

# SO GORBACHEV IS SERIOUS ...NOW WHAT?

*It appears that the Soviet leadership, including the military, accepts Gorbachev's diagnosis of Soviet ills and sees no alternative but to attempt a cure. All that is left to discuss is how fast.*

BY GEOFFREY PEARSON

**M**OST OF THOSE WHO study the Soviet Union now admit that significant change is taking place there. The main questions raised are the directions of this change, its duration and the implications for global stability. During a recent visit to the Soviet Union, I was able to explore these questions.

It is important to be clear about the meaning of "significant change." Mr. Gorbachev has described his programme as "a revolutionary re-organization of all aspects of socialist society's life," and "the biggest step in developing socialist democracy since the October Revolution." Perhaps this overstates the case, but even the partial achievement of such goals would indeed mark significant change. Domestically, the programme points towards a decentralization of economic decision-making, new incentives for farmers and small business, a greater choice of candidates for public office, amendment of laws affecting dissent and emigration, more cultural and academic freedom, and a re-examination of Soviet history. In foreign policy, it is intended to substitute the concepts of human survival and interdependence for the doctrine of "imperialist" aggression and international class warfare.

Are these goals being achieved? It is too early to tell whether the re-construction of the Soviet economy will be possible without the dismantling of the central planning system, and even the partial reforms so far underway are unlikely to show results for some years. If anything, the economy shows signs of decline rather than growth.

Consumer goods are as scarce as ever, although consumer services, such as restaurants, are benefitting from greater price competition. Supplies of meat and vegetables remain scarce in Moscow, and the distribution of food generally is unlikely to improve until farmers have both the incentive and the means to market their products. Price reform may well be the key to change, and will be at the centre of political debate in the coming months. If prices are to be even partially de-controlled, so too will

however, and it was apparently for this sin that the Moscow Party head, Boris Yeltsin, was demoted late last year. Clearly, there are limits to *glasnost*, just as there are to social and economic change. But for one who experienced the intellectual conformity of the late Brezhnev years, the degree of change is remarkable. It is hard to believe that this in turn will not lead to change in the political pro-

cess, and that opposition to Party policies will not be able to find wider means of expression. The special Party Congress, to be held in June, will certainly not declare the Soviet Union a multi-party State. But it may well concede that *glasnost* must apply to politics as much as to the press.

Some argue that change of this kind, if significant, is not fundamental and that the socialist system can never resemble our own traditions of democratic pluralism. Indeed, Soviet leaders agree that this is so. But to go on to say or imply that, without fundamental change, the Soviet Union will remain an expansionist state, (a "brutal adversary" in the words of

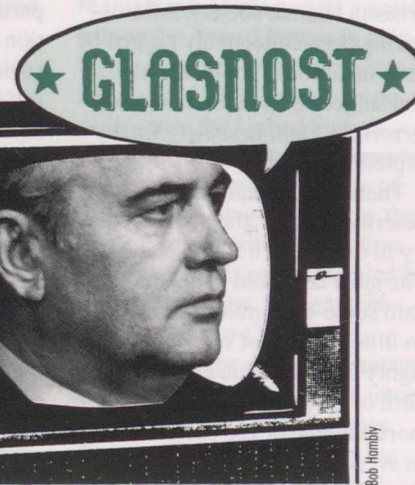


SMASH FOES



BASH TOES!

NO DOZZZZZZE...



bureaucratic control have to be loosened, and this in turn raises fundamental questions about the role of the Communist Party apparatus in directing the pace of change.

Such questions are indeed beginning to be raised publicly. The press is full of tales of official corruption and indifference, and the theatre is becoming a platform for social protest and criticism. The leadership of the Party remains exempt from direct attack,

an American official) with whom the West cannot expect to have relations of confidence, is to go too far.

THE NEW DIRECTIONS OF SOVIET foreign policy did not emerge *de novo* from Mr. Gorbachev's imagination. Already, in Khrushchev's time, attempts were made to stabilize East-West relations and to reduce the burden of defence spending. The achievement of parity in strategic nuclear weapons with the US in the late 1960s led to

the abandonment of the notion that the USSR could fight and win a nuclear war, and to the concept of "equality and equal security." The Strategic Arms treaties of the 1970s process were the major manifestation of this concept. But Soviet encouragement of "national liberation" and class warfare in the Third World was still regarded as legitimate, and this, together with American suspicion of Soviet intentions, led to the effective demise of detente even before the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

existence," without time limits or reservations. He is in favour of reducing or abolishing first-strike weapons and doctrines of counterforce and surprise attack, and accepts that negotiations in Europe should take into account Soviet advantages in tanks and artillery. There is a new willingness to allow rigorous methods of verification, soon to be tested by the intermediate-range missile treaty signed last year but already manifested in the 1986 Stockholm agreements on monitoring of conventional forces in Europe. He supports a role for the UN in peacekeeping and mediation (for example, in the Persian Gulf) and emphasizes the importance of

and bombers. It is unlikely to reduce its forces in eastern Europe without some form of compensation. It will continue to export arms to friends and allies threatened by invasion (Iraq and Angola for example) or by civil war (Nicaragua) if political settlements of such conflicts cannot be found. But such qualifications would apply to the policies of other great powers. What is new is the Soviet readiness to seek stable agreements rather than to gain new advantages or influence. Mr. Gorbachev told the Central Committee in February that the key principle "is recognizing

Gorbachev has built on the Khrushchev legacy, but with greater determination and consistency, and with a better appreciation of the dangers of the nuclear age. He reminds one in some respects of the Lenin of the post-1917 period when the new Soviet state was struggling to survive. Then, as now, dogmatism and adventurism gave way to pragmatism and co-existence. But both Lenin and his brilliant rival, Trotsky, shared the view that Communism in Russia could not endure unless it also triumphed elsewhere. They differed about when and how this would happen. Lenin was cautious. Trotsky played the part of Danton during the French revolution - "toujours de l'audace."

Mr. Gorbachev, on the other hand, appears to have accepted the literal meaning of "peaceful co-

global partnership on issues such as pollution of the environment, famine, and the rules of trade. Here is an example of this "new thinking," taken from Gorbachev's February statement on Afghanistan.

Just as the agreement to eliminate intermediate- and shorter-range missiles is to be followed by a series of further major steps towards disarmament, with negotiations on them already underway or being planned, likewise behind the political settlement in Afghanistan already looms a question: which conflict will be settled next? And it is certain that more is to follow.

States and nations have sufficient reserves of responsibility, political will and determination to put an end to all regional conflicts within a few years. This is worth working for. The Soviet Union will spare no effort in this most important cause.

None of this means that the Soviet Union will sacrifice core interests. It will not accept deep cuts in its ballistic missile inventory if these are not balanced by US concessions on submarines

ing that every people and every country have freedom of social and political choice."

Some believe that this change is more apparent than real and that in any case it will not endure. They suspect that Mikhail Gorbachev will lose his job if he threatens the powers of the Party bureaucracy or the status of the armed forces. This may be so. But it would appear that the Soviet leadership, including the military (which no longer has a vote in the Politbureau - the Soviet Communist Party's senior decision-making body), accepts Gorbachev's diagnosis of Soviet ills and sees no alternative but to attempt the cure of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. What is at issue is the pace of change. This will vary as the vested interests involved negotiate the terms on each issue - limits of free speech for example. The measure of success is likely to be the productivity of the Soviet economy, which is, as we can see

autarchy. The West cannot be a decisive factor in influencing Soviet politics, except possibly in one respect; we can meet Mr. Gorbachev halfway on questions of arms control and disarmament, which are at the top of his agenda. If the Strategic Arms Reductions negotiations succeed, and lead on to real progress in reducing disparities in conventional arms in Europe, the current Soviet leadership will benefit from strong public support. My own experience has been that no subject interests the ordinary Soviet citizen more (unless it be the price of bread) than the prospect of better relations with the West, in particular the United States. The popular notion that the Soviet bear is in search of prey, with its overtones of invasion and subjugation, is a hold-over from the early days of the Cold War in Europe. The Afghanistan war kept this idea alive. But it ought now to be critically re-examined.

The implications of this brief analysis for global stability are of two kinds: they could mean that East-West relations undergo the kind of change that relations between China and the West experienced in the early seventies, leading to respect and co-operation if not friendship and alliance; but they would be unlikely to mean significant change in the situation of most of the rest of the world, where population growth, poverty, and social tensions will continue to engender conflict and the flight of refugees. Neither of the great powers appear to have the means or the will to eliminate Third World poverty, even if they have to work together. What they can do is to co-operate to prevent these conditions from endangering the fragile state we now call "strategic stability." Preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping through the UN, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and better control of arms exports, to name obvious examples, can all be greatly strengthened in a new era of detente.

None of the above is bound to happen. But if we do not believe it could happen, and act accordingly, we should not be surprised if it doesn't. □