

CHAPTER 1

Jack F. Matlock Jr. *The End of Détente
and the Reformulation
of American Strategy:
1980–1983*

ON DECEMBER 26, 1979, a special unit controlled by the Soviet Committee on State Security, the KGB, stormed the presidential palace in Kabul, killing Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, his family, and all who happened to be in the building at the time. It was an act of treachery as the forces were in Kabul ostensibly to protect Amin. The next day, large numbers of Soviet regular troops rolled into the country to make sure an Afghan exile under their control, Babrak Karmal, could seize the reins of the Afghan government and the ruling political party.¹ With this act, Soviet leaders plunged their country into a hopeless war and swept away the last remnants of the fraying détente that had been inaugurated with great fanfare during Richard Nixon's meeting with Leonid Brezhnev in 1972.

President Jimmy Carter reacted to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with a fury that at times failed to take into account the ultimate effect of his actions. He prohibited or severely limited most commercial ties with the Soviet Union. He appealed to athletes throughout the world to boycott the summer Olympic Games scheduled for Moscow in 1980. He closed the small U.S. consulate

1. Many accounts of what happened have been distorted by deliberate Soviet falsification. The most concise and accurate description, based on documents released after the Soviet collapse, can be found in Dmitri Volkogonov, *Sem' Vozb-dei: galereia liderov SSSR* (Moscow: Novosti, 1996), 2:54–63.

in Kiev and required the USSR to withdraw its consular officers from New York. He limited educational and cultural exchanges and allowed the bilateral agreement that provided for them, which had been in force since 1956, to expire. His representatives sponsored condemnatory resolutions in the United Nations. He requested the U.S. Senate to suspend consideration of the SALT II agreement that had been submitted for ratification a few months earlier. Senior U.S. officials let journalists know that the United States would be willing to provide small arms to Afghan forces that resisted the Soviet incursion.

All of these moves were damaging to Soviet prestige, but they were not sufficient to convince the Soviet leaders that they had anything to gain from withdrawing from Afghanistan before they had accomplished their purpose. Except for the UN resolutions, none of these measures received full support from U.S. allies, who for the most part had not been consulted before the moves were announced. Most embargoes of exports simply shifted Soviet procurement to other sources. The Soviet Union needed to import large quantities of grain, and other countries were pleased to sell their products to Moscow when Washington placed limits on U.S. exports. Meanwhile, American farmers chafed at the loss of their largest foreign market.

Some sanctions, such as the attempt to boycott the Olympic Games, were one-time gestures that could have no positive effect after the event had passed. Others, such as the closure of consulates and the suspension of exchanges, were actually contrary to U.S. interests. When the handful of Soviet consular officials left New York, over 700 Soviet officials remained in that city under the auspices of the United Nations. When U.S. officials left Kiev, no resident Americans were left to observe events and maintain contacts with the Ukrainian people. Cultural and educational exchanges had been one of the few avenues open to the United States to communicate with Soviet intellectuals; by suspending them, the United States became an active partner in maintaining the iron curtain.

Any U.S. administration would have reacted vigorously to an

outrage such as the invasion of Afghanistan, but one not taken by surprise might have been more judicious in selecting the most effective means to counter it. One that paid more attention to the implications of Soviet military activities in Africa, the Near East, and the Western Hemisphere, and was willing to make clear that arms control agreements would be impossible if these activities continued, might possibly have deterred it. As it was, however, the Soviet action made Carter look both naïve (by his own admission, it was “the greatest surprise” of his life) and ineffectual, since his response did nothing to reverse, or even moderate, Soviet military action in Afghanistan or elsewhere. Following the prolonged hostage crisis in Iran, the Soviet invasion suggested a shocking loss of U.S. power.

This perception inevitably provided the Republicans with powerful ammunition during the presidential campaign. Their candidate, Ronald Reagan, long a proponent of more vigorous resistance to the Soviet threat, charged that Carter had allowed U.S. strength to decline and had failed to contain Soviet aggression. Carter countered with charges that Reagan’s policies would risk war.² Many Americans found Reagan’s arguments the more persuasive. The feeling that Carter had poorly managed U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, a feeling bolstered by the administration’s inability to resolve the hostage crisis in Iran, doubtless played a role in Carter’s electoral defeat.

For their part, the Soviet leaders were oblivious to the reasons for the U.S. reaction to their invasion of Afghanistan. They considered ratification of the SALT II treaty the ultimate test of U.S. intentions. When opposition developed in the U.S. Senate, it was thought to be the result of a die-hard anti-Soviet sentiment rather

2. For example, on September 22, 1980, Carter told an AFL-CIO convention in Los Angeles that the election “will determine . . . whether we have peace or war.” Subsequently, the White House press secretary acknowledged that the charge was “obviously an overstatement,” but Carter continued to suggest that the sort of policies Reagan had proposed would risk war even if this were not Reagan’s intent. See *Facts on File*, September 26, 1980.

than genuine doubts about some features of the treaty. In Moscow's cynical interpretation, fumbling by the Carter administration while the treaty was before the Senate was evidence of a deliberate attempt to sabotage ratification. For example, Moscow considered the public clamor over the Soviet brigade in Cuba to be a calculated provocation to undermine ratification of the SALT II treaty.³

The Soviet leaders did not consult their experts on the United States before they made their decision to send troops to Afghanistan. Even if they had, it is unlikely that Soviet diplomats would have predicted the vehemence of the U.S. reaction. Senior officials such as First Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kornienko and Brezhnev's foreign policy aide Andrei Aleksandrov-Agentov have since written that, although they considered the invasion of Afghanistan to be a grave mistake, they doubted that the SALT II treaty would have been ratified even if the invasion had not occurred.⁴ Equally pertinent, by not repeatedly warning against direct Soviet military intervention as the Soviet stake in Afghanistan grew, the Carter administration left the erroneous impression that what happened in Afghanistan was of no great importance to the United States. Therefore, the Soviet leaders considered Carter's reaction to the event both unexpected and inexplicable except in terms of a general desire to disrupt U.S.-Soviet relations.

A sharp divergence in each country's understanding of détente lay behind the emotions unleashed by the Soviet invasion of Af-

3. In response to an inquiry from Senator Frank Church about the presence of a Soviet brigade in Cuba, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance unwisely informed him that reports to that effect had no foundation. Subsequent examination of overhead photography, however, revealed that there was, in fact, a Soviet brigade in Cuba. U.S. intelligence agencies had not been tasked with looking for it and therefore had not reported it, but it had been there for years without U.S. objection. When Vance notified the senator of the error, the matter became a public issue because the initial assumption was that the Soviets had recently introduced these troops.

4. See Georgi Kornienko, *Kholodnaia voina: svidetel'stvo ee uchastnika* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia, 1994); and Andrei Aleksandrov-Agentov, *Ot Kollontai do Gorbacheva* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia, 1994).

ghanistan. To the Soviet leaders, détente, or *razriadka* (relaxation), was a strictly limited concept. It meant controlling the U.S.-Soviet arms race (if possible to the Soviet advantage) and not much else. It specifically excluded relaxation in the sphere of ideology, limits on the Soviet “right” to fulfill its “international duty” (supporting pro-Communist insurrections or Socialist regimes), and any “intrusion” in Soviet internal affairs, such as political pressure on behalf of human rights.

The American view was much broader. Most Americans thought that any détente worthy of the name meant relaxation across the board. President Nixon and General Secretary Brezhnev had signed a declaration of principles in 1972 that committed both sides to refrain from seeking “unilateral advantage.” In American eyes, the appearance of Soviet arms, advisers, and Soviet-financed Cuban troops in hot spots in Africa and Latin America violated this agreement. Furthermore, Americans thought that the Helsinki Final Act, signed in 1975, obligated the Soviet Union to alter its practices to permit greater openness and respect for human rights. The invasion of Afghanistan seemed to be the culmination of increasingly assertive Soviet policies on taking advantage of U.S. restraint following its defeat in Vietnam. Therefore, to much of the American public, the promise of détente seemed to have been betrayed even before December 26, 1979. Reagan’s charge that détente had been a “one-way street” was taken as an obvious truth.

The Soviet leaders seemed incapable of understanding the reasons for American disquiet, but, dissatisfied as they may have been with Carter’s policies, they preferred him to Reagan, whom they considered a reckless right-wing ideologue. There was a general expectation in Moscow that Carter would win the 1980 election, and Reagan’s victory came as a shock.

Exit Carter; Enter Reagan

Ronald Reagan’s charge during his campaign that President Carter had allowed U.S. defenses to deteriorate was not mere campaign

rhetoric. He genuinely believed that the United States had become too weak to negotiate effectively. Therefore, when he took office he set as his first priority a restoration of U.S. military strength. He sought an even larger defense budget than the one Carter had requested,⁵ and he set about trying to improve the country's economic performance and shore up its political will.

Reagan considered the negotiating climate to be unfavorable during his first two years in office, and he took his time spelling out in detail his policies toward the Soviet Union. From the very beginning of his administration, however, he set forth several key themes that were to persist throughout his eight years in office. During his first press conference, on January 29, 1981, Reagan stated that he was in favor of negotiations to achieve "an actual reduction in the numbers of nuclear weapons" on a basis that would be verifiable. He also declared that during any negotiation one had to take into account "other things that are going on," and for that reason he believed in "linkage." He also referred to *détente* as having worked to the Soviets' advantage.

These themes, limited as they were, represented a departure from President Carter's approach. In proposing an actual reduction in nuclear weapons, Reagan was implicitly critical of the SALT II treaty that Carter had signed and the Vladivostok Agreement concluded by President Ford, both of which would have placed limits on the number of weapons without requiring a substantial reduction of existing arsenals. The condition that any agreement be verifiable was also intended to differentiate Reagan's approach from Carter's since Reagan had charged that the verification provi-

5. Carter's final defense budget request, submitted to Congress after his electoral defeat, called for a 14.2 percent increase in authorized expenditures for fiscal 1982, equivalent to an increase of 4.4 percent after allowing for inflation. He also projected annual increases of about 5 percent in subsequent years. Reagan subsequently called for an increase in the fiscal 1981 year and an inflation-adjusted increase of 7.3 percent for fiscal 1983. He projected additional increases of about 7 percent annually in subsequent years. See *Facts on File*, January 16, 1981, and March 6, 1981.

sions of SALT II were inadequate.⁶ Reagan's endorsement of linkage was also an about-face in U.S. policy, for the Carter administration had considered arms control too important to be influenced by other issues.

Initially, Reagan's policy neither required nor assumed a fundamental change in the internal power structure in the Soviet Union. Secretary of State Alexander Haig, who spoke in greater detail than Reagan on U.S.-Soviet relations, emphasized that it was not necessary for the Soviet Union to change internally "for East and West to manage their affairs in more constructive ways."⁷ He stressed that the U.S. goal was "to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that aggressive and violent behavior will threaten Moscow's own interests" and added that "only the U.S. has the power to persuade the Soviet leaders that improved relations with us serve Soviet as well as American interests."⁸

Both Reagan and Haig spoke of the Soviet Union as a failed system facing increasing difficulties, and both felt that the growing Soviet reliance on military power abroad, while a danger to the peace, was also a source of weakness at home. They believed that the Soviet leaders would have no choice but to seek accommodation with the West if the United States could demonstrate that the USSR could not save their faltering system with military victories abroad and could not win an arms race with the United States. Haig put it most clearly in an address to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in April 1982 when he remarked, "We must place our policy in the context of important changes that are taking place in the world and in the Soviet empire that may make Moscow more amenable to the virtues of restraint. The Soviet attempt to change

6. The treaty permitted encryption of telemetry from Soviet weapon tests, which would have made accurate verification of some of the treaty commitments exceedingly difficult, if not impossible.

7. Statement to French television network Antenne 2 on February 23, 1981; text in *Department of State Bulletin* (April 1981), 15.

8. Speech of April 24, 1981, to the American Society of Newspaper Editors; text in *Department of State Bulletin* (June 1981), 6.

the balance of power has produced a backlash of increasing international resistance. . . . As a consequence, the Soviet leaders may find it increasingly difficult to sustain the status quo at home while exporting a failed ideology abroad.”⁹

Reagan sounded the same theme, but with a more positive tilt, in his first speech on U.S.-Soviet relations, delivered in May 1982 at Eureka College, where he said: “I’m optimistic that we can build a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union. . . . The Soviet empire is faltering because it is rigid. . . . In the end, this course will undermine the foundations of the Soviet system. [A] Soviet leadership devoted to improving its people’s lives, rather than expanding its armed conquests, will find a sympathetic partner in the West.”¹⁰

The American news media paid scant attention to statements reflecting Reagan’s negotiating stance but concentrated instead on comments he made, usually in response to questions, about the nature of communism and Marxist doctrine. For example, during the same press conference at which he called for negotiations to reduce the number of nuclear weapons, he was asked about Soviet intentions and specifically whether he thought “the Kremlin is bent on world domination.” Reagan replied that the Soviet leaders had consistently said that “their goal must be the promotion of world revolution” and that “the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that. . . . I think when you do business with them, even at a détente, you keep that in mind.”¹¹

Journalists and news analysts repeated this statement out of context for years, as if it had been meant to preclude negotiation rather than to pledge appropriate caution when dealing with people hold-

9. Speech of April 27, 1982; text in *Department of State Bulletin* (June 1982), 43.

10. Speech at Eureka College, May 9, 1982; *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 18, no. 19: 599ff.

11. *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 17, no. 5:66–67.

ing different ideological and ethical standards. Few critics were naïve or dishonest enough to deny that what Reagan said was true; rather, they claimed that “excoriating” the Soviet leaders would make it impossible to deal with them.

Soviet Reaction

Reagan’s frank assessment of the Communist system and its ideology doubtless reinforced the Soviet leaders’ conviction that he would be a difficult and perhaps impossible negotiating partner. However, this was not the cause of the heightened tensions that marked U.S.-Soviet relations from 1980 until at least November 1985. Those tensions were the result of the incompatibility of Soviet and Western concepts of an acceptable relationship. They would have existed, in much the same form, even if the U.S. president had been more restrained in his public comments on Soviet policy.

Fighting intensified in Afghanistan during Reagan’s first years in office. As the free trade union Solidarity gained adherents and influence in Poland, Soviet criticism of the Polish government seemed an ominous prelude to direct intervention; General Wojciech Jaruzelski’s declaration of martial law in December 1981 was obviously in response to intense Soviet pressure. The Soviet leaders continued to deploy a new generation of intermediate-range missiles in Europe and refused to consider either removing them to make NATO deployments unnecessary or limiting them to a small number that would apply to both sides. Arms supplies to insurgents in Latin America increased, as did military support for parties in local wars in several parts of Africa. Jamming of Western radios was intensified. Political arrests and expulsions of dissidents continued; Andrei Sakharov languished in internal exile in a city closed to visits by foreigners. Jewish emigration dropped from tens of thousands a year to a few hundred.

The Soviet message seemed to be: Ratify SALT II or nothing else will work in the relationship. Accordingly, the Soviet leaders

refused any meaningful discussion of other issues raised by the United States, and they initiated a propaganda battle designed to convince U.S. allies in Europe—and, if possible, the American public as well—that Reagan was threatening a nuclear war.

Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov's November 1981 speech on the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution summed up the Soviet reaction to the early Reagan administration. Ustinov accused the United States of "undermining the military-strategic balance" by seeking military superiority, attempting to stop "forces of national and social liberation," and "besieging" the Socialist countries. Ignoring evidence that some terrorist groups were receiving support from the Soviet Union, Ustinov charged that the United States and NATO were employing "the methods of international terrorism." The United States, he charged, had called into question "all that had been jointly achieved" (during *détente*) and had become an "uncontrolled military threat." The Soviet Union, he asserted, "has never embarked and will never embark on the road of aggression."¹²

This, of course, was public rhetoric, designed for a celebratory occasion normally marked by braggadocio and self-congratulation. However, it was also a direct and frank expression of the Soviet leaders' attitude at the time. Their positions in private coincided with those Ustinov expressed in public on behalf of the Politburo. The Soviet leaders were oblivious to the irony implicit in their accusations that the United States sought superiority by planning to do what the Soviet Union was already doing and in their assurances that the Soviet Union was incapable of aggression because it had never indulged in it. Whatever the Politburo had declared to be the truth was, in their minds, the truth, and anyone who questioned it was an enemy.

During Reagan's first year in office, negotiations began with the

12. The Russian text of Ustinov's speech can be found in *Pravda* (November 7, 1981); comments on it by the U.S. embassy in Moscow are in 81 Moscow 13344 (November 6, 1981).

Soviet Union on only one important issue: intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) in Europe.¹³ From 1976 the Soviet Union had begun replacing its nuclear missiles targeted on NATO countries with a much more capable weapon, the SS-20. It was more accurate than its predecessors, had a significantly greater range, was mobile (therefore less vulnerable), and carried three independently targeted warheads. It could strike most NATO capitals in Europe in minutes. NATO countries viewed it as altering the nuclear balance in Europe and, in 1979, decided to deploy a smaller number of U.S. missiles in Europe to counter the threat unless negotiations with the Soviet Union made the deployments unnecessary.¹⁴

The negotiations, which began in November 1981, turned out to be futile, but not because the United States—as some of Reagan’s critics charged at the time—negotiated in bad faith. The initial U.S. proposal to eliminate INF weapons altogether was neither self-serving nor a propaganda gesture. It was actually in the strategic interest of the Soviet Union not to have any nuclear missiles of this type deployed in Europe. Such U.S. missiles on European soil could reach the Soviet Union, but comparable Soviet missiles could not reach the United States. Nor was the proposal offered on a take-it-or-leave-it basis; both Reagan and Haig described it from the outset as an optimum goal that could be reached in steps.

The Soviets, however, refused to negotiate on any basis that would have been acceptable to NATO. By the summer of 1982 it became clear to the Soviet negotiator, Yuli Kvitsinski, that the Soviet leaders had decided that any concession to the U.S. position

13. Initially, the sides could not even agree on a name for the talks—a dispute based on differing views as to which weapons systems should be covered. The United States at various times called them theater nuclear forces (TNF), long-range theater nuclear forces (LRTNF), and long-range intermediate nuclear forces (LRINF). The Soviets generally preferred medium-range nuclear forces (MRF, MNE, or MRNF). Eventually, both sides accepted the INF acronym.

14. The decision, taken formally on December 12, 1979, was to deploy 108 Pershing II ballistic missiles and 464 ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs). All were replacements for less capable weapons that would be removed from Europe, and both types of missiles together had only a fraction of the destructive power of the SS-20s that were eventually deployed by the USSR.

would undermine the “peace movements” in Europe that were attempting to block INF deployments. Thus, the repeated efforts of the U.S. negotiator, Paul Nitze, to find a compromise solution came to naught, even though Kvitsinski had initially tried to interest his government in them.¹⁵ Fundamentally, the Soviet military, which still determined the Soviet position on arms control issues, was unwilling to trade weapons at hand for weapons that were not yet in place. As a consequence, the Soviet position not only doomed the negotiations but also facilitated public approval in Europe for the U.S. deployments.

Negotiations on strategic arms, delayed both by disputes within the U.S. administration and by Reagan’s sense that the time was not opportune for successful negotiation, were not resumed until Reagan’s second year in office. As was the case in the INF forum, the U.S. proposals differed radically from the Soviet approach, which had evolved only slightly in the decade since the ABM Treaty and Interim Agreement had been concluded in 1972. The U.S. proposals aimed for major reductions in the quantity of weapons, particularly heavy MIRVed ICBMs, suitable for a disarming first strike. The Soviet arsenal was tilted sharply in favor of such weapons; the U.S. nuclear arsenal was more balanced among the legs of the triad of land-based missiles, sea-based missiles, and aircraft, and was designed for deterrence or, failing that, retaliation.

The United States sought deep reductions in Soviet land-based heavy missiles and increased reliance on sea-based systems in order to create a more stable, and thus safer, balance. This approach ran counter to entrenched Soviet doctrine and would have required a major Soviet effort and no little expense to implement, but it was not inherently one-sided or a blatant effort to secure U.S. superiority, as its critics charged. The Soviet Union had proved its ability to

15. Their accounts of these negotiations can be found in Paul H. Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision—A Memoir* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 366–398; and in Julij A. Kwizinskij, *Vor dem Sturm: Erinnerungen eines Diplomaten* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1993), 291–351.

rapidly match U.S. technological advantages, and the Soviets would have had a decade or more to make the adjustments. Nevertheless, given the Soviet mind-set of the early 1980s, it was no surprise that the U.S. proposal was dismissed out of hand.

Reagan added an additional major element to the U.S. position on strategic weapons in March 1983 when he announced “a comprehensive and intensive effort to define a long-term research and development program to begin to achieve our ultimate goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles.”¹⁶ He called this program the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI); his critics dubbed it “Star Wars.”

Reagan had several motives for promoting strategic defenses. Most fundamentally, he was uncomfortable with the prevailing doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction, which would require him to respond to a nuclear attack on the United States with a nuclear strike against the population of the attacking country. Also, he was devoted to the idea of eliminating nuclear weapons but feared that this would never be feasible unless there was a defense against them. Furthermore, the Soviets were resisting deep cuts in their heavy ICBMs, and the U.S. Congress had refused to authorize deployment of the mobile MX, a tradable counterpart to the Soviet heavy missiles. If the Soviet leaders could be convinced that the United States was capable of building a defense against such missiles, it might make it easier to persuade Moscow to reduce their numbers. And, finally, the Soviet Union had active research programs in many of the areas critical to developing a strategic defense system. In Reagan’s view, it would be foolhardy for the United States to leave the field to them entirely.

The Soviet leaders immediately condemned SDI as an American attempt to “militarize space” and establish military superiority. Initially, however, SDI was not the problem for negotiators that it was to become later.

16. The text of the speech is in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 19, no. 12:442–448.

Causes of the U.S.-Soviet Stalemate

The Soviet leaders of the early 1980s considered arms control the central issue of U.S.-Soviet relations. President Reagan, however, was convinced that the arms race was the result of political hostility rather than its cause. One of his favorite aphorisms was, “Nations don’t fear each other because they are armed; they arm because they fear each other.” He believed that the U.S.-Soviet relationship had to improve before the arms race could end. That is why he believed that arms reduction, to which he was genuinely devoted, should be viewed in the context of the overall relationship. The use made of arms, the record of compliance with past agreements, and the adversary’s doctrine and nature of its rule at home were all relevant issues, and all were discouraging when he took office. The Soviet leaders were insisting on a limited form of arms control without changing anything else in the relationship.

Reagan’s goal was to shift the U.S. strategy from reacting to events and limiting damage to a concerted effort to change Soviet behavior. His approach constituted a direct challenge to the Soviet leadership because it explicitly denied fundamental tenets of Communist ideology and required a Soviet about-face on many issues under negotiation. It was a challenge to think differently about Soviet security, the place of the Soviet Union in the world, and the nature of Soviet society. It altered both the substance of negotiations and the way the dialogue was conducted, but it did not require the Soviet Union to compromise its own security. Soviet claims to the contrary, Reagan never threatened military action against the Soviet Union itself.

Reagan was aware that the Soviet leaders would initially reject his approach. But he was confident that the United States had a long-term strategic advantage: a healthier economy, more solid alliances, and most of all a political system that could adapt to change and stimulate the creativity of a free people. He could wait.

While waiting, however, there were things that needed to be

done to prepare for the day when some Soviet leader would recognize that things could not go on as they had. Aside from improving America's capacity to deter war and negotiate a real peace, it was important to define the issues, to establish a pattern of equality and reciprocity in the bilateral relationship, and to improve communication with both the Soviet leaders and their people.

Reagan had no master plan, just a congeries of impulses and general judgments. During the early years of his presidency, policy was made on the fly in the maelstrom of heated disputes within his administration, disputes that sometimes produced exaggerated or inconsistent statements by senior officials. With rare exceptions (which were always given heavy play in the press), Reagan's own statements, as well as those by his two secretaries of state, were consistent in regard to the fundamental issues.

Preparing for Gorbachev

No one, of course, could have been sure in 1981 or 1982 that Mikhail Gorbachev would become general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985. It was clear, however, that as the youngest member of the Politburo to hold simultaneously a seat on the Secretariat, he was in the best position to succeed members of the old guard when they finally allowed power to pass to a new political generation.

It was also impossible to be certain what sort of policies Gorbachev or one of his contemporaries would follow when they succeeded to power. It was, however, reasonable to assume that a younger leader might be more willing than the older leaders to look at Soviet interests from a more realistic perspective. Gradually, after George Shultz replaced Alexander Haig as secretary of state and Reagan became more confident of his negotiating strength, the United States articulated a policy that aimed to reduce, and, if possible, eliminate, the grounds for antagonism and confrontation in U.S.-Soviet relations. Simultaneously, the administration concentrated on efforts to improve the channels of com-

munication with the Soviet leadership and the Soviet public and to inject a greater measure of reciprocity in their use.

Brezhnev died in November 1982 and Reagan made the unexpected gesture of going to the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C., to sign the official condolence book. It was intended as a signal to Brezhnev's successor that he desired to initiate a more fruitful dialogue than had been possible with Brezhnev. This elicited no greater response than had earlier efforts to communicate,¹⁷ but, from early 1983, Reagan began to press his staff to prepare for serious business with Moscow. He approved policy guidance, previously delayed by bureaucratic disputes, that summarized U.S. goals as follows: "U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union will consist of three elements: external resistance to Soviet imperialism; internal pressure on the USSR to weaken the sources of Soviet imperialism; and negotiations to eliminate, on the basis of strict reciprocity, outstanding disagreements."¹⁸

After describing these three elements in greater detail, the directive stated explicitly that "the U.S. must make clear to the Soviets that genuine restraint in their behavior would create the possibility of an East-West relationship that might bring important benefits to the Soviet Union." The U.S. goal, therefore, as stated in its most sensitive and authoritative internal policy directive, was to bring the Soviet Union to the negotiating table to conclude agreements that would be, in its words, "consistent with the principle of strict reciprocity and mutual interest." It also set a goal of promoting "the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system" in order to reduce Soviet aggressive tendencies.

From early 1983, Reagan began thinking about a possible meeting with Yuri Andropov, who had succeeded Brezhnev as general

17. Reagan, for example, had penned a personal message to Brezhnev while still in the hospital recovering from an assassination attempt. He received only a cold formal reply.

18. From NSDD-75, signed on January 17, 1983. Originally classified Secret/Sensitive, it has been declassified and was published in facsimile in Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994), 372-380.

secretary. In February, Secretary of State Shultz arranged for Reagan to see Anatoli Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador, privately in order to make it clear that he wished to improve relations. At that meeting, Reagan requested the Soviet government to allow the emigration of the seven Pentecostal Christians who had taken refuge in the U.S. embassy in Moscow five years earlier. Within a few months they were allowed to depart along with members of their families who had remained in Siberia. Reagan took this as a signal that Andropov might be prepared for more substantial negotiations, and he instructed the White House staff to work with the State Department to develop a negotiating agenda. He approved without cavil a forward-looking statement Secretary of State Shultz made to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on June 15, 1983, that went beyond criticism of Soviet actions to stress the need for accommodation. In Shultz's words, "Strength and realism can deter war, but only direct dialogue and negotiation can open the path toward lasting peace."¹⁹ From that point, "realism, strength, and dialogue" became a catchphrase to describe the Reagan administration's approach to the Soviet Union.

Contingent preparations for a meeting with Andropov continued through the summer at the White House. The idea was controversial within the administration. Some senior officials, both in the White House and in the Department of Defense, were opposed to the idea, fearing that the president would be under pressure to conclude a faulty arms control agreement to avoid accusations of failure. Secretary of State Shultz, in contrast, favored a meeting to establish direct communication with the Soviet leadership. Reagan was eager to deal directly with Andropov but was not certain that he should propose meeting unless there was some indication that it would bring tangible progress toward some important U.S. objectives.²⁰

19. *Department of State Bulletin* (July 1983), 69.

20. As Special Assistant to the President for National Security, responsible for Europe and the USSR, I was instructed in June 1983 to prepare a paper giving the pros and cons of a near-term meeting with the Soviet leader. It was clear from Reagan's comments on the paper that he favored preparing for such a meeting as long as he would not be seen as the *demandeur*.

If the Soviets had shown any inclination to reach an INF settlement along the lines negotiator Paul Nitze had proposed the year before, Reagan most likely would have approved a meeting to conclude an agreement on that basis. The Soviets, however, had rejected Nitze's compromise proposal out of hand, and there seemed little prospect that agreement could be reached before the INF deployments scheduled for November. Therefore, it was necessary to devise an agenda that did not center on arms control and to prepare the public for a "get acquainted" meeting that might not produce a breakthrough in arms control. Accordingly, the NSC staff at the White House and the European Bureau in the State Department worked on an agenda that would broaden ties and revive some cooperative projects. They included an expanded program of cultural and educational exchanges, a new agreement for grain sales that would assure American farmers of larger Soviet purchases, improvements in the hot line and other confidence-building measures, and the expansion of air service between the United States and the USSR.

Few in the administration opposed these measures in principle, but some objected that restoring and expanding such agreements would signal an acceptance of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Most of these ties had been broken as a result of the Soviet invasion. The prevailing view in both the White House and the State Department, however, was that many of these "sanctions" had been unwise and had damaged the United States more than the Soviet Union. A way needed to be found to keep pressure on the Soviet Union to leave Afghanistan while restoring channels of communication and increasing interaction with the Soviet leadership and the Soviet public.²¹ Without better communication, improvement in the relationship over the long term would be impossible.

21. This logic led to a series of decisions to reverse many of the Carter-era sanctions that were considered self-defeating and simultaneously to increase aid to the resistance forces in Afghanistan.

These preparations came to an abrupt halt in September, when a Soviet fighter shot down a Korean civilian airliner that had blundered into Soviet airspace, plunging 269 persons, including a U.S. congressman, to their death. Though nothing could have diminished the tragedy for the victims and their relatives, the Soviet leaders' response to the action of its air defense forces turned it into a major international issue. Instead of apologizing, attributing the action to human error, offering to pay damages and to take steps to avoid such incidents in the future, the Soviet leaders first denied what had happened and then fabricated accusations that the United States was to blame because it had tried to use the plane to spy. There was no evidence supporting the latter charge, and the Soviet government, having recovered the plane's black box and much of the debris, knew very well that there was none.

Both Reagan and Shultz were outraged. Reagan personally drafted a speech to the American public and delivered it with passion. If he had been primarily a propagandist at heart, he might have welcomed the opportunity to cite the Soviet reaction as the latest proof of his contention that the Soviet leaders were capable of lying and cheating to further their cause. In fact, he did not welcome the incident, not only because he genuinely deplored the loss of life but also because he had been seeking ways to ease tensions with the Soviet Union. This latest demonstration of Soviet mendacity could only impede that process.

Nevertheless, Reagan considered a vigorous U.S. reaction indispensable. The Soviet leaders had to learn that misrepresentation of facts, and military rules of engagement that permitted, even encouraged, destruction of civilian aircraft, were harmful to their own interests. Much of the world community agreed. Resolutions condemning the Soviet action passed with overwhelming margins in the United Nations and in the International Civil Aeronautics Organization (ICAO). NATO allies and others applied temporary sanctions against the Soviet airline.

The Soviet reaction to the KAL shoot-down precipitated a telling confrontation within the Reagan administration. At issue was

whether the United States should show its indignation by postponing planned negotiations and canceling meetings with senior Soviet officials. A meeting of foreign ministers had been scheduled in Madrid on September 6 to conclude the CSCE review session, and Secretary Shultz had agreed to meet Foreign Minister Gromyko while they both were there. Negotiations on INF and START were also scheduled to resume. Some in the Reagan administration, notably Secretary of Defense Weinberger, urged Reagan to cancel the meeting with Gromyko and postpone the negotiations on nuclear arms. Shultz argued that these meetings should go forward as planned because the United States could achieve more by talking than by refusing to talk to the Soviet leaders. Reagan agreed with Shultz's position (though he instructed Shultz to discuss only the KAL shoot-down with Gromyko), and the meetings went forward as scheduled. The meeting with Gromyko resulted in little more than a shouting match, but at least the two were still talking in each other's presence.

In deciding to proceed with planned meetings and negotiations despite the destruction of the Korean airliner and the Soviet refusal to take responsibility, Reagan set an important precedent. Subsequently, he always ruled in favor of keeping the U.S.-Soviet dialogue on track rather than using some unacceptable Soviet action as a pretext to shut it down.

Soviet Intransigence

Aside from the release of the Pentecostals and a few other small concessions made to secure U.S. consent to bring the CSCE review conference in Madrid to a close, there was no positive response from Moscow to the feelers Reagan put out periodically in 1983. The Soviet leaders still were insisting on arms control on their terms before any other questions could be usefully addressed. Indeed, Gromyko stated repeatedly that most of the issues the Americans raised had no place in the U.S.-Soviet dialogue at all. In their attempt to avert NATO's INF deployments by supporting

the “peace movement” in Europe, Soviet officials maintained a drumbeat of accusations that the United States was planning nuclear war. To intensify a general feeling that East-West tensions were dangerously high, Andropov threatened to terminate arms control negotiations if the INF deployments went forward.

On September 29, 1983, Andropov issued a statement bordering on the hysterical. It accused the United States of a “sophisticated provocation” that resulted in the loss of life on the downed Korean plane and it misrepresented statistical measures in an attempt to demonstrate that the United States, not the USSR, had been driving the arms race in the 1970s. (Actually, the United States had reduced its armed forces and arsenals following the war in Vietnam, while the Soviets were steadily expanding theirs.) As if to justify in advance the subsequent Soviet action in ending arms control negotiations, Andropov stated flatly, “If anyone had any illusions about the possibility of an evolution for the better in the policy of the current American administration, events of recent times have thoroughly dispelled them.”²²

The Reagan administration ignored Andropov’s charges, which in fact had become surreal in their absurdity. But in its response, the administration noted that Andropov had failed “to address concrete steps to reduce tensions,” reminded him that “peace is imperative to mankind if it is to survive,” and invited him to “get down to the task at hand.”

This, however, was not to happen in Andropov’s lifetime. On November 22, 1983, the German Bundestag voted to proceed with the deployment of Pershing IIs, and the missiles began to arrive in Germany within hours. On November 24, Moscow announced that its negotiators would not return to either the INF or START negotiations.

A few weeks earlier, on October 25, 1983, U.S. forces had invaded Grenada to depose a cabal of hoodlums, who had murdered Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, and to evacuate U.S. citizens, most

22. Statement published in *Pravda* and *Izvestia* on September 29, 1983.

of whom were students at a medical college. Although the island's governor general and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States had asked the United States to intervene, the U.S. action was criticized severely not only by the Soviet Union (the news agency TASS called it "an act of undisguised banditry and international terrorism") but also by many U.S. allies. Criticism quickly subsided in the United States when television broadcasts showed the evacuated students kissing the ground upon their arrival in the United States and carried interviews with students who described their fear of being taken hostage. Criticism elsewhere subsided when it became obvious that the overwhelming majority of Grenadians welcomed their liberation from the thugs who had seized power with Cuban military support and Soviet blessing.

The United States had not invaded Grenada primarily to impress the Soviet Union with its resolve—the decisive motivations were fear of a hostage situation and a desire to protect the region from Cuban military interference—but many in the Reagan administration thought that the action sent a beneficial message to Moscow. If the Soviet leaders imagined that they could support violent revolutions with impunity, they would now be on notice that the United States had emerged from its post-Vietnam passivity and would oppose such efforts whenever it was practical to do so. The Soviet leaders probably needed no such reminder. They had entered no new theaters of conflict since Reagan took office, though they continued to support parties to conflicts that had begun earlier.

Moscow, of course, added the "crime" of invading Grenada to their bill of particulars against Reagan. But their propaganda machine, including extensive clandestine "assets," had been focused for months on selling the slogan "Reagan means War."²³ The sei-

23. Oleg Gordievsky, who worked on behalf of British intelligence in the KGB from 1974 until his defection in 1985, described this campaign in the book he coauthored with Christopher Andrew, *KGB, The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 494.

zure of Grenada added little to the extravagant charges already being made.

The Soviet propaganda campaign failed to persuade the West Germans to refuse the Pershing II missiles (although it came close to succeeding), but it had the unintended effect of frightening the Soviet public. Traditionally, the Soviet government had avoided publicizing the dangers of nuclear war because it did not want to deal with an aroused public that might demand an end to testing or more restraint in military activities abroad. Now, however, there was so much talk of the nuclear threat that the Soviet public became sensitized to the importance of the issue. For decades Soviet citizens had been told that they need not worry about nuclear war; their government was powerful enough to protect them. Now they were being told that they were vulnerable.

The propaganda, contrived as much of it was, also may have had an effect on the thinking of the Soviet leaders themselves, for they began to fear that the United States was, in fact, preparing a nuclear first strike. There was no evidence to support this thought and much circumstantial evidence tending to disprove it.²⁴ Therefore, the reasons for their alarm remain obscure. We may speculate, however, that it stemmed from a combination of three factors: autosuggestion (a tendency to believe one's own propaganda if it is repeated enough), mirror imaging (they would cloak aggressive intent in peaceful-sounding rhetoric, and therefore believed others were capable of doing the same), and the reluctance of intelligence organizations to contradict fixed ideas held by their political leadership. In this case, KGB operatives in the field found no evidence to substantiate the fear and considered the tasks demanded by

24. For example, if Reagan had indeed contemplated a nuclear strike against the Soviet Union, he would hardly have said repeatedly that he believed the Soviet leaders did not want war. Instead, he would have tried to whip up hysteria that they were planning an attack on the United States. For a description of the absurd lengths the KGB in Moscow went to in order to secure information on a possible nuclear strike (an operation code-named RYAN), see Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 488–508, 524, 525.

Moscow a waste of time, but they prudently refrained from questioning the basis of their leaders' fear.

As 1983 drew to a close, U.S.-Soviet polemics were at a peak, and it appeared to those with short memories that the cold war had reached unprecedented intensity. The fear of war that infected a vocal segment of the public posed a political problem for the Reagan administration, but the president and his closest advisers were confident that the world was in fact safer than it had been in 1981 when Reagan took office. The strident Soviet propaganda casting Reagan as a warmonger was taken to be the impotent raving of politicians who suddenly saw the tide of history turning against them.

However shrill the Soviet rhetoric, it was clear to U.S. policy-makers that the Soviet government could not easily sustain its intransigence beyond the U.S. election year of 1984. Some senior Soviet officials also must have understood this because the Reagan White House began to receive informal messages, apparently authorized in Moscow, suggesting that the Soviet leaders would have to sulk for a few months but would be willing to resume serious business in the fall of 1984.²⁵ Therefore, even as hopes faded for any short-term breakthrough in relations with the Soviet Union, attention in Washington turned to working out more details of a negotiating approach and conveying it to the public.

Secretary of State Shultz was distressed by disputes within the administration over policy toward the Soviet Union, and he undertook further efforts to build a consensus. To do so, he hosted a series of unpublicized meetings over breakfast on Saturdays with senior White House, defense, and intelligence officials, including Vice President Bush, Defense Secretary Weinberger, and Director of Central Intelligence Casey. Although these gatherings did not bring about a complete meeting of minds, a general consensus on

25. The author described one of these in Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, 83. At the same time the KGB was acting under instructions issued in February to plan "active measures" to prevent Reagan's reelection. See Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 494.

U.S. goals emerged: reduction in the use or threat of force in international disputes, smaller arsenals (particularly of weapons of mass destruction), and a gradual opening of the Soviet Union by increasing bilateral ties and supporting human rights. There remained disagreement on the specific terms of acceptable agreements to reduce arms, but there was strong support for a policy that linked arms reduction with the use made of arms, and recognized that more openness and pluralism within the Soviet Union would facilitate Soviet acceptance of these goals.

In November, as the Soviet Union withdrew from negotiations on nuclear arms, President Reagan decided that he needed to clarify his position on the entire range of U.S.-Soviet issues, and he instructed his staff to work on a speech on the topic. Reagan personally read and commented on several drafts, discussed them in meetings with senior advisers, and finally added several paragraphs in his own hand. The result was his considered view of the U.S.-Soviet relationship and an outline for diplomatic interaction throughout the rest of his presidency. Specific policies were subsequently elaborated, but the basic reformulation of a U.S. policy to replace détente was complete when Reagan delivered the speech in the East Room of the White House on January 16, 1984.

After explaining why he had considered it necessary to strengthen defenses and the U.S. economy when he came to office, Reagan made it clear that this was the means to an end and not the end itself: “Deterrence is not the beginning and end of our policy toward the Soviet Union. We must and will engage the Soviets in a dialogue as serious and constructive as possible, a dialogue that will serve to promote peace in the troubled regions of the world, reduce the level of arms, and build a constructive working relationship.”

He pointed out that, with all our differences, “We do have common interests. And the foremost among them is to avoid war and reduce the level of arms.” He went on to formulate U.S. goals as common problems and common tasks, not as U.S. demands:

First, we need to find ways to reduce—and eventually to eliminate—the threat and use of force in solving international disputes. . . . As

a first step, our governments should jointly examine concrete actions we both can take to reduce the risk of U.S.-Soviet confrontation in these areas. And if we succeed, we should be able to move beyond this immediate objective.

Our second task should be to find ways to reduce the vast stockpiles of armaments in the world. . . . We must accelerate our efforts to reach agreements that will greatly reduce nuclear arsenals, provide greater stability, and build confidence.

Our third task is to establish a better working relationship with each other, one marked by greater cooperation and understanding. . . . Complying with agreements helps; violating them hurts. Respecting the rights of individual citizens bolsters the relationship; denying these rights harms it. Expanding contacts across borders and permitting a free interchange of information and ideas increase confidence; sealing off one's people from the rest of the world reduces it. Peaceful trade helps, while organized theft of industrial secrets certainly hurts.

He then explained in nonconfrontational terms the meaning of the watchwords "realism, strength, and dialogue." Realism: "We must be frank in acknowledging our differences and unafraid to promote our values." Strength: "Soviet leaders know it makes sense to compromise only if they can get something in return. America can now offer something in return." Dialogue: "We're prepared to discuss the problems that divide us and to work for practical, fair solutions on the basis of mutual compromise."

Throughout the speech, Reagan emphasized the need for cooperation and the U.S. willingness to compromise. He also suggested interconnections among the various problems, pointing out that "greater respect for human rights can contribute to progress in other areas of the Soviet-American relationship."

For most Americans, the most memorable part of the speech was the portion Reagan wrote himself, the "Ivan and Anya" story, which imagined a Soviet couple and an American couple meeting by chance and finding that they have much in common and wish to

be friends. It demonstrated Reagan's respect for the Soviet people, whom he always distinguished from the government that had been imposed upon them, and illustrated one of his fundamental tenets: "People don't make wars, governments do." He then ended the speech with a statement of assurance and a direct appeal: "If the Soviet Government wants peace, then there will be peace. Together we can strengthen peace, reduce the level of arms, and know in doing so we have helped fulfill the hopes and dreams of those we represent and, indeed, of people everywhere. Let us begin now."

Subsequently, the three "problem areas" Reagan cited in the speech became four when Secretary Shultz decided that the human rights issue was so important that it should be singled out for separate treatment. Thus was born the "four-part agenda" that provided a framework for the negotiations that brought the cold war to an end.

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The four-year interval between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Reagan's speech in January 1984 is one of the most misunderstood periods of the entire cold war. Reagan's political opponents in the United States charged him with reckless brinkmanship, risking a nuclear war in pursuit of some ideological Holy Grail.²⁶ Many of his supporters, following the Soviet collapse in 1991, credited him with a grand design to bring down the evil empire.²⁷ Other commentators have assumed that he reversed his policy toward the

26. Such charges were made during both the 1980 and 1984 presidential campaigns, when they might have been dismissed as campaign hyperbole. Some prominent politicians repeated them, however, even when they were not on a political stump. For example, Soviet ambassador Dobrynin wrote that Speaker Thomas J. (Tip) O'Neill told him in 1983 that if Reagan were reelected he would "give vent to his primitive instincts and give us a lot of trouble, probably, put us on the verge of a major armed conflict. He is a dangerous man." Anatoli Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Random House, 1995), 548.

27. See, for example, Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy that Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994).

end of his first term.²⁸ Some have even argued that Reagan's policy prolonged, rather than hastened, the end of the cold war.²⁹

None of these interpretations will withstand an objective examination of the facts. Reagan's policies never brought the United States to the brink of military conflict with the Soviet Union, as, for example, Kennedy's policies did during the Cuban missile crisis, and Nixon's arguably did during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. He did not seek to destroy the Soviet Union but rather offered cooperation if it abandoned its militaristic and expansionist course. Reagan delayed serious negotiation as long as he felt too weak to negotiate effectively, and subsequently refined his policies in the light of experience, but his strategy when he left office was precisely what he had in mind when he took office.

As evidence now available proves beyond reasonable doubt, the Soviet leaders who preceded Gorbachev were unwilling to make the changes in their policies and practices that could have brought the cold war to a close. They wanted a limited arms control skewed in their favor and a free hand to pursue their traditional goals in every other sphere. They believed implicitly in the international class struggle and the eventual final victory of socialism as Lenin and Stalin had defined it. It was this belief that lay at the root of the cold war from its very beginning. Until it was abandoned, the cold war persisted.

By January 1984, Reagan had placed the United States in a position to deal with Mikhail Gorbachev, the first Soviet leader pragmatic enough to grasp that the cold war was not in the Soviet Union's interest, and the only one to realize that the cold war could not end unless the Soviet Union itself changed. The positions

28. The most detailed exposition of this point of view can be found in Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

29. Argued explicitly in Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 369–376; and implicitly in Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994).

Reagan staked out more than a year before Gorbachev came to power anticipated Gorbachev's "new thinking" and were totally compatible with it. Perhaps this is why Gorbachev and his associates have not joined Reagan's critics in their assessment of his policy toward the Soviet Union or of him as a statesman.

Anatoli Dobrynin, the former Soviet ambassador, has written, "The Reagan I observed . . . had a clear sense of what he wanted and was deeply involved in diplomatic events. He became a principal protagonist in ending the cold war."³⁰ And Gorbachev stated in his *Memoirs*, "In my view, the 40th President of the United States will go down in history for his rare perception."³¹

30. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 477.

31. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 457.