Commentary

Peter W. Rodman: *Reversal of Fortune?*

American analysts of the cold war competition in the third world have the greatest respect for Georgi Mirski as one of those perceptive (and courageous) scholars in Moscow who led an agonizing reappraisal of Soviet third world policies in the 1980s. Dr. Mirski describes this reappraisal well in his essay, though he is too modest about his own role.

His essay reflects the same forthrightness and insight. Undoubtedly he is correct in saying that both sides sometimes treated the competition in the third world as more important than it really was; in retrospect, it was clearly never as central to the cold war rivalry as the division of Europe or the strategic nuclear balance. Nonetheless, I continue to find the contest in the third world the most interesting intellectually. From the days of Woodrow Wilson and Lenin, the anticolonial struggle in the developing world seemed to both sides a moral as well as a strategic opportunity. The United States and Soviet Russia both considered themselves free of the taint of European colonialism, and indeed natural champions of the anticolonial cause. Both sides, accordingly, invested much of their self-esteem and historical self-confidence in the question of how this contest would turn out—which side the new nations would "choose." In the 1950s and 1960s, there were certainly many in America who imagined that the global balance of power would be decided there. Recall books and films of the 1950s such as *The Ugly American* that reflected Americans' angst about whether they were sufficiently sensitive to the new nations' needs.[1] Recall the

1. William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: Norton, 1958). The book was made into a film in 1963 by Universal Studios with George Englund, director.

"long twilight struggle" to which President John F. Kennedy repeatedly summoned the American people in the early months of his term.[2] Many of the bitterest domestic controversies over foreign policy during the cold war were over our engagement in third world conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and Central America.

Dr. Mirski is also correct to point out two important historical moments when the third world contest did play a pivotal role in the East-West confrontation. He describes perceptively how Soviet overreaching in the third world doomed the détente efforts of the 1970s. And he is correct that in the 1980s the first practical evidence of the winding down of the cold war came in the negotiations that resolved a number of these conflicts (Afghanistan, Angola, and later Central America and Cambodia). The new inside information that Dr. Mirski presents about Soviet calculations (and miscalculations) makes this essay valuable.

An American observer is bound to offer some additional perspective, however. To Dr. Mirski, the prime mover in the endgame was Mikhail Gorbachev, who, he says, "initiated" and "first manifested" the policy of seeking an end to this dimension of competition. Both sides' third world policies had failed, he says, and it was Mr. Gorbachev whose "new political thinking" broke the stalemate and led to the resolution of these conflicts. The American perspective is somewhat different. No one can doubt Mr. Gorbachev's pivotal importance, but it is not chauvinistic of me to suggest that Dr. Mirski does not do justice to the interaction of the two sides' policies during the period.

This is especially true with regard to the climactic turning point of the 1980s, the central topic of this book. When future historians look back on this period, they will see a bigger picture and a bigger question that cries out for an answer: What accounts for the extraordinary reversal of fortune that occurred globally between 1975 and 1985?

2. John F. Kennedy, inaugural address, January 20, 1961; State of the Union address, January 30, 1961; Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs, May 25, 1961.

In 1975, despite its strategic successes with Egypt and China, the United States was reeling from a series of setbacks: defeat in Indochina, abdication in Angola, energy shocks and economic recession, and the resignation of a president in the constitutional crisis called Watergate. It was in this context that Leonid Brezhnev, addressing the Twenty-fifth Soviet Communist Party Congress in February 1976, could boast that the historical "correlation of forces" was shifting in favor of socialism.[3] This is indeed how things looked.

Ten years later, the pendulum of history had swung the other way. By 1985, the Western economy had recovered from recession and the information revolution had already begun. Western demoralization had ended, too; Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were in office. The Soviet Union, meanwhile, had gone through a prolonged, humiliating, and debilitating succession crisis, its economy had stagnated, and it was bogged down in Afghanistan. The global "correlation of forces" was no longer going its way. The transformation of the competition in the third world can best be understood in this broader historical context.

Dr. Mirski touches upon all of this, but he shrinks from drawing the appropriate conclusions about causation. Events were *forcing* on the Soviet system the need for a thoroughgoing reassessment of everything.

To be sure, Dr. Mirski is right to stress the policy reappraisal that took place inside research institutes and government offices in the Soviet Union. The internal pressures for change in foreign policy were becoming as inexorable as the pressures for change in domestic policy. After many decades, a large proportion of Soviets were reaching the conclusion that the "Socialist orientation" of many Soviet clients was a sham, that Soviet aid to these clients was going to waste, and that Soviet military commitments to some of

3. Leonid Brezhnev, "Report of the CPSU Central Committee and the Immediate Tasks of the Party in Home and Foreign Policy," February 24, 1976 (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1976), 10–12, 20–22.

these clients, especially Afghanistan, were dragging Moscow deeper into local quagmires.

This reappraisal began even before Gorbachev's appointment as general secretary in March 1985. Its signs were evident in the early 1980s during the brief tenure of Yuri Andropov. As early as 1982, a scholarly book entitled *Socialist Orientation of the Liberated Countries* appeared, arguing that, contrary to the exuberant optimism of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods, problems of social, political, and economic underdevelopment were often profound and intractable. Many supposedly Socialist countries in the third world were still closely tied to, and indeed integrated into, the capitalist world. This dry academic analysis had profound practical implications: not only were fundamental tenets of Marxist-Leninist analysis proving to be flawed, but, in addition, these countries were likely to be unreliable allies for Soviet foreign policy.[4]

Andropov himself, at a plenary meeting of the Central Committee on June 15, 1983, sarcastically called into question the ideological credentials of various Soviet clients and suggested rather dismissively that their economic development was their own responsibility: "It is one thing to proclaim socialism as one's goal and quite another thing to build it. . . . [O]n the whole their economic development, just as the entire social progress of those countries, can be, of course, only the result of the work of their peoples and of a correct policy of their leadership."[5]

Most importantly, the Reagan administration was noticing all this. In May 1984, a young Sovietologist on the National Security Council staff, Stephen Sestanovich, published an op-ed article in the *Washington Post* calling attention to the many signs that Moscow was increasingly disillusioned with its third world involvement

4. Karen Brutents, Rostislav Ulianovsky, Evgeni Primakov, and Anatoli Gromyko, *Socialist Orientation of the Liberated Countries: Some Problems of Theory and Practice* (Moscow: Mysl, 1982), cited in Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, "New Soviet Thinking about the Third World," *World Policy Journal* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 667.

5. Yuri Andropov, Speech at CPSU Central Committee Plenum, June 15, 1983, in FBIS-SOV-83–117, June 16, 1983, R9,11.

and was feeling the strain of overextension. He quoted the Andropov remarks and cited some of the scholarly commentary.[6] The Reagan administration identified this overextension as a significant Soviet strategic vulnerability. Over the next two years, the Americans increased their assistance to guerrilla movements resisting Marxist-Leninist regimes in Angola, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and Cambodia, in what came to be known as the Reagan Doctrine. In March 1986, a seminal White House document on regional policy (of which Sestanovich was a principal draftsman) explicitly stated that the rationale of the new U.S. policy was to raise the costs of Soviet third world involvement and thereby to spur the reappraisal that was under way: "Our goal, in short—indeed our necessity—is to convince the Soviet Union that the policies on which it embarked in the 70s *cannot work*. . . . [T]here are reasons to think that the present time is especially propitious for raising doubts on the Soviet side about the wisdom of its client ties. . . . There is no time in which Soviet policy reviews and reassessments are more likely than in a succession period, especially when many problems have been accumulating for some time."[7]

By 1988, Soviet commentaries on the subject were becoming even more forthright and pessimistic. Dr. Mirski himself, in a 1987 paper, openly deplored the ideological blinders that had hindered earlier Soviet analysis of third world complexities: "Years passed before we understood the significance and influence of the middle classes, the intelligentsia, the bureaucracy and the army, which indeed had been understood earlier by Western scholars. And years passed before we sufficiently realized what enormous weight can be attributed to traditions and non-class-related social institutions like tribalism, the deeply rooted dividing lines in Asian and African

6. Stephen Sestanovich, "Do the Soviets Feel Pinched by Third World Adventures?" *Washington Post*, May 20, 1984, B1.

7. President Ronald Reagan, "Freedom, Regional Security, and Global Peace," White House statement, March 14, 1986 (emphasis in original).

societies according to ethnic, religious, caste and clan lines. . . .''[8] Historian Viacheslav Dashichev in a 1988 article scathingly denounced the ''miscalculations and incompetent approach of the Brezhnev leadership'' that had provoked ''unprecedented new pressure from imperialism.''[9] Brezhnev's offensive in the third world had derailed détente, Dashichev explained in a later interview, and triggered a U.S. arms buildup that was bankrupting the Soviet Union:

> [W]e launched an offensive against imperialism's positions in the Third World in the mid-seventies. We attempted to expand the sphere of socialism's influence to various developing countries which, I believe, were totally unprepared to adopt socialism. And what came of all this? A sharp clash of political contradictions with the Western powers (and that was not all—even China opposed our actions in the Third World). Détente was derailed, and we came up against a new and unprecedented explosion of the arms race.[10]

Andrei Kozyrev, then a junior official in the Soviet foreign ministry, lamented in the ministry journal in 1988 that Moscow's entanglement in third world conflicts was not only wasting resources but incurring ''enormous'' costs in poisoning relations with the West: ''Unfortunately, there are no data concerning the price paid by the Soviet Union for providing assistance to those countries. . . . Furthermore, it is important to stress that aid itself is only the tip of

8. Georgi I. Mirski, ''On the Question of the Developing Countries' Choice of Path and Orientation,'' *World Economy and International Relations* 11 (1987): 76, cited in Mammo Muchie and Hans van Zon, ''Soviet Foreign Policy under Gorbachev and Revolution in the Third World: An Ideological Retreat or Refinement?'' in *The New Détente: Rethinking East-West Relations*, ed. Mary Kaldor, Gerard Holden, and Richard Falk (London: Verso/United Nations University, 1989), 191–192.

9. Viacheslav Dashichev, ''East-West: Quest for New Relations: On the Priorities of the Soviet State's Foreign Policy,'' *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, May 18, 1988, in FBIS-SOV-88–098, May 20, 1988, 7–8.

10. Viacheslav Dashichev, ''Topical Interview,'' *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, June 19, 1988, in FBIS-SOV-88–118, June 20, 1988, 57.

the iceberg. Our direct or indirect entanglement in regional conflicts brings about enormous losses, exacerbating overall international tensions, justifying the arms race and hampering mutually beneficial economic ties with the West.''[11] A later writer in the same journal lamented the military quagmires in which the Soviet Union was sinking on behalf of failed authoritarian regimes. Afghanistan loomed very large in this reassessment:

> [W]e waged an outright war in Afghanistan, we were deeply enmeshed in several acute regional conflicts . . . and we promoted the creation of regimes in different parts of the world that tried, under the banner of anti-imperialism, to implement in their own conditions the administer-by-command model and therefore counted on us for everything. The specifics of these regimes, the militarist bent typical of our domestic and foreign policy, and the backwardness of the Soviet civilian economy that was strongly manifest even then made for the fact that military cooperation and arms deliveries were the heart of our relations with developing states ''friendly'' to us. Their militarisation only pushed them even farther into participation in conflicts and into authoritarian rule and worsened the situation in the economy that was falling apart as it was.''[12]

Dr. Mirski is correct to give the Reagan administration credit for seeking negotiated outcomes to the various third world conflicts then raging from Afghanistan and Angola/Namibia to Central America. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in October 1985, President Reagan urged the two sides to make a concerted effort for diplomatic solutions. These regional negotiations became an integral part of the U.S.-Soviet diplomatic agenda, at summits and in regular channels, from 1985 onward. The Arab-Israeli conflict and tensions in Korea and the Indian subcontinent were also regularly discussed. As Dr. Mirski says, Presidents Reagan and Bush accepted Mr. Gorbachev's good faith in seeking a new turn.

11. Andrei Kozyrev, ''Confidence and the Balance of Interests,'' *International Affairs* (Moscow) 11 (November 1988): 7–8.

12. Andrei Kolosov, ''Reappraisal of USSR Third World Policies,'' *International Affairs* (Moscow) 5 (May 1990): 35–36.

The interest in winding down these conflicts was indeed mutual, and thus credit goes to the interaction of the two sides' policies.

Many of the bitterest Soviet reappraisals, as we have seen, denounced the Brezhnev policies for harming Soviet interests by provoking a Western reaction. This seems to me to be an acknowledgment that U.S. responses—raising the costs of these policies when the Soviets were themselves reassessing them for a variety of reasons—had their impact. It is idle to deny this when it is so clearly stated in Soviet commentaries. The opportunistic blunders of Brezhnev, which Dr. Mirski so well documents, were blunders in large part precisely because they triggered a Western reaction. Had there been no Western reaction, including no Western support for resistance movements, some of these Soviet third world adventures might have succeeded, and different conclusions might have been drawn in the Politburo.

Therefore, it can be argued that Mr. Gorbachev's policies were as much the result as the cause of what was happening in the 1980s. The Soviet Union was on the defensive in the third world, and Mr. Gorbachev was drawing proper conclusions. He admitted this himself in remarks he made on October 15, 1985, seven months after he came to power. Explaining to a party plenum the need for a new party program, he argued: "It has been necessary to work out a new understanding of the changes in the correlation of forces that are occurring. . . ." There was a "very dangerous shift" in the policies of the imperialists, he said, in seeking military superiority and suppressing liberation movements. Thus, it was "imperative to take a realistic view." The new party program would demonstrate the party's "ability to take into account the changing situation in due time, face the reality without any bias, objectively appraise current events, and flexibly react to the demands of the moment."[13]

13. Mikhail Gorbachev, Report to the Plenary Meeting of the CPSU Central Committee, October 15, 1985, quoted in *On the New Edition of the CPSU Programme* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1986), 13–15; also in FBIS-SOV-85–200, October 16, 1985, R3, 6.

"Realistic" was a compliment that Moscow often bestowed on Western leaders who were conciliatory; they were praised for accommodating themselves to the objective factors of history. We are entitled to return the compliment, especially because Gorbachev seems to have shared the assessment.