

# WORDS AND DEEDS: TRANSFORMING SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY

*By studying the words of Soviet leaders we can understand not only what has changed in the USSR but also why.*

BY PAUL MARANTZ

**T**HUS FAR, THE WESTERN REACTION TO Mikhail Gorbachev has been somewhat schizophrenic. He has clearly captured the imagination of the man and woman in the street. "Gorby-fever" and "Gorbymania" have swept much of the Western world. Yet along the corridors of power, most policy-makers are far more cautious and skeptical. Western skeptics are fond of the adage that deeds speak louder than words, and they argue that neither the deeds nor the words of Soviet foreign policy convincingly demonstrate that Gorbachev has broken with the Soviet past. Other less skeptical Westerners argue that while the process is still in its early stages and is dependent upon the continued survival of Gorbachev's reformist approach, it nonetheless has vast significance for the future course of Soviet foreign policy and East-West relations.

It is vivid testimony to the speed with which people adapt to new circumstances and the rapidity with which the extraordinary is accepted as commonplace that there is not a wider appreciation of the degree to which Gorbachev has already transformed the conduct of Soviet foreign policy. Let us imagine for a moment that back in February 1986, at the time that Gorbachev first unfurled his call for "new thinking" in international politics, a skeptical Western observer had advanced a test of Soviet intentions. Suppose he had declared that he would not be convinced that a genuine change had taken place until the Soviet Union had met these conditions:

Soviet troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan; the Soviet Union accepted the American zero-option for the elimination of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces in Europe; the Kremlin agreed to highly intrusive international inspection of its military facilities; the Soviet Union initiated unilateral reductions in its armed forces amounting to ten percent of all its troops and twenty percent of its tanks; Moscow permitted the legalization of Solidarity and allowed it to function as a freely-elected opposition party within the Polish parliament; the Soviet Union exerted its influence on behalf of a political settlement to the con-

flicts in Cambodia and Angola; the jamming of Western radio stations broadcasting to the Soviet Union was ended; Andrei Sakharov and hundreds of other political prisoners were freed; articles by Western scholars and policy-makers began to appear with some frequency in the Soviet press; and Soviet scholars and journalists were allowed to criticize openly the foreign policies of Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev.

Had someone proposed such a sweeping test of Soviet intentions in 1986, Western experts on the Soviet Union would have been virtually unanimous in objecting that the proposed criteria for judging Soviet policy were far too stringent and had little likelihood of being met in the foreseeable future. The experts would have argued that at best a few of these measures might be instituted in the next several years. Yet in the space of less than four years, all of these changes have occurred or are in the process of occurring. Gorbachev has moved far more quickly and comprehensively than virtually anyone thought possible just a few years ago. The concrete deeds have been delivered; they are not just being promised.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM HOLDS THAT DEEDS ARE more important than words in assessing the nature of Soviet foreign policy, but in some ways the reverse is true. After all, specific deeds (such as the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan), can take place for a variety of reasons. A reversal of past policy may be motivated by nothing more than temporary weakness and a desire to mislead the enemy or, alternatively, it may reflect a fundamental reassessment of previous assumptions and a genuine belief that new, more cooperative forms of international interaction are now both possible and necessary. By studying the words of Soviet policy-makers, we can get a better idea of how they conceptualize the foreign policy issues confronting them.

If Soviet thinking about the nature of international politics has really changed, then the policy initiatives of the past four years are far

more likely to be long lasting. Conversely, if the way in which the Soviet leadership conceptualizes international politics has not been altered, then these policy shifts are more likely to be based upon temporary tactical considerations, and many of them might be reversed once the Soviet Union's current difficulties are overcome. Thus, we have to look both at deeds and words so as to be able to ascertain not just *what* has changed, but *why* these changes have taken place.

Four major trends are currently reshaping Soviet perspectives on international politics. First, there is now a far greater appreciation than ever before in Soviet policy-making circles of what has been termed "the action-reaction phenomena" in East-West relations. The traditional Soviet view had been that the foreign policy of the West was dictated by the class nature of the capitalist system. Capitalist states were said to be implacably hostile to the Soviet Union not because of the particular foreign policies adopted by the Soviet Union but because of what the Soviet Union was — a socialist state whose existence demonstrated to the workers of the world that there was a real alternative to capitalist oppression. In stark contrast to this traditional view, Soviet spokesmen now acknowledge that much of Western policy has in fact been a reaction to Soviet actions and that the West is motivated by a real, and not feigned, fear of Soviet aggression.

As a corollary of this, Gorbachev and his associates have recognized that if the Soviet Union wishes to dampen the arms race and to promote cooperative endeavors between East and West, it must first alter those policies which the West finds so threatening. As a recent article in the Soviet press pointedly observed:

We have gotten used to phrases like: "We are mankind's vanguard"; "The future belongs to us"; "We will be victorious on a world historical scale." But have you tried to put yourself in the position of those who, in our opinion, are in the rear guard, to whom the future does not belong, and who, according to our viewpoint, are doomed to depart from the historical arena, doomed to perish? What must their attitude toward us be?... It is no accident that people in the West have