: Its composition

Soviet active measures, designed to influence and affect Western decision making, appears in three modes: white, black and grey. White active measures is overt in nature and carried out by the Ideology Department. It incorporates crude propaganda, emanating largely from Soviet publications. In the last two years there has been a decrease in this category with respect to both the West and South Africa. Black active measures is covert, directed primarily by the KGB, and comprises the forging of documents and disinformation. Lastly, grey active measures is directed by the International Department, which uses its front organisations, communist parties, friendship societies and institutes to propagate and execute Soviet policy objectives. In order to reinforce his political influence operations, the last two modes have increased dramatically under Gorbachev.

The new KGB

The KGB plays a seminal role in Gorbachev's new policy agenda. To achieve this, there has been a sophisticated change in KGB operations and analysis. To win the hearts and minds it is shifting away from old Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and stereotypes, and attaching greater emphasis on the 'human factor'. This is being initiated by the new KGB Chief, Valdimir A Kryuchkov, who, at an extraordinary conference at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs between July 25-27, 1988, stated that 'the Soviet security service is waging a stubborn and complicated struggle. We attach great importance to the human factor, to teaching staff members to think in new political categories'.

The role of Soviet front organisations

Major changes, both in organisation and strategy, are taking place with Soviet front organisations under the direction of the ID. Seventeen direct front organisations now call themselves 'closely cooperating non-governmental organisations' and maintain consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). One organisation currently playing a key role in gaining greater respectability for Soviet fronts is the Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations (CONGO) which co-operates closely with ECOSOC. Representing a number of Soviet fronts, CONGO has been actively lobbying the UN to provide a greater role for 'non-governmental organisations' in UN activities. Furthermore, there are indications that a whole new generation of Soviet front organisations is being spawned with no overt ties to current fronts, making them more difficult to identify.

These changes represent part of a concerted effort to break down the negative images which the West has successfully associated with these front organisations. The ID has ordered its fronts to adopt a flexible approach with regard to non-communist organisations, and even conservative ones. Communist dogma must be set aside to deny the West 'an

enemyâ\200\235. Genrich Borovik, chairman of the Soviet Peace Committee, which directs the World Peace Council, stated last year that â\200\234we want the World Peace Council, too, to become a more pluralistic organisationâ\200\235.

In keeping with Gorbachev's new benevolent approach, front organisations and Communist Party affiliates worldwide are going to increasingly embrace the Soviet's new political thinking by distancing themselves from harsh Marxist-Leninist rhetoric. This is slowly occurring both in the Communist Party of Great Britain and the South African Communist Party (SACP) both of which are changing their policy programmes. Despite this moderating approach, Soviet disinformation campaigns against the West remain, and will continue to remain, at an all time high as part of the battle of perceptions that the Soviet leadership is currently waging.

SOVIET REGIONAL OVERTURES

Soviet policy changes toward South and southern Africa are, again, not due to any special favour on Moscow's part, but due rather to a micro-level extension of the Soviet Union's new global political offensive. The Soviet Union's approach to South Africa is similar to its approach to the US or any other protagonist - remove the notion of an enemy.

In response to these changes in Soviet policy, South Africa clearly needs to adopt a guerilla-type foreign policy approach toward the Soviet Union - the need for flexibility to both

engage the Soviets where opportunities avail themselves, while able to pre-empt Soviet initiatives in the region. The country should avoid engaging in the politics of spite with the West by playing the Soviet card. South Africa's approach should be premised on the assumption that the Soviet Union is in a weaker position in the region than is South Africa.

In addition, Soviet irritations with the revolutionary incompetence of the ANC and its Stalinist support organs inside South Africa are real enough. Consequently, South Africa is in a stronger position not to have to meet the demands and preconditions laid down by the ANC for negotiations. What has emerged in southern Africa is a coincidence of interests between South Africa and the Soviet Union, that provides scope for some degree of rapprochement. :

Reconsidering the costs of intervention

Given the Soviet need to withdraw its military commitments from regional conflicts, for economic reasons, the strategic importance of these areas to the Soviet Union is in the process of being down-graded. Soviet military disengagement from southern Africa is an example, both with respect to Angola and Mozambique. The use of military options against both UNITA and the MNR has been shelved, with political solutions now becoming the next best option. These developments provide a number of opportunities for South Africa to fill the emerging vacuum in the region. The Soviet Union though, through political influence operations, will continue to use any political resolution of the regional conflicts to reinforce the perception that it has become a stabilizing factor in world affairs.

The question of the armed struggle

Serious considerations by Soviet policy analysts to the continued effectivity and usefulness of national liberation struggles in third world countries, in the light of Gorbachev's new political thinking, has important implications for South Africa's future dealings with the ANC and SACP. In a paper delivered to assembled representatives of communist parties, at a conference held by the World Marxist Review - the theoretical journal of the

CPSU run by the International Department â\200\224 Soviet scholars shocked their compatriots when they suggested that armed force should not be used in class struggles because of â\200\234the concept of a non-violent worldâ\200\235. The paper went on, stating: â\200\234today, revolutionary tasks should be tackled in the context of the struggle for survival, and this struggle concerns all people regardless of their class affiliation . . . paradoxically, the class adversary (capitalists) should become a partner in the efforts to solve this universal problemâ\200\235. The Soviet delegation was simply expanding upon Gorbachevâ\200\231s desire for â\200\234mutual cooperation and

understandingâ\200\235 with the West to help save the Soviet Union. Ideological wars of â\200\234national liberationâ\200\235 in far distant lands have become less important now that the engine of global socialism (the Soviet economy) is facing collapse. As a result, the Soviet Union is becoming increasingly intolerant of subsidising wars of a national liberation that are showing no tangible results. The case of the ANC provides a good example.

This new political thinking was not immediately received with much enthusiasm from assembled delegates, including Essop Pahad of the SACP, to whom the armed struggle is central to their revolutionary strategy. Nevertheless, there are indications that Soviet affiliated communist parties and Soviet supported â\200\234liberation movementsâ\200\235 are slowly adapting to Soviet thinking. The armed struggle will be replaced with â\200\234peaceâ\200\235, â\200\234dialogueâ\200\235 and â\200\234negotiationâ\200\235. Notwithstanding assurance given by the secretary general of the ANC, Alfred Nzo, in the ANCâ\200\231s May issue of Sechaba â\200\224 that the Soviet Union fully supports the ANCâ\200\231s armed struggle â\200\224 the demotion of the ANC is becoming increasingly evident.

At a meeting between South Africa and Soviet academics in Surrey, England, in March this year, the Soviet delegation, led by Anatoly Gromyko, agreed that South Africaâ\200\231s problems could best be solved by a round table conference of all interested parties. As one British intelligence analyst commented, this would place the ANC on the same footing as Inkatha. A week later, Dr Boris Asoyan â\200\224 former Soviet ambassador to Lesotho and now deputy chief of the Department of African Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, and a member of the ID â\200\224 stated that â\200\234we also believe that there is really no alternative to a peaceful solution to South Africaâ\200\231s problemsâ\200\235.

The likes of Dr Boris Asoyan and Anatoly Gromyko â\200\224 head of the Africa Institute â\200\224 as well as the thinking emanating from Soviet institutes generally, are representative of serious thinking on the part of the Soviet leadership, and not the thoughts of lightweight intellectuals. All fall under the control of the powerful International Policies Commission which oversees the work of the ID. These think-tanks are, in turn, arms of the ID, that flesh out policy changes initiated by the CPSU.

With respect to South Africa, the political battle will supersede the military one â\200\224 due to the latterâ\200\231s clearly limited success rate. National liberation struggles contradict the new Soviet push for a â\200\234non violent world for disarmamentâ\200\235. Both the ANC and SACP are therefore leaving the door open for the possibility that they will be forced to abandon the armed struggle and opt for talks with the South African Government. This is already apparent in the SACPâ\200\231s latest discussion document â\200\224 The Path to Power.

POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

With Soviet policy changing, South Africa faces a number of new challenges which demand careful responses:

â\200\224 The most important challenge is the possibility of both the ANC and SACP renounci

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violence thereby forcing the South African Government to react with a political, rather than military, solution. One of the obstacles to the ANC renouncing violence remains the existence of the hard-liners centred around Chris Hani and Umkhonto We Sizwe - the armed wing of the ANC. The further ascendancy of Hani within the ranks of the ANC will marginalise the importance of the organisation with respect to its relations with the Soviet Union. Clearly, the South African Government will have to develop a well thought-out response to the real possibility of the ANC attempting to seize the moral highground as the peace makers. Accelerated internal reform, aimed at broadening the democratic base, is one important way to neutralise the effects of this possibility.

In preparation for the likelihood of talks with the South African Government, the perception is already being created by ANC propagandists that the end of the apartheid regime is near. This is in an attempt to turn a military defeat into a political victory it

will be claimed that it was the ANC's national liberation struggle that brought the South African Government to the negotiation table. The power projection factor will be crucial in how government deals with a non-violent ANC in the eyes of the South African population. :

Improved relations with the Soviet Union will result from that country's willingness to circumvent the economic isolation of South Africa. Two-way trade should therefore be encouraged. Increased economic relations will also help open up the possibility of relations that have not previously existed with other countries.

South Africa would clearly gain some political benefit if it developed structural relations with the Soviet Union even if only at trade mission level. This would further counteract Western efforts to economically isolate South Africa and would simultaneously undercut the ANC's position internationally. Less hostile relations with the Soviet Union may well result in the United States treating South Africa more positively - as a strategic, rather than a human rights issue. This would undermine the emotional underpinnings of the sanctions campaign.

With regard to regional issues, concessions must be avoided if nothing is to be gained. Future agreements that include the Soviet Union must be self-reinforcing and should include negative consequences if breached. The Soviet Union's willingness to, at least temporarily, withdraw from the region provides a window of opportunity for South Africa to play a more positive role regionally. '

Though there are indications that overt propaganda against South Africa is on the decline, covert disinformation and political influence operations by both the KGB and ID are likely to increase. A warming of RSA/Soviet relations will have to take this aspect of Soviet foreign policy into account.

In the final analysis fundamental systemic and economic pressures in the Soviet Union have forced the leadership of that country to re-evaluate their positions internationally. This is being demonstrated in changing Soviet policies, both at home and abroad and has created unique opportunities for both the Western powers, and regional powers, such as South Africa. Just as the West now has a unique opportunity to both influence and benefit from the course of future events in the Soviet Union through the active promotion of greater two-way trade, and cultural, academic and tourist links so South Africa has the opportunity to benefit from improved bilateral relations with the Soviet Union. While the door is still open, South Africa should be seizing upon the opportunities being presented by circumstances in the Soviet Union.

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