

The decline of Soviet power

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What would be the future of international relations if Soviet power and influence suffered a serious and prolonged decline? Would such a development lead to conflict or would it lead to a new peaceful era in international relations?

Predictions abound concerning the imminent decline of Soviet power and communism generally. Prominent Western analysts, both conservative and liberal, have pointed to the plethora of problems Moscow faces which appear to make Soviet decline inevitable: economic stagnation, lagging technical development, bureaucratic obstruction of needed economic reform, increasing ethnic tension within the USSR, the mounting economic and political problems of Eastern Europe, setbacks in the Third World, and the much diminished appeal of Marxism generally. Soviet officials have also openly acknowledged many of these problems and have warned of dire consequences for the Soviet Union if they are not resolved. Mikhail Gorbachev himself, for example, declared that ethnic tension within the USSR could endanger «the destiny and integrity of our state».¹

Unlike Soviet officials, however, many Western observers regard the purportedly imminent decline of Soviet power as presaging a far less threatening, even benign, international relations system in the near future. Writing about «Soviet overreach and the demise of the Cold War», John Mueller predicted:

Therefore, if the Cold War evaporates as the Soviet Union begins to act like an ordinary Great (or semi-Great) Power rather than as the carrier of a messianic universal ideology, one of the few remaining potential causes of major war will no longer be around. It will be the end of the world as we know it.²

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¹ Bill Keller, «Gorbachev Warns on Ethnic Unrest», *The New York Times*, July 2, 1989.

² John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 214.

Conservatives also anticipate a benign international order as a result of declining Soviet power. In his latest book forecasting the «death of communism in the twentieth century», former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski concluded «that democracy - and not communism - will dominate the twenty-first century»³. Francis Fukuyama, currently deputy director of the Policy Planning Staff at the US Department of State, went even further. According to him, Soviet power and the appeal of Marxism have declined so markedly that the world has come to the «end of history»:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.⁴

Fukuyama went on to predict that the decline of Marxism as a force in the world «means the growing 'Common Marketization' of international relations, and the diminution of the likelihood of large-scale conflict between states».⁵

Of course, not all Western observers agree that Soviet power is declining. There are those who warn that Gorbachev may be overthrown by hardliners who revive the policies of previous years.⁶ On the other hand, there are those who warn that Gorbachev may not be overthrown, that his perestroika might succeed in reversing the Soviet decline, and that as a result Moscow may become a more formidable foe to the West than it ever was before.⁷

But whether they see the decline of Soviet power as likely or unlikely, most Western analysts seem to regard this prospect as desirable. The less powerful the USSR becomes, the less it will be able to threaten the West and international order generally. A dissenter from this point of view is Paul Kennedy who sees Soviet power declining, but does not view this process as a benign one for the rest of the world: «Those who rejoice at the present-day difficulties of the Soviet Union and who look forward to the collapse of that empire might wish to recall that such transformations normally occur at very great cost,

³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), p. 258.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, «The End of History?» *The national Interest*, n.º 16, Summer 1989, p.4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ One Soviet conservative leader, Yegor Ligachev, indicated his desire to continue aiding revolutionary regimes and groups in the Third World; Moscow TASS in English, August 5, 1988.

Western scholars predicting Gorbachev's downfall have focused on how the conservatives would reverse his domestic policies. They imply, however, that foreign policy would also be changed. See «Reading the Gorbometer», *The Economist*, March 11, 1989, p. 48, and Peter Reddaway, «The Threat to Gorbachev», *The New York Review of Books*, August 17, 1989, pp. 19-24.

⁷ See, for example, Judy Shelton, *The Coming Soviet Crash* (New York: The Free Press, 1989).

and not always in a predictable fashion».⁸ Kennedy, however, does not spell out what this «very great cost» might entail.

What would be the future of international relations if Soviet power and influence suffered a serious and prolonged decline? Would such a development lead to conflict or would it lead to a new peaceful era in international relations? This article will examine what a decline in Soviet power may mean for international relations generally and for American foreign policy in particular. Specifically, I will explore what a decline in Soviet power could mean for four areas that have long been the focus of Soviet-American rivalry: Europe, Central Asia, the Far East, and the Third World. The article will conclude by analyzing what choices American and Western foreign policy makers will face as a result of declining Soviet power.

What will be argued here is that the decline of Soviet power is not likely to herald the dawn of a new peaceful era in international relations. Conflict is not only likely to continue, but may well increase as a direct result of the decline of Soviet power. The decline of Soviet power, then, will not mean that the security problems faced by America and the West will vanish completely. Instead, the problems related to the Soviet threat will diminish, but other problems will increase.

Europe

The decline of Soviet power has occurred most strikingly in Eastern Europe since the latter part of 1989. Orthodox regimes were overthrown in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Except in Romania where the Soviets had the least influence, this change of government occurred peacefully. Indeed, far from opposing democratization in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev appears to have actively supported it. In addition to democratization, Gorbachev has acquiesced to the reduction of Soviet troops in Eastern Europe (including their complete withdrawal from Hungary and Czechoslovakia), and the reunification of Germany (though there remain differences between Moscow and

⁸ Kennedy also warns that «... there is nothing in the character or tradition of the Russian state to suggest that it could ever accept imperial decline gracefully. Indeed, historically, *none* of the overextended, multinational empires... the Ottoman, the Spanish, the Napoleonic, the British - ever retreated to their own ethnic base until they had been defeated in a Great Power war, or (as with Britain after 1945) were so weakened by war that an imperial withdrawal was politically unavoidable». Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), p. 514.

the West concerning what the relationship of a reunified Germany to NATO and the Warsaw Pact should be).⁹

This Soviet retreat from Eastern Europe - which until recently seemed unimaginable - was undertaken voluntarily by Gorbachev. The USSR was not driven out of Eastern Europe by force, though it may be Gorbachev withdrew because he concluded that preserving Soviet influence in the region via orthodox Marxist regimes would become increasingly costly and difficult. It could be argued that this largely voluntary Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe presages a future of peaceful relations on the continent. This, unfortunately, is not necessarily the case; the Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe is already causing tension in several areas.

Eastern Europe has long played host to a number of ethnic rivalries. Many east European nations did not win their independence until the end of World War I. The inter-war years were a period of marked territorial and ethnic conflict among them. For the most part, the imposition of Soviet power throughout Eastern Europe suppressed these conflicts. The Soviets, however, did not eliminate these conflicts altogether. Now that they are withdrawing, some of them are already starting to re-emerge. There is tension between the new regimes in Hungary and Romania over Romania's treatment of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania; discrimination against the Hungarian minority was not eliminated with the overthrow of Ceaucescu. Similarly, discrimination against the Turkish minority continues despite the ouster of the orthodox Marxist regime in Bulgaria - which may mean that tension between Turkey and Bulgaria will continue in the future. A certain degree of tension has also reemerged between the Czechs and the Slovaks in Czechoslovakia. Finally, the new Polish government has stated its deep concern that a reunified Germany would reclaim the formerly German territory which Stalin awarded Poland at the end of World War II. Tension between German and Polish inhabitants of western Poland is also possible.¹⁰

Another source of tension is the impact of democratization in Eastern Europe on the USSR's non-Russian republics, especially in Europe. This is already apparent in the Baltic states, but also in Byelorussia, the Ukraine, and Moldavia. Soviet approval of

⁹ On the dramatic changes occurring in Eastern Europe during 1989, see Bernard Gwertzman and Michael T. Kaufman, eds., *The Collapse of Communism* (New York: Times Books/Randon House, 1990). See also R. Jeffrey Smith, «U.S., Soviets Reach Troop-Cut Agreement», *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1990, and Celestine Bohlen, «Warsaw Alliance Split on Germany», *The New York Times*, March 18, 1990.

¹⁰ Alan J. Day, ed., *Border and Territorial Disputes*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1987), pp. 29-44, 52-56, 79-80, and «Where the Real Nations Are in the Center of Europe», *The New York Times* (Week in Review), April 1, 1990.

democratization in Eastern Europe, as well as Moscow's military withdrawal from the region, has apparently been one of the primary causes of the rise of non-Russian nationalist movements. Each of the Baltic states is seeking independence. There are also strong nationalist movements rising in the Ukraine and Byelorussia which seek independence (these two already possess seats at the UN General Assembly). Moldavian nationalists seek reunification with Romania.

But whereas Gorbachev has voluntarily withdrawn from Eastern Europe, his forceful actions in Lithuania recently demonstrate that he is not willing to allow it to become independent anytime soon. This may be because if he allows Lithuania or all the Baltics to become independent, all other non-Russian republics would probably demand independence too. The Soviet military along with the increasingly vocal Russian nationalists are apparently pressuring Gorbachev not to allow this.¹¹ Gorbachev, then, may have to keep the USSR intact just to keep his job, though its preservation may be his own preference too. But while Gorbachev may be able to deny independence to the non-Russian republics through force or just the show of force, he cannot eliminate nationalist aspirations. These independence movements may pursue their goals through either peaceful or violent means, but in their case they can make continued Russian rule over them costly and difficult. Eventually, Gorbachev and the Russian people may decide that the cost of holding onto non-Russian republics far outweighs any benefits they might derive, just as the electorates in Western Europe decided with regard to their colonial empires. But unless and until they do decide this, there is likely to be continuous tension and perhaps even conflict with the USSR over the future of the non-Russian republics.

Another possible source of tension is German reunification. Poland is not the only nation which is uneasy about the prospect of a reunited Germany. Although Gorbachev has acquiesced to Germany's reunification, he has insisted up to the present that Germany not be exclusively linked to NATO. At first, Moscow proposed that Germany should be neutral. But all other European states, including those in the Warsaw Pact, objected to this. Others fear that a neutral Germany will be an isolated Germany which seeks to enhance its security through unilateral means - a prospect which would only increase tension. More recently, Gorbachev has suggested that Germany remain part of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact alliances until a comprehensive European security pact can be arranged. Many

¹¹ Michael R. Gordon, «Soviet Military Is Reported to Reassert Itself at Kremlin», *The New York Times*, April 13, 1990.

in the West fear, however, that a comprehensive European security pact, like the League of Nations, would require unanimous agreement to act and would thus be ineffective.¹²

It is possible that Gorbachev may allow Germany to reunify as well as remain part of NATO - he has, after all, given up so many other seemingly sacrosanct Soviet domestic and foreign policy positions. He might give this one up too. Unless he does this soon, however, tension is likely to grow between Germany and the USSR. A particular cause for concern will be the continued presence of Soviet troops in East Germany. German public opinion is likely to want this presence removed quickly, and tension will result if the Soviets do not comply.

Of course, the Soviet Union and certain East European countries are not the only parties concerned about a reunified Germany. Several West European countries as well are uncomfortable with the prospect that Germany will become the most important state within the European Community instead of just being one of three main states. It is possible that concern about Germany in the east and the west may result in a tendency to recreate, if only to a small extent, the diplomacy of the *entente cordiale* before World War I which united Britain, France, and Russia against Germany. Finally, while many observers have noted other nations' concerns about Germany, Germany will certainly have its concerns about others too. Indeed, German public opinion may react negatively to cooperation with other European states if Germany is the only nation called upon to reassure others about their concerns while no one reciprocates vis-a-vis Germany.

It is doubtful, though, that Western European nations would abandon over 45 years of cooperation and allow tensions to grow among them. Nevertheless, the rapid Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe, possible tension and possible conflict there, probable conflict within the USSR, and the rapidly occurring reunification of Germany are all introducing a greater degree of fluidity and uncertainty into European politics than has existed since the onset of the Cold War. It is possible, of course, that the NATO allies will be able to agree upon a common approach to these problems. Yet even if this is the case, maintaining peace and stability could be a far more complicated task in the era of declining Soviet power than at the height of the Cold War. And if the NATO allies cannot agree upon a common approach to this task, the problem will become even more complicated.

¹² Craig R. Whitney, «Soviets Flesh Out View on Germany», *The New York Times*, April 11, 1990; Thomas L. Friedman, «U.S. Rejects Ideas Raised by Soviets on German Future», *The New York Times*, April 12, 1990; and Henry A. Kissinger, «Germany, Neutrality and the 'Security System' Trap», *The Washington Post*, April 15, 1990.

Central Asia

The past few years have witnessed several non-Russian nationalities become increasingly assertive about their complaints and demands vis-a-vis Moscow. Groups have appeared in the Baltic republics calling for complete independence from the USSR. Ethnic conflict has broken out in the Caucasus between Armenians and Azerbaizhanis. Violence has also taken place in Georgia.

If Soviet power declines markedly, ethnic tensions and non-Russian demands for independence are only likely to increase. This could occur not only in the European USSR, but also in the Asian borderland regions of the Caucasus (where violence has already occurred) and Moslem Central Asia (which up to now has been relatively quiescent).

Since the Iranian revolution, some Western observers have predicted the spread of Islamic fundamentalism to Soviet Central Asia.¹³ It is not clear, however, that the Iranian brand of Islamic fundamentalism would have widespread appeal in this region.¹⁴ A more powerful force may simply be nationalism. If nationalist movements emerge (as they have in the Caucasus), Moscow may benefit to some extent since these groups often oppose each other's interests and may turn to Moscow for support. This is just what the Armenians and Azerbaizhanis did during their dispute over a predominantly Armenian enclave within the Azerbaizhani republic. Plenty of other such disputes are possible due to the convoluted borders which the Soviets established in these regions.¹⁵

Nevertheless, many of these nationalities see Soviet domination as the root cause of their problems. If it appeared that Soviet power was declining, nationalist rebellions might well erupt in this region. Perhaps these groups, especially if they acted separately, could not hope to expel the Soviets with their own forces. But they might, as in Afghanistan, be able to wage a protracted insurgency that Moscow is unable to crush. Soviet Moslem rebels may decide that if only they can keep an insurgency going long enough like the Afghan mujahideen did, the Soviets will eventually weary from it and withdraw.

¹³ Moscow's fear of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism to Soviet Central Asia is discussed in Alexandre Bennigsen, «Mullahs, Mujahidin and Soviet Muslims», *Problems of Communism* 33:6 (November-December 1984), pp. 28-44.

¹⁴ While the rulers and the overwhelming majority in Iran are Shia, the majority of Soviet Moslems are Sunni. While Azerbaizhan is predominantly Shia, one report indicates that the opposition movement there identifies less with revolutionary Iran and more with secular Turkey. Bill Keller, «Turkic Republics Press Soviets to Loosen Reins», *The New York Times*, September 3, 1989.

¹⁵ The territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaizhan which flared up in 1988 is well known. The borders Moscow established between the Central Asian republics in the National Delimitation of 1924 could also give rise to conflict between different ethnic groups there. See Geoffrey Wheeler, *The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), pp. 124-28.

Can Soviet Moslems really launch a protracted insurgency? They might if they could obtain arms. Arms, though, have become increasingly available on the black market in the USSR.¹⁶ In addition, rebels in the Caucasus and Central Asia may be able to obtain arms and sanctuary in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and China (just as the Afghan mujahideen did in Pakistan and Iran).

Aiding anti-Soviet rebels would involve obvious risks to neighboring states. But if they perceived Soviet power to have declined significantly, the USSR's Asian neighbors may find they have a strong incentive as well as the opportunity to support rebel groups. Turkey and Iran may each fear that unless they help rebels in the Caucasus, the other will do so and eventually gain influence in the area if the Soviets eventually retreat from it.¹⁷ Even east of the Caspian, which Turkey does not border, Iran may fear the Turkic-speaking peoples there would become oriented toward Istanbul unless Tehran aids them. Similarly, Iran and China might compete to support rebel groups in order to prevent the other from dominating these regions. Finally, a number of countries (including Iran's rival Saudi Arabia) might be able to funnel aid to Central Asia rebels via Afghanistan.

Despite their declining power, the Soviet leadership might attempt to maintain its control of these areas with conventional forces and find itself fighting an endless insurgency as in Afghanistan. Then again, the Soviets might decide to cut their losses by granting independence to these non-Russian nations but maintain Moscow's influence through playing them off against each other as well as against their Turkish, Iranian, Afghan, and Chinese neighbors. In either case, the decline of Soviet power in the Central Asian borderlands is likely to lead to a significant amount of conflict in this vast region. As with Europe, maintaining peace and stability in this area will become far more difficult if the USSR becomes weaker than if it remained strong.

The Far East

The decline of Soviet power could dramatically alter the international relations of the Far East also. Facing a much reduced Soviet threat, China might well feel less constrained from pursuing a more aggressive policy toward those states which relied most heavily on

¹⁶ Stephen Sestanovitch, «Soviet Chaos: Gun play ... » *The Washington Post*, July 23, 1989.

¹⁷ During the January 1990 crisis in Azerbaijan, the Iranian government did nothing to encourage the Azeris to revolt. President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani and his supporters seemed to fear the growth of a movement for a reunited Azerbaijan independent of both the USSR and Iran. Iranian conservative leaders, however, saw the crisis in Azerbaijan as an opportunity to spread Islamic revolution. See «The Other Country with Some Awkward Azeris», *The Economist*, January 20, 1990.

Moscow for military support - Vietnam, Mongolia, North Korea, and India. China, for example, might adopt a much tougher line with Vietnam if Chinese leaders calculated that Moscow could do little to harm Beijing or help Hanoi. Specifically, China might attempt to achieve predominant influence in Cambodia and Laos as well as threaten Vietnam directly if Hanoi persisted with policies Beijing objected to.

The Chinese might also see the decline of Soviet power as an opportunity to reassert Beijing's influence in Mongolia - which Moscow detached from a weakened China shortly after the Bolshevik revolution. In addition, the hard-line Beijing government might adopt a more supportive line toward North Korea if the Soviets were in less of a position to compete with China for influence there. China would probably also adopt a more aggressive policy regarding its border disputes with India if Beijing had less to fear from Moscow. China, of course, also has longstanding border disputes with the USSR itself.¹⁸

The decline of Soviet power would not only have serious implications for China's relations with Moscow and its allies, but also for China's relations with Washington. To the extent that China's fears of the Soviet Union are reduced, Beijing's need for American friendship and support will also be reduced. Under these circumstances, China would be less hesitant to act against American interests.

If Tokyo sees a more aggressive China's actions harming Japanese interests in the Far East and South East Asia, it might decide that more active efforts to project its interests are required, especially if American public perception of a declining Soviet threat and the budget deficit result in America playing a reduced role in the region.

The smaller states of the region, though, might be fearful of a stronger Japan as well as of a less moderate China. The smaller states may conclude that a continued American presence is their preferred means of countering China and Japan.

Should such a situation arise, it would be impossible for the United States to remain friends with its three traditional friends in the region - the Chinese, the Japanese, and the smaller Asian nations. If a serious Sino-Japanese dispute arose, the United States would undoubtedly support democratic, capitalist Japan over an undemocratic, socialist China. Tension between Japan and the smaller Asian nations, though, would provide the United States with more difficult choices. A positive American response to the smaller Asian states' concerns about Japan could alienate Tokyo. Yet American failure to respond to their

¹⁸ A useful map showing the territory Russia took from China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is contained in Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Soviet Foreign Policy since World War II*, 3rd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989), p. 171.

concerns could lead them to turn to other powers for support, such as China or a weakened Russia.

Maintaining stability in the Far East could become more difficult if Soviet diplomacy is able to exploit differences between China and Japan and between them both and the United States. Indeed, China and Japan may even compete with each other for influence over a weakened Soviet Union. Granting economic and other concessions to Japan might be one way for a weakened Soviet Union to gain Japanese support against Chinese territorial and other demands vis-a-vis the USSR.

Conflict in the Far East is not necessarily an inevitable result of the decline of Soviet power. Nevertheless, maintaining peace and stability in this region will be vastly more complicated if this occurs than during the past few decades when China, Japan, and most non-Marxist states regarded the USSR and its allies as the primary threat to their security.

The Third World

While the Third World has been one of the primary arenas of Soviet-American rivalry since the 1950s, its importance for the Soviet Union would undoubtedly decline markedly in an era of receding Soviet power. The Soviets have already begun to withdraw from the Third World since Gorbachev came to power. This process would accelerate if the USSR becomes weaker. Most affected would be Moscow's Marxist Third World allies. The USSR may no longer be willing or able to heavily support and subsidize Marxist Third World states as it has in the past. Many of the newer Third World Marxist regimes, which Moscow has not supported to the extent it has Cuba and Vietnam, are already unstable. These may become even less stable. Some Marxist regimes might be overthrown altogether or become embroiled in endless civil war.¹⁹ Others might conclude that the USSR can no longer help them and so they will seek to remain in power through changing their foreign and domestic policies in order to attract Western support.

Vietnam and Cuba have received much greater Soviet assistance than other Marxist Third World states. Moscow, however, may no longer be willing or able to support them in an era of declining Soviet power.²⁰ Without Soviet assistance, Vietnam might find itself

¹⁹ Some, of course, have been embroiled in civil war for many years now: Afghanistan, Cambodia, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Nicaragua. The Marxist regimes in these countries would undoubtedly find it much more difficult to continue fighting their internal opponents if they received much less Soviet military and economic assistance.

²⁰ The Gorbachev leadership's dissatisfaction with Vietnam's and Cuba's inefficient use of Soviet economic assistance is noted in Stephen Sestanovich, «Gorbachev's Foreign Policy: A Diplomacy of Decline», *Problems of Communism* 37: 1

confronting a far more aggressive China. Rather than face China on its own, Vietnam would probably seek to make some accommodation with Japan, ASEAN, and even the United States. To achieve this, Vietnam would have to moderate its behavior toward Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

Cuba under Castro, by contrast, would probably resist any accommodation with the United States even if Soviet aid to Havana were severely curtailed.²¹ Seeing the Soviet Union as no longer being willing or able to support revolution, Castro might attempt to make Cuba the primary support for revolution in Latin America, southern Africa, and possibly other regions. Castro, however, would find large-scale Cuban intervention such as occurred in Angola or the Horn of Africa difficult to undertake without Soviet support and in the face of American hostility. A Cuban leader other than Castro might give up hopes for revolution and seek accommodation with the United States in the event of Soviet aid being curtailed.²²

Yet while the decline of Soviet power may result in Marxist Third World states being less able to threaten their neighbors, it would not lead to the end of conflict in the Third World by any means. In previous debates between regionalists and globalists, regionalists frequently pointed out that the USSR is not the source of conflict in the Third World, but that local issues are instead.²³ The decline of Soviet power will not eliminate the causes of regional conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli dispute, tension between Iraq and Iran, Indo-Pakistani hostility, ethnic conflict in South Africa and the Horn of Africa, and many others.

In the future, however, the Soviets may no longer be willing to transfer weapons to Third World states on concessionary terms. States receiving them on this basis may find themselves cut off and hence at a disadvantage vis-a-vis their internal and external opponents. However, states willing and able to buy Soviet weapons for hard currency will undoubtedly find a weakened Soviet Union eager to sell. Poorer states may find other suppliers willing to supplant the USSR: China, North Korea, Syria, Iraq, Libya and many

(January-February 1988), p. 13. On recent Soviet arms transfers to Vietnam, Cuba, and other Marxist Third World states, see U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers*, 1988, (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, June 1989), pp. 111-14.

²¹ On Gorbachev's and Castro's conflicting policies regarding relations with the United States and support for revolution, see Bill Keller, «Gorbachev Signs Treaty with Cuba», *The New York Times*, April 5, 1989.

²² Just as Yugoslavia under Tito, Cuba under Castro has played an extraordinarily large role in world affairs given the size of his country. But as with Yugoslavia after Tito, Cuba after Castro may play a far more modest role in international relations.

²³ One eminent regionalist recently acknowledged that the decline of superpower competition in the Third World would by no means eliminate the sources of conflict in the Middle East; William B. Quandt, «The Superpowers and Middle East Crises», *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 23:1 (July 1989), pp. 1-8.

others have large inventories of Soviet weapons already to fuel several conflicts for years to come. In addition, weapons are also available from Western and, increasingly, Third World arms producers.

Nevertheless, Third World conflicts may be less intense without active involvement on the part of the USSR and its allies as in the past. Such conflicts will certainly possess much less potential for superpower confrontation if the USSR is not involved in them. On the other hand, the decline of Soviet power would have one negative effect with regard to conflict in the Third World: America will not be able to put pressure on the Soviet Union to restrain its allies, keep conflict limited, or effectively resolve conflicts. America and the West, then, may find that they must single-handedly shoulder the burden of managing conflict in the Third World. And it may be important for America and the West to do this for even without Soviet involvement, conflict in the Third World could threaten important Western interests and allies.²⁴ As with other areas, the decline of Soviet power may not make the establishment and maintenance of stability in the Third World any easier than when the USSR was strong.

Soviet Options

Despite its mounting problems, the USSR will obviously remain a superpower in terms of nuclear weapons. The possession of this nuclear arsenal, however, will not be of much use to Moscow in dealing with most of the problems examined here. To the extent that nuclear weapons are useful, they can serve to deter or retaliate against a nuclear or conventional attack by another country; however, they can serve no useful purpose in halting the internal decay afflicting Moscow's rule.

The Soviet Union will also possess powerful conventional forces. If Soviet conservatives become convinced that Gorbachev's reforms will only weaken the USSR, they may seek to reimpose order through force both in the USSR and Eastern Europe. But this will not be easy. In the past, Moscow has only needed to use force in one East European country at a time. It would be far more difficult to restore order by force throughout virtually all of Eastern Europe and much of the USSR at the same time. Indeed, the attempt to restore Moscow's authority by force on such a large-scale may only lead to endless conflict. While

²⁴ An excellent analysis of the Third World's importance to American interests (including those not related to concerns about the Soviet Union) is presented in Steven R. David, «Why the Third World Matters», *International Security* 14: 1 (Summer 1989), pp. 50-85.

the USSR's opponents would not be able to defeat it, Moscow (as in Afghanistan) would be unable to defeat its opponents either. At some point, either a reformist or a conservative Soviet leadership might therefore decide that to grant independence to the non-Russian republics would be the best way of preserving Russia. With over 145 million people, in addition to large nuclear and conventional arsenals, it would still be a great power. This decision is not likely to be made, however, unless the cost of keeping the Soviet Union whole appears to be overwhelming.

If a moderate leadership remains at the helm, the decline of Soviet power might offer Moscow certain diplomatic advantages. To the extent that other nations view the USSR as less of a danger, they might be more willing to cooperate with it, especially if they perceive the rise of other threats. For example, the possibility of a reunified Germany could provide an incentive for Poland to adhere voluntarily to the Warsaw Pact. In addition, by making concessions to Japan on the Northern Territories, Moscow would pave the way for a greatly improved relationship with Tokyo; both might find that they had a common interest in working together to thwart possibly hostile Chinese aims.

The likelihood of Moscow reaping diplomatic opportunities as a result of its declining power, though, may be limited. The Soviet Union may simply be beset by too many problems internally and on its periphery to take full advantage of these opportunities. Although the USSR might want to cooperate with the West in resolving conflicts in the Third World, Moscow may simply not be in a position to contribute much to this process in regions distant from the USSR.

As has been argued here, the decline of Soviet power may not necessarily lead to a more peaceful world. Indeed, a greater volume of conflict than currently exists may be generated because of the decline of Soviet power. The reason for this is that up to now the strong degree of Soviet influence in some areas or the strong fear of the Soviet threat in others have suppressed many nascent conflicts. The decline of Soviet power will provide increased opportunity for these nascent conflicts to become actual or highly probable ones, especially within the USSR and around its periphery. Nor will the decline of Soviet power remove the sources of many of the Third World's perennial conflicts.

How would this affect American defense policy? No non-nuclear war occurring in an era of Soviet decline but rising conflict would affect American security interests as much as the possibility of a direct Soviet-American confrontation now or in the past. Yet while each individual conflict that takes place in such a world may not represent a great threat to

American interests, the volume of conflict that might take place (as outlined here) could, in the aggregate, seriously do so. The United States would face extraordinary challenges if conflict erupted between and within East European states, tensions mounted in Western Europe over how to respond to this, insurgency broke out in the USSR's non-Russian republics, the USSR's neighbors from Turkey to China fueled Central Asian rebellions, China adopted a more aggressive policy toward its neighbors, Japan pursued an independent foreign policy, and conflict in the Third World grew. These crises will be all the more difficult to manage because a weakened USSR may be unable to defend its interests effectively.

If a significant decline in Soviet power could result in a chaotic world wracked by conflict which the United States will find difficult to manage, then the question American foreign policy makers will face is: to what extent does the United States wish to see Soviet power decline? This will be a difficult problem for Washington to come to terms with as American foreign policy makers have since the end of World War II focused their attention on how to strengthen the United States vis-a-vis the USSR. However, if Soviet power declines to the extent that it no longer pursues expansionist aims but finds itself on the defensive instead, it is not clear that American interests would be best served through helping further weaken the USSR to the extent that Moscow is unable to prevent conflict breaking out on its periphery.

The perpetuation of Soviet rule over peoples who want it to end in order to cynically preserve America's leadership role is not what is being advocated here. If the decline of Soviet power seems inevitable, America and its allies have a strong moral as well as realpolitik interest in working for peaceful instead of violent change. The West would probably have no interest in seeing weakening Soviet power in some border areas replaced by that of a more vigorous neighboring dictatorship.

Another concern of American foreign policy makers will be that while Soviet power may appear to decline, the possible resulting breakup of the Western alliance, decline in Western defense expenditures, and other Western actions might contribute to the resurgence of Soviet power later. The problem American and Western statesmen may face, then, is one of steering a course between actions tending to strengthen the USSR and others which would weaken it precipitately.

Whether Soviet power actually will continue to decline dramatically remains to be seen. If it does, however, international relations and foreign policy making could become vastly more

complicated for America and the West than they have been in the era of Soviet strength. Those who predict that the decline of Soviet power will lead to a benevolent international order only paid attention to the problems associated with the diminishing Soviet threat and not the other problems that could emerge as a result of Soviet decline.