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Coit D. Blacker

THE COLLAPSE OF SOVIET POWER IN EUROPE

Soviet military power has been an enduring preoccupation of U.S. policymakers for better than forty years, its presumed menace one of the great constants of the age. Our understanding of that power and the perceived menace have changed dramatically, however, as a direct consequence of Mikhail Gorbachev's program of radical economic and political reform. Nowhere has the changing face of Soviet power been more apparent than in Europe. The presence of almost 600,000 Soviet troops in Europe symbolized and sustained for several decades the grim reality of the continent's postwar division. Today the partial withdrawal of these forces, coupled with the expectation of additional reductions, signals the start of a new era. With these redeployments begins a period of profound political change in Europe, the most significant, in fact, since the defeat of the Axis powers at the conclusion of World War II.

If the rapid disintegration of the postwar order in Europe took Western leaders by surprise, it stunned, confused and demoralized their counterparts in Moscow. What began as a well-conceived strategy to recast the tone and substance of Soviet security policy in Europe all but dissolved in the face of an extraordinary political upheaval that the Soviet leadership appears not to have anticipated. As a result, Kremlin leaders now confront the virtual collapse of Soviet power on the continent. Moreover, this collapse comes without a corresponding erosion of authority and influence on the part of Moscow's erstwhile adversaries to the west.

Gorbachev and his colleagues did not labor to attain supreme power in the U.S.S.R. only to expedite their country's decline. They were seeking instead to ensure that the Soviet Union would enter the 21st century, in Gorbachev's words, "in

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a manner befitting a great power." But upon assuming power, they discovered their nation's decline was already well advanced, largely as a consequence of a deeply troubled economy. Only through substantial reform, they thought, could this precipitous slide toward economic ruin be halted and then reversed. Exactly how far-reaching that reform had to be in order to accomplish economic renewal became apparent only in retrospect. By that time, however, the process threatened to consume not only the architects themselves, but the very system it was designed to save.

Key to Gorbachev's ambitious strategy was a period of peaceful, evolutionary political change. It was essential that Moscow's allies and adversaries, including the United States, recognize the processes underway in the Soviet Union, welcome and facilitate them, and adjust their own policies accordingly. Since the fall of 1989, however, events have overtaken Moscow's carefully constructed plan for Europe, resulting in a kind of policy "free-fall." Today, the Kremlin leadership has all it can do simply to respond to events as they occur.

II

From the mid-1940s to the late 1980s two goals lay at the heart of Moscow's European policy: to safeguard the territorial and political gains attained at such enormous cost in the final phase of World War II; and to secure admission to, and influence in, the remainder of Europe. Confronted with a cohesive community of Western states able to arrest the advance of Soviet power beyond the line that came to demark the continent's division, the Soviets were forced to settle for their first objective—hegemony in the East—to the long-term detriment of their second—an institutionalized role in the West.

As Europe's de facto East-West split solidified, the Soviets invested significant resources to garrison a community of "socialist" states in Europe, remade in all important ways in the Soviet image. Thus by the mid-1950s, eastern Europe was securely linked to the U.S.S.R. through a complex series of reinforcing bilateral and multilateral ties that affected virtually every aspect of the region's political, military and economic life. Yet Moscow's larger vision of Europe never faded. The Soviet leadership repeatedly in the 1950s called for the convening of an all-European conference to overcome Europe's division, specifically by implementing a multilateral nonag-

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gression pact and a series of bilateral security guarantees. The United States, as a non-European power, was to be excluded from these arrangements. Once in place, the new system would supplant NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and all foreign military forces, including those of the United States, would be withdrawn from the continent. The Soviet Union, then, would be *primus inter pares* politically and militarily.

The resounding lack of support in the West for these initiatives did not deter the Kremlin from offering them, at irregular intervals. At a meeting of Warsaw Pact foreign ministers in Bucharest in 1966 the call went out once again—this time shorn of its blatantly anti-American tone—and the result was different. Much reduced in scope, and with the United States and Canada as central participants, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe finally got under way in the fall of 1972 in Helsinki. That this conference failed, utterly, either to legitimize the Soviet position in eastern Europe or to enhance its influence in western Europe was not apparent to the Brezhnev leadership for a number of years. Soviet leaders at that time looked upon the CSCE as an ideal instrument for attaining a position in European affairs fully commensurate with what they termed the "worldwide shift in the correlation of forces" in favor of the allied socialist states.

What Soviet leaders failed to understand was that, in order for them to reap substantial rewards from détente, the West required a perceptible and sustained reduction in the Warsaw Pact's military threat. It also needed to see a measurable loosening of the Kremlin's political hold over eastern Europe. Absent these steps, Moscow's proclamations of pacific intentions toward the noncommunist states of Europe rang hollow. Moscow's attempts to overcome the continent's postwar schism under a Soviet aegis were thus rendered stillborn.

Between the mid-1970s and early 1980s the Kremlin undertook a far-reaching and expensive effort to modernize its conventional and nuclear military capabilities in the European theater. This move provoked deep alarm in Western capitals. Among other consequences, the Soviet buildup resulted in NATO adopting the Long-term Defense Program in 1978 to enhance its ability to withstand a Warsaw Pact conventional military attack. The following year NATO also made its famous "dual track" decision, in which the Western allies agreed to field a new generation of nuclear-armed intermediate-range

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missiles in Europe if a negotiated solution to prevent their deployment could not be reached.

The Kremlin also continued to lend strong support to the repressive regimes of eastern Europe, most of which did their best to quash the kinds of dissenting political expression supposedly guaranteed by the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. Thus with the rise of the Solidarity trade union movement, the Polish government imposed martial law in 1981 with at least Moscow's blessing, if not at its instigation. By the time Soviet leader Yuri Andropov died in February 1984, the Kremlin's political fortunes in Europe were at their lowest ebb in several decades. The abbreviated tenure of Andropov's successor, Konstantin Chernenko, witnessed only a modest change for the better. The two superpowers announced in January 1985 that they would resume negotiations on intermediate-range nuclear forces and the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks, which the Soviets had broken off 13 months earlier. It was in these far from auspicious circumstances that in March 1985 the Soviet Central Committee elected Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev general secretary of the Communist Party. At 54 years old, Gorbachev was twenty years younger than the man he replaced.

Within four years Gorbachev transformed Soviet foreign policy beyond recognition. In short order he abandoned many of the principles his predecessors had routinely invoked to justify their country's international conduct. He jettisoned as atavistic existing Soviet positions in several arms control settings, including the INF negotiations and START. He also displayed a willingness to entertain foreign-policy outcomes that previous leaders had consistently rejected as detrimental to Soviet interests.

Gorbachev moved with particular alacrity to overturn the Brezhnev legacy in Europe, where twenty years of rigid and shortsighted diplomacy had produced by the mid-1980s a policy conundrum. On one hand, to continue along the present path seemed certain to prolong the impasse in East-West relations. On the other, to change course by acceding to Western demands in INF negotiations, for example, was equally unpalatable: the Warsaw Pact's theater military posture, including its nuclear dimension, was central to Moscow's European policy.

To resolve this dilemma Gorbachev essentially reversed Soviet priorities in Europe. In other words, he placed the

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fostering of fully normalized relations with Western countries, long the second-order goal of Soviet policy, ahead of what had always been the Kremlin's primary objective on the continent, the maintenance of virtually absolute control over the east European glacis.

Gorbachev selected two vehicles to signal this sea-change in policy. The first was the decision to eliminate the Warsaw Pact's superiority in nuclear and conventional military capabilities through a combination of unilateral measures and negotiations with the West. With the successful conclusion in September 1986 of the Stockholm Conference on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in Europe, the Soviets hinted broadly at their interest in restructuring the NATO-Warsaw Pact balance. They even harkened back to proposals made by the West 13 years earlier in the long-running, and ultimately fruitless, Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions negotiations. This nascent dialogue was furthered in 1987–89 during the so-called Mandate Talks, convened to prepare the way for a new set of negotiations on limiting conventional forces in Europe. At the Mandate Talks the Soviets communicated their readiness to accept military parity "from the Atlantic to the Urals," an offer that, if backed by action, would require them to make deep, asymmetrical reductions in areas of traditional advantage, such as deployed manpower, tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery.

The Soviets coupled these measures with a series of pronouncements on military doctrine underscoring the "defensive" character of the Eastern alliance. The Warsaw Pact's Political Consultative Committee, for example, declared in May 1987 that "the military doctrine of the Warsaw Treaty . . . is subjugated to the task of preventing war, both nuclear and conventional." The pact also emphasized support for reductions in forces and armaments "down to the level where neither side, in ensuring its defense, would have the means for a sudden attack against the other side, for starting offensive operations in general."[1] Gorbachev then announced to the U.N. General Assembly in December 1988 plans to reduce unilaterally the size of Soviet armed forces by 500,000 troops within two years, including the withdrawal of 50,000 troops from eastern Europe. Thus by the time NATO and Warsaw Pact

[1] "On the Military Doctrine of the Warsaw Pact Member States," *Pravda*, May 31, 1987.

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countries gathered in Vienna in March 1989 for the start of talks on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), the Soviets had indeed effected a dramatic volte-face in their European arms-control policy. Moscow had set the stage for what most observers felt confident would be the most productive series of exchanges on East-West military issues in postwar history.

The second signal of the sea-change in policy was the Soviet leadership's decision to encourage a process of indigenous political reform in eastern Europe. This initiative, however, precipitated revolutionary rather than evolutionary change and all but eviscerated the logic that inspired Moscow's initiatives on arms control and defense doctrine. It appears Gorbachev believed he could control and direct the forces of reform in order to produce a fundamentally new political order in Europe—one denoted by greater cooperation and mutual stability.

The Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact allies, however, declined to play the part Moscow had scripted for them. The political disintegration of East Germany in late 1989, followed less than a year later by the unification of the two German states—and on terms set by the Federal Republic no less—was particularly traumatic for the Kremlin. These and other developments in the region constituted mortal blows to the Soviet position in eastern Europe.

III

Given the enormous stakes for the Soviet position in Europe, what possible combination of factors could have impelled the leadership to undertake such a high-risk strategy? The first factor was the continuous decline in Soviet political fortunes in Europe between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, colored by the gnawing sense that the European military balance was evolving in ways disadvantageous to the Warsaw Pact. The second was the precipitous decline of the Soviet economy.

The Kremlin's position in Europe never looked more secure than in 1975 at the conclusion of the CSCE. Moscow had attained formal Western acceptance of the political and territorial status quo in eastern Europe—or so it seemed—in the first several paragraphs of the Helsinki Final Act. The Brezhnev leadership doubtless also found to its liking the second part of the document, which encouraged the 35 signatories to develop more extensive economic and trade relations. Only

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the inclusion of the call for "the freer movement of peoples and ideas" and respect for fundamental human rights gave Moscow pause. The Soviet leadership appeared to believe that it could look to its stalwart allies in eastern Europe to contain the seemingly moderate pressures for political reform, and thereby extract from the CSCE process most of the benefits and few of the costs.

Ten years later, however, the bargain struck in Helsinki looked very different. While conservative regimes still held sway in eastern Europe, they did so through increasingly repressive measures that widened the gulf between the rulers and the ruled. In Poland that gulf became a yawning chasm, resulting in Solidarity's spectacular rise, and apparent fall, in 1980–81. Elsewhere, most notably in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, governments also found themselves under constant siege from reform elements that drew much of their legitimacy from the phrases embedded in the Helsinki Final Act.

The steady deterioration in East-West political relations in Europe coincided with a highly visible modernization and expansion of Warsaw Pact theater military capabilities. Although not without a certain utility from Moscow's perspective, the buildup all but destroyed any lingering Western optimism about the future of Soviet policy in Europe.

The most potent symbol of what came to be seen as the progressive militarization of the Kremlin's European policy was the deployment, beginning in 1977, of the intermediate-range SS-20 ballistic missile. The Soviets protested that the missile constituted only a modest modernization of its theater nuclear posture and not, as the West claimed, an entirely new threat to NATO. The SS-20 nonetheless provoked widespread consternation within the Atlantic alliance and resulted in its 1979 decision to offset the Soviet deployments by placing American intermediate-range missiles in Europe: the Pershing II and the ground-launched cruise missile. NATO's deployments, however, were contingent on the United States and the Soviet Union failing to reach an agreement to limit these kinds of theater-range nuclear systems.

The dismal state of Soviet relations with the West in the early to mid-1980s constituted an important precondition for change in Moscow's European policy. Whether these factors were seen at the time to be of sufficient urgency to warrant a revolution rather than a simple shift in approach is impossible to know. But the virtual paralysis characteristic of Soviet

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diplomacy during this period seemed to suggest that a revolution was not under consideration. In any event, the problem was bequeathed to a new leadership, which hesitated only momentarily, and then overthrew the entire legacy of its past.

The most salient and time-urgent factor promoting change in Moscow's European policy, however, was the steep decline of the Soviet economy. The cost of maintaining the largest military establishment in the world, including 31 combat-ready divisions in eastern Europe equipped with the most modern weapons the Soviet system was capable of producing, was an enormous drain on the country's industrial and technological resources. As Soviet economic growth slowed during the last decade, the share of the national income devoted to military requirements actually increased. This was true even though the rate of increase in military spending between the late 1970s and the early 1980s was cut in half, from 5 percent a year to roughly 2–3 percent. By the second half of the 1980s, even this modest increase in military expenditures could not be sustained.

Military spending imposed an obvious and onerous burden on the Soviet economy. It absorbed resources that, in the judgment of Soviet and Western economists alike, would have been better spent on the modernization of the country's aging and inefficient industrial, transport and agricultural sectors. To compound the problem, the economic reforms introduced between 1985 and 1989 were extraordinarily costly in material terms, demanding the identification and utilization of additional capital and human resources. For perestroika to succeed the government had to reorder radically the country's economic priorities. One key to that strategy was the reallocation of resources from defense to investment and consumption accounts.

To date the results of perestroika have been disappointing, to say the least. Eagerly anticipated increases in productivity have mostly failed to materialize. This has served in turn to increase the allure of the Soviet Union's own "peace dividend"—the capture for more productive purposes of some of the resources hitherto earmarked for the military. While reductions in defense expenditures of 25 to 50 percent for armed forces and military industries cannot be achieved without significant near-term strategic costs to the Soviet Union, the long-term benefits could be considerable. The current leadership understands this better than anyone. This fact

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partly explains its haste to shrink both the size and attendant costs of Soviet armed forces, particularly those in Europe and Asia. Hard economic necessity, as well as the desire to convince the West of the seriousness of Moscow's "new look," may thus have inspired Gorbachev's dramatic demobilization edict of December 1988 and his assent to the November 1990 CFE accord.

Since many of Moscow's troubles appeared to stem from the decision after World War II to seal off the "socialist community" from contamination by the West, Gorbachev may have considered greater openness to be a solution. Glasnost for the Gorbachev regime has had several distinct meanings. Among other things, it has meant a greater tolerance for diversity in political opinion, a less restrictive cultural milieu, and less secrecy in military and national security affairs. It also implied a new receptivity to social, political and economic forces long deemed subversive to the interests of Europe's communist states. Gorbachev began to speak and write of the importance of "universal human values" in defining Soviet interests and security. He also noted the sterility of such time-honored Marxist-Leninist concepts as "the international class struggle" and "proletarian internationalism." Soviet authorities and academics thus called for "new thinking" in the formulation of foreign policy, and challenged allies and adversaries alike to join in the search for novel answers to old problems.

The use by senior Soviet officials of a vocabulary that their predecessors would have found wholly unintelligible was designed to signal an important departure in policy. The theories and practices of Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev had divided the world into two camps, with each side irreconcilably opposed to the values, purposes and goals of the other. Gorbachev, by contrast, described in February 1986 a world of converging interests, a world both "interdependent" and "integral."[2] Such allusions to the notion of intersystemic integration—the gradual overcoming of the political and economic barriers separating East and West—were for seventy years a cardinal heresy among orthodox communists. That Gorbachev seemed eager to sanction a process of integration reflected his deepening conviction that the Soviet Union would fall still farther behind the rest of the world economically,

[2] Mikhail Gorbachev, "The Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," *Pravda*, Feb. 26, 1986.

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socially and politically if it continued to remain in a self-imposed exile.

Diagnosis, however, is no cure. To end the Soviet Union's isolation Gorbachev needed to sanction the elimination of the twin pillars of Moscow's postwar security policy in Europe: its vise-like hold over eastern Europe and the offensive military posture of the Warsaw Pact. Gorbachev has already completed the first step, deciding not to intervene militarily within eastern Europe to arrest the process of revolutionary change. This decision could not have come easily. But the disastrous state of the Soviet economy, the growing political and social restiveness of its own population and the perceived need not to delay in opening a new and more cooperative East-West relationship all deprived the leadership of any real choice in the matter. The second step is now underway: the complete withdrawal of Soviet forces from Czechoslovakia and Hungary scheduled for mid-1991, and eventually from eastern Germany, as well as the signing of the CFE agreement.

Some Soviet leaders may regret the decisions to accept military parity with the West and to allow eastern Europe to chart its own political and economic destiny. But the process cannot be halted, let alone reversed, at this late date. The issue, then, for Gorbachev and his allies is not how to recover what has been lost, but how to take advantage of the opportunities that induced them to take such an extraordinary gamble in the first place.

IV

The question of cost—measured in terms of lost political control and military potential—must also have figured prominently in the Kremlin's decision to overturn its European policy. By what logic did Soviet leaders decide to run the very real risks that inevitably attend a policy change of this magnitude? What did they seek to gain by eliminating the Warsaw Pact's military "overhang" in Europe? And without it, how would the Kremlin now induce the West to pay sufficient attention to Soviet interests?

The leadership appears to have calculated that the ability to intimidate the West militarily had outlived whatever usefulness it may have once had. Far from advancing Moscow's interests, Western perceptions of the "Soviet threat" had become a net liability. Moreover, if the underlying purpose of Soviet policy had indeed changed, from safeguarding the

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Soviet position in eastern Europe to the far more ambitious goal of fully normalizing political and economic relations with the West, then eliminating the principal source of Western anxiety was a necessary first step.

Especially during the early years of the new policy, the Soviets may have anticipated that the loss of their conventional military advantage could be put to surprisingly attractive uses. Among its potential consequences might be the erosion of NATO unity, the complication of Western efforts to initiate or complete controversial military programs, the undermining of domestic political support for high levels of defense spending, and even the partial withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the continent. These objectives may still hold some allure for Soviet leaders, although the priority attached to them must have declined, as they have been forced in recent months to shift their ambitions from enlisting Western support for the creation of an all-European community of states to staving off the complete collapse of Soviet political and military power on the continent.

Three further considerations probably played a part in the Soviet strategy for retaining influence in eastern Europe. First, by sanctioning the outcome of the Polish "roundtable" negotiations in April 1989 and the results of the parliamentary elections two months later, the Soviet government had communicated its tolerance of far-reaching political and economic reforms in eastern Europe. Even as the Soviets anticipated serious challenges to those communist governments, they may have convinced themselves that a new brand of socialism—cleansed, reformed and renewed—would emerge in the region. Under such conditions, close, if qualitatively different, relations could be maintained between a liberalizing Soviet Union and a newly invigorated community of European communist states.

Second, unless the leadership was prepared to continue indefinitely the de facto military occupation of eastern Europe, some modification of the existing relationship was essential. Compelling the region's allegiance at gunpoint was enormously expensive, both politically and materially. Letting go might be costly, but perhaps no more so than the expense to the Soviet economy of maintaining 580,000 combat-ready troops in the heart of Europe. Assuming a corresponding reduction in the West's military, a significantly smaller Soviet military presence in eastern Europe might be enough to

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protect the Kremlin's essential geopolitical stake in the region. It would also contribute to a more stable East-West balance of power, at lower levels, and save the Soviet treasury tens of billions of rubles.

Finally, some in the leadership appear to have believed that whatever loss of authority the Soviet Union might suffer in eastern Europe would be more than offset by a net increase in its influence in western Europe. This appears to have been at the core of Gorbachev's thinking, for example, when he set forth his vision of a "common European home" in a July 1989 address in Strasbourg, France, to the Council of Europe.

Soviet leaders assumed for forty years that war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, while perhaps unlikely, remained a possibility. Beyond the imperial function served by the deployment of Soviet forces in eastern Europe, the Kremlin's continental military posture therefore had a clear military purpose: deterring the outbreak of war and, should deterrence fail, terminating war on favorable terms. The Soviet military probably did not have much confidence in an outright victory at any time during the postwar period. Kremlin planners appear to have been keenly aware, for example, of the weakness and vulnerability of the country's industrial, technological and transport systems. The potential for rapid nuclear escalation in Europe further complicated matters, in that it could precipitate a strategic exchange between the two superpowers and deprive either alliance of a meaningful victory.

Warsaw Pact forces were nonetheless structured to permit major offensive operations from the very outset of hostilities. This strategy retarded the country's development by depriving the Soviet civilian economy of precious resources, without which the leadership could not hope to navigate the difficult passage from extensive to intensive economic growth. Soviet decision-makers thus began to reassess fundamentally the military threat in Europe. They arrived at the somewhat paradoxical conclusion, to paraphrase Raymond Garthoff, that as the West had grown more powerful economically and militarily, it had also become less dangerous.[3] Gorbachev and his supporters, embracing this logic, could legitimize an entire series of decisions affecting the size and character of Soviet

[3] Garthoff offered this interpretation at a March 1989 session of the Henry A. Kissinger Study Group on Arms Control, convened by the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C.

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armed forces that would have been impossible under the old regime.

The leadership's conclusion that war with the West had become a remote possibility generated relatively little overt opposition within the ranks of the military. Soviet military planners nonetheless seemed determined to place their own imprimatur on the notion of "defensive defense." Their concept differed operationally in some important respects from that outlined by senior civilian authorities. To date, however, the Soviet military appears supportive of, if not exactly enthusiastic about, the "new thinking" in defense policy. This suggests an imperfect consensus among civilian and military officials on the need to redefine the size and mission of Soviet armed forces.

V

How much of their original vision for Europe can Gorbachev and his colleagues still hope to see implemented in the months and years ahead? Two factors will be important in determining the Kremlin's relationship to Europe in the 1990s: internal developments within the U.S.S.R. itself and the direction of change in the new Europe.

Seldom has the ability of a country's leadership to conduct an effective foreign policy been so dependent on its domestic condition. The vital question confronting Gorbachev and his followers—beyond their own political survival—is whether economic and political reforms can soon generate sufficient material, social and political rewards to offset their own costs. How this contest plays out will directly influence the development and character of Soviet foreign policy. If, for example, the economy begins to recover and a new political system takes root, the leadership could expect more respect and leverage in its dealings with the West and several countries in eastern Europe. In particular, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary could all look again to the Soviet Union if they come to regard a unified Germany as a mixed blessing. If economic conditions worsen, undermining efforts at political reform and exacerbating already severe national tensions within the Soviet Union, Moscow could find itself less able to shape international and domestic events. This could be true with or without Gorbachev. The Soviet Union, much like the Ottoman Empire, could quickly become a great power in name only, its

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leaders struggling against ever-worsening odds to preserve a modicum of national unity and international autonomy.

Despite the fact that it is now beyond the capacity of Kremlin leaders to determine events in central and eastern Europe, two distinct developments could still slow the rapid erosion of its position. First is the emergence of a viable community of socialist states along the Soviet Union's western frontier, linked to Moscow and one another through a reinforcing series of bilateral and multilateral ties. But this appears unlikely; the extremely low standing of most east European communist and neocommunist parties strongly suggests that reformed socialism is not about to stage a political comeback anytime soon.

A second development that could redound to Soviet advantage is the appearance of a politically active and economically expansionist Germany. East Europeans might seek to balance the growth of German power by cultivating friendly relations with their former oppressors in Moscow. The reluctance of Warsaw to press for the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Poland suggests that steps to guard against possible resurgent German hegemony have already begun. While Poland's position vis-à-vis Germany is indeed special, it is not unique. Many Czechs and Slovaks are old enough to remember the tragic events of 1938 and 1939.

This is not to suggest that a unified Germany must inevitably pose a threat to the security of its neighbors. Recent history indicates just the opposite. But simply by virtue of its economic strength, size and geographic position, the new Germany will deploy greater power within contemporary Europe than any other single actor. Many of the countries of eastern Europe may seek practical guarantees to assure their sovereignty and independence. To the extent that such assurances can be provided by Europe as a whole—for example, through the CSCE—the need for individual guarantees diminishes. Should an all-European solution fail to materialize, however, the return to a balance-of-power system on the continent cannot be ruled out. In such a context the Soviet Union, or at least Russia, could recoup some of the influence it once enjoyed in eastern Europe, albeit on fundamentally different terms.

If the impulse toward economic integration and political accommodation prevails, the association between eastern and western Europe will only strengthen. If this process of greater integration falters, however, new alliances might emerge either to offset or to draw strength from a Germany militarily

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independent of both East and West. A return to an environment akin to the interwar period—with smaller, more temporal and less stable alliances—might make Soviet power once again decisive in Europe.

VI

Extraordinary uncertainties, dangers as well as opportunities, accompany the Soviet Union's radical departures in policy. The impact of the Gorbachev reforms has obviously been far more extensive than anyone could have predicted.

One important and unanticipated consequence has been the rapid decline of strategic nuclear arms control as the centerpiece of U.S.-Soviet relations. Nuclear arms control, for several decades a substitute for meaningful political discourse, has less relevance in a world where politics has been revitalized and the probability of an intentional nuclear war approaches zero. The signing of the long-awaited START treaty would garner far less attention than earlier strategic weapons accords. This complacency toward START, bordering on indifference, is a measure of just how radically world politics has changed.

Whether, or to what extent, Moscow can recover from the loss of its European empire is impossible to predict. In any event, restoration of the status quo ante is hardly an option. But Gorbachev's gamble could still produce dividends for the Kremlin. The loss of eastern Europe could turn out to be a necessary, if expensive, precondition to attaining a more secure place in a Europe that indeed stretches from the Atlantic to the Urals. As the Soviets are aware, however, a united Europe is only one of several possible outcomes. Moreover, there can be no guarantees that such a community would welcome the Soviet Union as an equal partner.

Herein lies the greatest cost to Moscow of the unraveling of its European policy at the end of the 1980s: in losing control of a process they initiated, Soviet leaders are now forced to respond to the actions and decisions of states whose interests may be different from, or even antithetical to, their own. Unless and until the Soviet leadership can regain the political initiative, this unpleasant state of affairs will endure and further undermine its tenuous hold on superpower status. Gorbachev and his colleagues must now ensure that these difficult times constitute the end of the beginning and not, as they must sometimes fear, the beginning of the end.

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