

AT A RECENT CONFERENCE IN NAKHODKA in the Soviet Far East, a number of Soviet academics and policy-makers expressed the fear that their country's foreign policy might fail. Their anxiety is based on the belief that the West is in danger of missing a unique opportunity to completely restructure its relationship with the Soviet Union. In fact, western missteps at this critical stage could very well reverse the current policy of Soviet retrenchment and cause Gorbachev's removal from power. An adept Western approach, however, could simultaneously advance Western interests and reinforce the present healthy tendencies in Soviet policy.

If Gorbachev continues to adhere to his present course, we are likely to see a string of Soviet withdrawals from the Third World. Western leaders can only welcome such events and indeed have expressed guarded optimism about the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Soviet contributions to a Cuban withdrawal from Angola and a Vietnamese departure from Kampuchea. However, there is a serious question of how much longer Soviet leaders can endure this ongoing series of unilateral retreats with its attendant costs for Soviet prestige in the world.

American leaders faced a similar problem after the fall of Saigon. They worried that a defeat in Vietnam would cause Soviet leaders to doubt American resolve and ability to resist future Soviet expansionism. They assumed that their NATO allies and Japan would doubt American security guarantees and predicted that allies around the globe would sense American impotence and accommodate themselves to the Soviet threat, rather than join with the US against it.

IT IS ONLY REASONABLE TO ASSUME THAT SOVIET leaders have similar anxieties about the unravelling of their global alliances. Soviet pressure on Vietnam over Kampuchea will not increase its chances of maintaining a military presence at Cam Ranh Bay. Its efforts to promote a Namibia-Angola settlement will not demonstrate steadfastness in the eyes of the Mozambican government fighting against South African-backed RENAMO insurgents, or convince ANC fighters in South Africa that the USSR is committed to their cause. When the US was faced with this image problem, it chose a unilateral approach. Its most effective device was to support countries naturally inclined to resist the Soviets, such as China — an alliance which helped shatter any Soviet illusions that the US was relinquishing its position in Asia.

In other parts of the world the US found regional powers, such as Iran, to assume the

IS THE WEST MISSING THE SOVIET BOAT?

A chilly response by Western countries to Gorbachev's new foreign policy is not in anyone's interest.

BY TED HOPF

burden of countering any Soviet encroachments. Though reliance on such regional strong points proved ultimately ineffective, at the time these alliances were formed the Soviets perceived them as evidence of renewed American commitment in the wake of its humiliation in Southeast Asia. Last, and often too casually dismissed, American leaders continually stated that the withdrawal from Vietnam did not signal any loss of power or the resolve to use it.

Judging from the statements of Gorbachev, Shevardnadze and other Soviet foreign policy-makers, as well as recent Soviet behaviour, the Soviet Union has opted for a different antidote to its credibility problem. This has happy consequences for the West, but only if the latter responds in a way that lets the Soviets withdraw from their positions without having to admit total defeat. Gorbachev asserts that the days of unilateralism in international politics are past and that the only solution to regional conflicts must be at the negotiating table. One could dismiss such statements as mere rhetorical boilerplate, but for the fact that the Soviets are engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity.

While the US tried to restore its credibility by sending arms to its friends, the Soviet Union, in some cases at least, has cut its allies adrift. Mozambique has been left virtually defenceless against continual attacks by RENAMO guerrillas. Moscow has denied Syria advanced missiles capable of reaching Israel. In both cases, the Soviets have ignored military obligations under Treaties of Friendship and Cooperation.

DIPLOMATICALLY, THE SOVIETS SUPPORT THE resolution of regional conflicts in ways which contribute to the interests of the West. American policy-makers praised the Soviets for their role in softening the negotiating positions of Cuba and Angola in talks with South Africa.

Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and Gorbachev's putative rival, Politburo member Igor Ligachev both pressed Vietnamese leaders to moderate their negotiating postures with the guerrilla coalition opposing the Kampuchean government. The PLO's decision to recognize Israel was probably due, in part, to Gorbachev's personal rebuke to Yasser Arafat that the PLO's previous position was "only an obstacle ... to a just resolution of the Middle East conflict."

Given this welcome trend, how can the West, and the US in particular, increase the chances that such a tendency will continue? The West should do everything possible to involve the Soviets in talks on the Middle East, Southern Africa, the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia and Central America. In the latter case, future Soviet policy regarding military aid to Nicaragua is a litmus test for judging Gorbachev's commitment to negotiated settlements of such conflicts.

THERE ARE THREE REASONS WHY THE WEST should encourage Gorbachev's preference for multilateral solutions to the Soviet credibility problem. First, a responsive Western attitude channels Soviet energies away from searching for new foreign policy adventures to strengthen its image. Instead, the West will give Gorbachev a graceful way out of commitments, while ensuring that any settlement preserves Western interests.

Second, the resolution of these conflicts removes a major obstacle to the further development of detente. It may very well be that Gorbachev's priority of controlling military spending through arms control is precisely what dictates Soviet moderation in the Third World. The West should use Gorbachev's priorities to its advantage.

Last, if one believes that Gorbachev's domestic reform package of *perestroika*, *glasnost* and *demokratizatsiya* is in Western interests, then it is critical that the West help him stave off attacks from his more orthodox colleagues. Conservatives on the Politburo undoubtedly raise serious concerns about a foreign policy that seems to do nothing but make one unilateral concession after another. The orthodox alternative is most likely a hardening of Soviet positions not only in the Middle East or Southern Africa, but also on the central issues of arms control and human rights. A constructive Western response to Gorbachev's foreign policy not only can reduce Soviet activism in areas of importance to the West, but it can also help protect Gorbachev from the attacks of those who would like to return to the days of Brezhnevite stagnation at home and adventurism abroad. □