

EAST/WEST RELATIONS

Preparing for the long haul. By Paul Marantz

■ I sometimes wonder whether... a democracy is not uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin:...

he lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath – in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but, once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat... You wonder whether it would not have been wiser for him to have taken a little more interest in what was going on at an earlier date and to have seen whether he could not have prevented some of these situations from arising instead of proceeding from an indiscriminating indifference to a holy wrath equally indiscriminating. (George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* [New York: New American Library, 1951], p. 66.)

■ It is a sad commentary on the sharp decline in East-West relations during the 1980s that the November 1985 summit meeting between President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev was greeted with such enthusiasm and excitement. Despite the almost total absence of substantive agreement at the summit, there was great relief that the superpowers were once again talking civilly to one another. However much we might agree with the sentiment that "it is better to jaw jaw than war war," it must be clearly understood that the superpowers have still

not advanced beyond the first tentative steps toward improved East-West relations.

Moreover, lest hopes for the next Reagan-Gorbachev summit reach unrealistic levels, we need to learn the hard lesson of recent history that summit meetings are a poor vehicle for furthering this objective. Beginning with the first postwar summit meeting in 1955, there have been no less than ten summit meetings between the American and Soviet leaders. And yet, as the present strained international climate demonstrates, none of these has brought about a true stabilization of East-West relations. In some cases, a momentary thawing of the international climate did occur. The 1955 summit produced "the Spirit of Geneva," and the 1959 summit resulted in "the Spirit of Camp David," but in each case fundamental disagreements on critical issues (such as the 'German problem' and the relationship of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union) soon brought a quick plunge back to the depths of cold war animosity.

The most successful of the postwar summits occurred in 1972, when President Nixon and General Secretary Brezhnev signed the ABM Treaty and the first SALT Agreement. However, it should be remembered that these were not achieved overnight. They represented the culmination of more than two

years of patient and laborious negotiation (and it took another seven years before the second SALT Treaty was ready to be signed). Moreover, the improvement in Soviet-American relations that the 1972 summit produced did not endure for very long. By the end of the 1970s' detente was in tatters and cold war tensions had once again reached an acute level.

East-West relations, throughout the long decades since the Russian Revolution of 1917, have resembled an interminable roller coaster ride, with temporary high points giving way to sharp downward plunges. Why has it been so difficult to stabilize relations?

The first reason is that there are a number of fundamental conflicts of interest between East and West which are exceptionally difficult to resolve. Yet as long as they remain unresolved, they thwart a durable improvement in East-West relations. The four most serious of these are the arms race, competition in the Third World, the way in which Soviet control is exercised in Eastern Europe, and Western concerns about human rights in the Soviet Union. We in the West need to find ways to express our profound disapproval of those actions which we find morally repugnant (e.g., the repression of Soviet dissidents, the application of martial law in Poland, or the use of force in Afghanistan) without undermining the arms control negotiations that are needed to lessen the risk of a nuclear confrontation. We need to avoid shooting ourselves in the foot (e.g., by suspending

educational exchanges with the Soviet Union or by refusing to sell them goods that they can readily obtain elsewhere) whenever they engage in conduct of which we disapprove.

The second factor that has contributed to this repetitive oscillation in East-West relations from unrealistic hope to needless despair is the volatility and stereotyped quality of Western perceptions of the Soviet Union. We are ill served by unwarranted optimism at times of cordial relations and bleak pessimism at times of acute tension. George Kennan's melancholy reflection on how democracies approach foreign policy, which was cited at the start of this article, is as true today as it was when he voiced it at the height of the Cold War in the early 1950s.

We need to recognize that the Soviet Union remains a highly authoritarian political system and that there is very little that the West can do to alter this situation. One of the important lessons of the 1970s is that neither economic blandishments (such as trade and loans) nor economic pressures (through embargoes and sanctions) are capable of promoting fundamental change in Soviet practices. Although the idea voiced by President Reagan on the eve of the summit of attempting to lessen mutual mistrust through expanded people-to-people contact and large scale educational exchanges is a very laudable dream, we must soberly recognize that the Soviet leadership is determined to prevent such an opening to the West.