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Soviet Military Policy Toward the Third World

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HIGHLIGHT: To examine the adjustment of the Gorbachev regime toward the Third World, the International Research Council of CSIS, headed by Quarterly Editor Walter Laqueur, convened a meeting on the issue. Presented as a roundtable, the views of some commentators provide a glimmer of what lies in store in the coming years for Soviet foreign policy in the Third World.

As regularly as clockwork, a new Soviet leadership goes through a process of reevaluation toward the Third World. Over the horizon, but constantly on their agenda, the less-developed regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America beckon the Soviets into geopolitical hazards and opportunities to score against the West.

SINCE THE U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, the Soviet Union has become much more active in conflicts in the Third World. Through varying degrees of military involvement, Soviet foreign policy has gained Marxist-Leninist allies in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. Marxist insurgencies also threaten to topple pro-Western governments in the Philippines and El Salvador.

However, the Soviets also have experienced several important failures in the Third World. They have lost important allies such as Egypt and Somalia, among others. Further, in some Third World nations where Marxist-Leninist governments have come to power, strong local opposition to them has developed, as in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Laos, Mozambique, and Nicaragua. In none of these countries have the Marxist governments been able to defeat the guerrillas fighting against them even with the assistance of Cuban, Vietnamese, or Soviet troops.

What can be said about Soviet political-military intentions in the Third World? Are they basically offensive or defensive? Is the USSR bent on military expansion in the Third World, or does it merely take advantage of U.S. foreign policy errors to acquire allies as Washington loses them? Answers to these questions may be sought by examining what the Soviets themselves have said about the Third World over time.

During the Khrushchev era, the Soviets were highly optimistic about the spread of their brand of socialism in the Third World. The United States was seen as militarily superior, but the Soviets made it clear then that they would not become heavily involved in national liberation struggles through military strength. Khrushchev did not see Soviet military involvement in the Third World as a necessity because he believed that the newly independent nations would voluntarily become allies of the USSR, and eventually, socialist. This process was seen as occurring naturally, with

only a small degree of Soviet effort being necessary to help it along.

During the early Brezhnev years (1964-1968), this optimism was dampened. Several progressive Third World regimes were overthrown in right-wing military coups, as in Ghana, Mali, and Indonesia. The Soviet-backed Arabs were humiliatingly defeated by U.S.-backed Israel in 1967. Further, the U.S. buildup in Vietnam threatened to defeat Communist aims in Indochina. The Soviets concluded that greater efforts on the part of the USSR were needed to maintain Third World nations on the path of socialism. This included a greater amount of Soviet military assistance when necessary. Nevertheless, the military role of the USSR was intended to be of an auxiliary nature; the main burden of any fighting was to be borne by local forces allied to the USSR.

The middle Brezhnev years (1969-1975) saw the resurgence of Soviet optimism. The United States withdrew from Indochina, the Portuguese empire collapsed, and several Third World nations acquired Marxist regimes. Like many in the West, the Soviets assumed that the decline of U.S. influence in the Third World would lead to a corresponding rise in Soviet influence there. The Soviets believed that only low-cost, short-term Soviet military efforts were needed; the USSR acknowledged sending not only weapons but also Soviet advisers. In addition, sending Dubans to Africa was seen as useful in promoting political progress. Nevertheless, the USSR and its allies would only play a supporting role when local Marxist forces would undertake the bulk of the struggle to establish and maintain socialism.

From the late Brezhnev years to the present, the Soviets' optimism about their prospects in the Third World has given way to increased pessimism. Two important Soviet allies, Egypt and Somalia, abrogated their treaties of friendship and cooperation with the USSR. In addition, pro-Soviet Marxist governments that had recently come to power faced strong local opposition.

It soon became apparent that these new Marxist-Leninist governments could not remain in power by relying on Soviet arms transfers and a few advisers alone -- these governments were simply too weak. The main burden of the fighting, in some instances, would have to be undertaken by the established Communist states (the Cubans in Angola, the Vietnamese in Cambodia, and the Soviets themselves in Afghanistan) just to keep these regimes in power.

Yet even with such direct military intervention, the opposition to the new Marxist-Leninist regimes in the Third World has not been readily defeated. It is now clear even to Moscow that it and its allies must undertake high-cost, long-term military efforts just to maintain these new regimes in power.

The Soviet Union has seen its Third World allies that are not completely Marxist-Leninist tend to break away from the USSR. Further, Soviet allies that are thoroughly Marxist-Leninist tend to be weak and to arouse armed opposition. This opposition, however, does not stem from the West but from indigenous forces. This is perhaps the bitterest blow to the Soviets -- while they always knew the West would be their enemy, they expected the Third World to be friendly toward them. It is for this reason that, for the past several years, the Soviets have come to view themselves as being on the defensive in the Third World.

Yet how can this be said when they are now defending nations such as Afghanistan, which did not come under Soviet influence until very recently? The Soviet Union has a strong interest in seeing that a Marxist-Leninist government, once having come to power, does not fall. Should such a government ever be overthrown by its own population (not overwhelmed by external forces as in Grenada), then others might become more vulnerable and fall too. The fact that this might occur at the hands of indigenous Third World forces and not the West would reveal that the USSR and Marxism-Leninism hold little attraction for the people in the Third World -- exactly the opposite of what the Soviets have always claimed.

Although the relatively costly and protracted military commitments directly undertaken by the USSR and its allies in Angola, Afghanistan, and Cambodia, as well as support for Marxist governments fighting insurgents in Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Nicaragua, have not yet proven successful, so far they have not been overwhelmingly burdensome to the established socialist states. But if the opposition forces become stronger and threaten to topple a pro-Soviet,

Marxist-Leninist regime in any of these countries, or if a serious insurgency erupted in other Marxist Third World nations such as South Yemen, Cuba, or Vietnam, the USSR would face a greater problem.

The USSR would then have to decide between two courses of action: making a much greater military effort itself to defend existing Marxist regimes, which would assure greater opposition to its foreign policy from both the West and the Third World, but would not guarantee that such a policy would be any more successful than it has been so far in Afghanistan; or giving only so much support to a weak Marxist regime to be overthrown (not just allowing incompletely Marxist allies such as Egypt and Somalia to change their minds) where they are strongly opposed by indigenous forces. This would risk the encouragement of opposition in other Marxist Third World governments that might also have to be allowed to fall unless the USSR were prepared to undertake a major military effort to save them.

In the short term, the choice the USSR has apparently made under the leadership of Gorbachev has been to increase Soviet military assistance to Third World Marxist-Leninist regimes in an effort to crush once and for all the insurgent groups threatening them. In the spring and summer of 1985, strong offensives were launched in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola. Vietnam, at the beginning of the year, had launched a larger offensive than usual that succeeded in driving most of the insurgents out of Cambodia. The Sandinistas also have stepped up their efforts against the contras. Several of these offensives were relatively successful, but none of them succeeded in either defeating the opposition movements they were directed against or even preventing the opposition from renewing their operations once the offensive stopped. Thus, unless Gorbachev is willing to make a much greater effort to crush these insurgent movements, he will have to run the risk that they will continue and grow stronger.

If this is indeed the kind of choice that Soviet foreign policy faces in the future, it will be evident that Soviet hopes that the Third World would willingly accept the USSR as a model for its own economic and political development were woefully optimistic and are unlikely to be fulfilled.

The United States is still vulnerable to Marxist or anti-U.S. insurgencies and to changes of government in the Third World that the Soviets and their allies either support or can take advantage of even if these movements are indigenous. This is especially true now in Central America, and could become increasingly so in South Africa and in any other part of the Third World where there are unstable pro-Western regimes.

But with the outbreak and persistence of insurgencies directed at pro-Soviet, Marxist-Leninist regimes, it is obvious that the USSR also has vulnerabilities in the Third World. Indeed, these Soviet vulnerabilities are ones that the United States can take advantage of in the same way that Moscow has taken advantage of similar U.S. vulnerabilities: by providing support to rebels seeking to overthrow weak Third World regimes allied to the other superpower. Indeed, many in the Reagan administration and the Congress want to do just this. The benefits of such a policy succeeding would be clear: not only would a pro-Soviet regime be replaced by a pro-Western one, the phenomenon of insurgencies directed against pro-Soviet regimes also might be intensified throughout the Third World, thus making more difficult the foreign policy choices faced by the Soviets mentioned earlier.

But before rushing to aid guerrilla movements in the hope that they will quickly succeed in toppling pro-Soviet Third World dictatorships, U.S. foreign policy makers would be well advised to consider that it takes a long time for guerrillas to succeed actually. The Vietnamese Communists fought the French from 1945 until 1954 before ousting them, and then they only came to power in North Vietnam. It took them another 21 years to gain South Vietnam. Guerrilla forces in Angola and Mozambique began their operation in the 1960s but accomplished little until the 1974 Portuguese coup brought to power a government in Lisbon that declared it would pull out of Africa the following year. The Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua in 1979 after very little fighting, but the Somoza regime they replaced had been in office for over 40 years.

In discussing Marxist Third World insurgencies, Soviet military writers insist that Moscow does not export revolution, and that when guerrillas come to power they do so through their own efforts. This is not to say that the USSR and its allies do not militarily assist guerrillas with arms, military training, or the intervention of Cuban troops.

But there is a kernel of truth to their claim: an outside power cannot help a guerrilla movement succeed unless it has substantial internal support.

What has proved a long, drawn-out process for the Soviets to encourage is likely to prove equally slow for the United States. The Reagan administration should not expect the Nicaraguan contras to oust the Sandinistas quickly simply because U.S. support has been renewed. To win, the contras first must gain support among the Nicaraguan people. This will be difficult as long as the contras are perceived as being led by the forces of the former dictator, Somoza.

Yet even where insurgents fighting a pro-Soviet regime do enjoy popular support, as in Afghanistan, another important condition must also be met for them to win: the forces they are fighting against must be relatively weak. The Marxist government of Afghanistan could not survive on its own, but the mujaheddin have no real chance of defeating Soviet forces. This is also true for the insurgents fighting the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia.

Although the forces of the National Liberation for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) are in a much better position in Angola, it will not be easy for them to defeat the Cuban-backed government. In Ethiopia, the insurgents, who are regionally based, are finding it difficult to secede from Addis Ababa, much less overthrow the Marxist government. In Mozambique, the government has been put on the defensive by South African-backed guerrillas, but the latter have yet to articulate a political program, beyond overthrowing the Marxists, upon which to build a solid foundation of internal support.

U.S. foreign policy makers seeking to advance U.S. interests by supporting guerrillas fighting pro-Soviet regimes then should learn what Soviet foreign policy makers already know about insurgencies: they take a long time to succeed and only do so if the guerrillas are popularly supported and the regime they are fighting is weak. Above all, the United States should avoid backing guerrilla movements that do not enjoy popular support. No matter how virtuously anti-Soviet the guerrilla movements may be, rebel groups that do not enjoy popular support in their countries are not likely to come to power. While the regimes they oppose may not be popular either, U.S. support to an unpopular guerrilla force may backfire and legitimize the Marxist regime defending its people against foreign intervention.

The United States, then, must be highly selective in deciding which rebel groups among all those fighting against Marxist-Leninist regimes in the Third World to support and how to support them. How can the United States determine which groups are popular, and hence, worthy of U.S. support? The U.S. government may do so by seeing how much of their country's territory and their people's loyalty these groups, even without much external support, can control. It is, for instance, highly telling that the Afghan rebels control so much of their country even with the presence of over 100,000 Soviet troops in it while the Nicaraguan contras control so little of theirs where there is only a relatively small Cuban and Soviet military presence.

With even a small amount of aid, the United States may assist groups that are genuinely popular to keep their struggle alive indefinitely and one day succeed in coming to power, while even a large amount of U.S. assistance to groups without popular support may not help them avoid defeat but instead prove an embarrassment to U.S. foreign policy that the Soviets can use to their advantage.

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