

Chapter II

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

A New Era

The 1980s may be remembered as a watershed era in East-West relations. The enormous changes that were introduced in the Soviet Union did more than catch foreign observers by surprise; they exploded old certainties and dashed conventional expectations with such swiftness that everything previously taken for granted between East and West appeared to be in flux. In this chapter, the exclusive focus will be on changes in the Soviet Union and their ramifications since it has been that superpower's relations with Europe on both sides of the "Iron Curtain" that have chiefly defined the dynamics of the larger East-West balance.

No part of the world has been unaffected by the consequences of Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in the Soviet Union. President Ronald Reagan of the United States, who at the beginning of the decade described the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," ended his term on a genuinely hopeful note — after concluding one of the most important bilateral treaties since arms control negotiations began between the superpowers. The refreshing new Soviet appreciation for reasonable negotiation and the peaceful settlement of disputes has had a positive influence in opening the door to resolution of such far-flung regional conflicts as Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia. It has given new momentum to the United Nations. And it has challenged the broad policy consensus that has been shared by all members of the NATO alliance.

For the NATO alliance, the testing decade will be the 1990s. NATO, in the words of Professor Fen Hampson of Carleton University, "is entering a period of deep structural crisis." (13:13-14) The roots of the crisis can be traced to the changing perceptions of the severity of the Soviet threat, of the concept of flexible response, and of the credibility of the American nuclear guarantee.

In the first instance, the Gorbachev revolution is altering the Alliance's fear of the Soviets. Changes in Soviet rhetoric are one thing, but when they are accompanied by clear shifts in policy, the impact is bound to be significant, particularly in Europe which had grown accustomed to a rigid, even sclerotic, Soviet foreign policy. Gorbachev has spoken of the need for a more defensive posture for Soviet military forces. This has been followed by a string of arms reduction proposals and initiatives as well as an announcement by Gorbachev in January 1989 that by 1991 the Soviet Union would reduce its military budget by 14.2% and arms production by 19.5%. On 30 May 1989 a figure for total defence