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EASTERN EUROPE ON ITS OWN

No easy generalizations, and certainly none that are conclusive, can be offered about the frequently surprising, fast-changing and ultimately ambiguous and confusing world of Eastern Europe. The observer must aim at a moving target, not only because of the rapid pace of new developments but especially because of the gap between reforms proclaimed and reforms pursued, reforms announced and reforms implemented.

Confusion persists because, on one level, nothing has changed in Eastern Europe. The Warsaw Pact is in place and functioning. For the time being, the leading role of the region's communist parties—the exercise of one-party rule—remains in force. Some version of “socialism” is embraced by reformers and antireformers alike.

On another level, however, everything about the area is in flux. The term “Soviet bloc” is becoming a political misnomer. Differences among the region's six states are so acute that it is now less appropriate than ever to speak of “Eastern Europe” as a single entity.

Ideologically, the foundation of the East European alliance is sinking, the edifice of its socialism is cracked. “Marx has turned out to be right, after all,” began an article published in a prominent Hungarian weekly in the fall of 1988. “It is in the advanced capitalist countries that socialism has come into being.” Some East European officials now even regret the split in socialist ranks that took place at the turn of the twentieth century; they speak of the political wisdom and economic achievements of their erstwhile enemies, the social democrats of Western Europe. Meanwhile, at the other end of the ideological spectrum, Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu assails ongoing

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reform in the Soviet Union and some parts of Eastern Europe as “capitulation to capitalism.”

Politically, too, Eastern Europe is in a state of disarray and division. In one ring, Hungarian and Polish reformers and professed reformers meet the region’s “Gang of Four”—Brezhnevite Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and East Germany, and neo-Stalinist Romania. In another ring, where the contenders appear in old nationalist uniforms, the main event pits Hungary against Romania, facing off over Ceaușescu’s particularly harsh treatment of the large Hungarian minority in Transylvania. The bottom of the card features “orderly” East Germans and Czechoslovaks sparring with Polish “troublemakers.”

Economically, yesterday’s grand hopes about surpassing capitalism have given way to intense competition among East Europeans to gain capitalist hard currency and to establish a system of favorable treatment by the Common Market before the fateful year of 1992—the year when the European Community intends to do away with internal trade barriers. As their debt to the West keeps growing, and as their balance of trade with the Soviet Union is now also unfavorable, most East Europeans hope against hope for Western help to save the region’s decrepit economies, just as the original Marshall Plan saved Western Europe forty years ago.

In economics as in politics, Romania leads the antireform pack. With the Ceaușescu family at the helm, there is neither perestroika nor glasnost in that country. As Ceaușescu upholds his highly oppressive version of socialism, basic foodstuffs are still rationed (as they have been since 1981). Czechoslovakia and East Germany offer faint praise of Gorbachev, expecting his failure. With economic performance tolerable if unpromising, neither regime sees any need to introduce reforms. While there must be “closet reformers” in both countries—an economist in Prague or a middle-level party leader in East Berlin—at the top, orthodoxy prevails. Both regimes are openly critical of what they read in the Soviet press and both forbid glasnost at home. The only apparent difference between the two countries is that East Germany favors Gorbachev’s more realistic policies toward Western Europe, no doubt because they complement East Berlin’s vital link with West Germany. As for Bulgaria, the clue to party chief Todor Zhivkov’s political outlook is less his unqualified verbal support for Soviet domestic and foreign policies than his deeds. One such deed was the

summary dismissal last summer of his heir apparent, Chudomir Alexandrov, who was reportedly accused of "new thinking."

Poland and Hungary are different; most of their leaders root for Gorbachev. In the spirit of glasnost, Polish television showed an extraordinary debate between Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa and the head of the official labor union last December, a debate that the shrewd Wałęsa is said to have easily won. In mid-1988, the Hungarian press revealed the budget of the Communist Party, including its leaders' salaries. Though economic reform is also in vogue in both countries, the shelves are still empty in Poland, while most goods are readily available but increasingly unaffordable in Hungary. Thus, unlike other East Europeans who eagerly await reforms, many Poles and Hungarians have reached the conclusion that their system cannot be reformed.

What has come to exist in Eastern Europe, then, goes beyond diversity—a term long used to describe occasional East European departures from rigid Soviet patterns and policies. Diversity was exemplified when Moscow showed intolerance toward religion while Warsaw tried to work with the Catholic Church, or when Moscow upheld centralized planning and Budapest began to flirt with the market. Today, by contrast, the winds of change blow from the Soviet Union to Eastern Europe and not the other way around—and most East European regimes, making use of their newly granted if still limited autonomy, are dissociating themselves from Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of reform. Most are, in fact, united against almost everything he stands for, and they are unwilling to follow his example.

With only Hungary and Poland backing Gorbachev, and emulating especially his policy of glasnost, the region's old diversity is thus turning into a new political schism. The emerging rift lacks the decisiveness and vindictiveness of earlier disputes such as the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict of 1948–49 or the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s. Indeed, Moscow may yet restore a greater measure of unity in Eastern Europe by masterminding the replacement of its orthodox opponents, or by slowing down its reformist supporters, or both. But now there is an unprecedented standoff between the East European "Gang of Four" on the one hand and Hungary and Poland (and the Soviet Union) on the other. It is truly a standoff, because so long as the East European guardians of orthodoxy can convincingly argue that reforms would undermine their countries' fragile stability, there is little Gorbachev can do—or would want to

do—to impose his policies and preferences on his fearful and hence defiant hard-line allies.

The Soviet bloc in 1989, then, is but a shadow of its former self. It is a military alliance whose members maintain extensive, but not always beneficial, economic ties. Their ideological orientations, and certain of their political interests, diverge. Romania, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria defy Moscow and continue to seek only to “perfect” their harsh rule. Supporting and supported by Moscow, Hungary declares its interest in the adoption of a multiparty system and Poland may yet come to terms with labor-union pluralism.

What are the implications of these contradictory, tentative, still reversible, but in some cases very promising trends? Does Gorbachev have a new policy toward Eastern Europe? As the East European regimes gain more autonomy, what will they do with it? Using its limited influence, could the United States help steer the region gradually, over unknown terrain, toward a more pluralist and autonomous future? Indeed, given the approaching reduction of Soviet forces in Eastern Europe, is there a new opportunity to redefine the role of this troubled and unstable region in East-West relations?

II

In examining Soviet intentions, it is useful to begin with the obvious: Gorbachev is a reformer, not a revolutionary. Whatever his ultimate impact may be, he does not seek to liquidate the Soviet hold on Eastern Europe; it is, after all, the most significant and the most tangible achievement of Soviet foreign policy. Gorbachev may bend—he *is* bending—but he will not break. The evolution of Eastern Europe from a Soviet sphere of domination to a sphere of influence may yet take place — fitfully, the process of decompression and even retrenchment has begun—but not because Moscow is ceding its “front yard.” The Soviet role is becoming less domineering and more paternalistic, because to continue the old policy of heavy-handed Soviet rule would have deleterious consequences for Gorbachev’s domestic and foreign policy priorities.

Still, a cloud of uncertainty hangs over Soviet intentions. On the one hand, Gorbachev still approves of past Soviet interventions and he still speaks of protecting the region’s “common interests.” On the other hand, East European officials trying to interpret Soviet policy no longer take it for granted that, in a crisis, they should either expect or count on Moscow’s “fra-

ternal assistance" (the euphemism for military intervention). They believe that there are conclusive signs of a growing Soviet reluctance to offer such "assistance": Gorbachev's promise to withdraw from Afghanistan and reduce Soviet commitments elsewhere in the Third World, his patience toward centrifugal tendencies in the Soviet Union itself, the stress he places on the autonomy of the East European communist parties, his plan to begin thinning out Soviet forces in the region, and his subordinates' repeated assurance that the Brezhnev Doctrine of restricted East European sovereignty is "dead." Indeed, in a secret report written at the end of 1987 and leaked to Western newsmen in 1988, Mieczysław Rakowski—Poland's premier since September 1988—strongly urged his colleagues not to assume that the Soviet Union would rescue the Polish regime if it were to lose control.

In 1988 Moscow began to revise the postwar history of Eastern Europe, including its own role in that history. At an unprecedented U.S.-Soviet conference on Eastern Europe, leading Soviet specialists made a number of striking statements about the region's past. They conceded that the postwar East European "model of socialism [was] established . . . under the influence of the Soviet Union" and that it "has not withstood the test of time"; that it was "the stagnation of the Soviet system and . . . Soviet policy in the 1960s and 1970s" that contributed to the region's past and present ills; and that "after 1964, when the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Suslov came to power . . . the era of stagnant neo-Stalinism began." At that time, "even reversion to the past, to Stalinist practices, became noticeable."

Reviewing the whole post-Stalin period, the Soviet specialists blamed not only the East European regimes' "major mistakes," but also "the hegemonic aspirations of the Soviet leadership" for "the deep political crises" in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1956, 1970 and 1980–81.¹ And Academician Oleg Bogomolov, the ranking Soviet expert on Eastern Europe, who led the Soviet delegation to the conference, stated that "the 'Brezhnev Doctrine' is completely unacceptable and unthinkable. . . . We gave too much advice

¹ The Soviet paper containing these quotes was a collective effort by the Institute of Economics of the World Socialist System of the Soviet Academy of Science. It appeared subsequently under the title "The Soviet Perspective" in *Problems of Communism*, May-August 1988, pp. 60–67.

before to our partners, and it was actually very damaging to them. It's time to keep our advice to ourselves."

By no means did such refreshing self-criticism characterize all Soviet statements about Eastern Europe in 1988. Gorbachev himself, when asked by *The Washington Post* in May about Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, still blamed the West: "When you speak about interference, I understand what you have in mind. But when I recall those situations, I had something else in mind. I have in mind that before what you are talking about happened, another kind of interference had occurred." Hence, according to Gorbachev, the Soviet Union intervened because interference by the West had forced Moscow's hand. In other words, the Soviet Union intervened in order to protect the cause of socialism from the West—not from the likes of the Hungarian "revisionist" Imre Nagy, or Alexander Dubček of Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring, arguably Gorbachev's ideological precursors. In a wide-ranging interview with *The New York Times* in October, the Politburo member now in charge of Eastern Europe, Aleksandr Yakovlev, echoed Gorbachev's "old thinking" on this subject. Thus the Soviet leadership has not dissociated itself from past Soviet interventions in the region.

When speaking of the present and future, however, Gorbachev has repeatedly stressed the "absolute independence" of "all fraternal countries." He wrote in 1987 that "the independence of each [Communist] Party, its sovereign right to decide the issues facing its country and its responsibility to its nation are unquestionable principles."² On another occasion Gorbachev asserted that "no one has the right to claim special status in the socialist world." In a major address to communist leaders from around the world, he added: "We have become convinced of there being no 'model' of socialism to be emulated by everyone." During his visit to Yugoslavia in March 1988, he and his hosts affirmed the principle of "mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, equality and noninterference in the domestic affairs of each other under any pretext." It is not clear, however, whether these principles applied only to Yugoslavia, or to the Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe as well.

The words emanating from Moscow thus imply a modified,

² *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, New York: Harper and Row, 1987, p. 165.

less heavy-handed Soviet approach to Eastern Europe—but no decisive break with the past. They point to a gradual evolution in Soviet thinking. On the one hand, Gorbachev's refusal to renounce the Brezhnev Doctrine is a sign of continuity in Soviet foreign policy. On the other hand, his stress on the general concept of noninterference, his modesty about the universal applicability of the Soviet experience, and especially his emphasis on the autonomy of the region's communist parties are rather hopeful signs of the fading of Moscow's imperial mentality.

III

As Gorbachev's observations and opinions sway between "old thinking" and "new thinking," his policies also reflect the ambiguity inherent in Moscow's current position in Eastern Europe.

For example, several recent decisions concerning personnel changes in the East European regimes were apparently permitted to be made mainly on the scene, and only partly in Moscow. While the removal in December 1987 of the old Brezhnevite party chief of Czechoslovakia, Gustáv Husák, was in line with Soviet expectations and suggestions, his replacement by a younger and more vigorous Brezhnevite, Miloš Jakeš, was a decision made in Prague. So was the ouster in the fall of 1988 of Premier Lubomir Strougal, which excluded from the Czechoslovak leadership a presumed supporter of Moscow's reformist course. In Hungary, too, the replacement of János Kádár by Károly Grósz in May 1988 was congruent with Soviet signals, but the wholesale expulsion of eight of the old Politburo's thirteen members was accomplished at a party conference in what amounted to a local conspiracy against Kádár's associates. Produced by secret ballot, the eventual outcome took everyone, including the Soviet Union, by surprise.

On some issues, Gorbachev's approach appears to differ markedly from that of his predecessors. Since mid-1985, the Soviet press has generally refrained from criticizing the leaders of Eastern Europe, their decisions or their regimes. In one confusing exception, several Soviet newspapers expressed different views of the Polish government's handling of labor disputes in the fall of 1988. Without referring to the outlawed labor union Solidarity, *Sovietskaya Rossiya* affirmed the right of unions to defend their members' interests, *Izvestia* attacked Solidarity, while *Pravda* seemed to endorse the "new situation"

in Poland. In still another signal to the Polish regime, Nikolai Shishlin, a ranking official in the Soviet Central Committee apparatus, told *Le Monde* that there was nothing in the “theology” of Marxism-Leninism that forbade labor union pluralism. Yet, to repeat, even such contradictory commentary on Eastern Europe is rare; the new norm for the Soviet press is to refrain from giving “fraternal advice.”

How Soviet leaders treat their East European colleagues behind the scenes is, of course, largely a matter of rumor and speculation. While Soviet officials claim that “a good example is the best sermon,” East European officials say that although their Soviet counterparts show considerable flexibility both at bilateral and multilateral meetings, they are still tough and demanding, especially on economic issues. Nevertheless, during the course of a private conversation in his office last October, Károly Grósz told me that it was no longer either necessary or customary to ask for Moscow’s “permission” before undertaking a new initiative. He said that recently, before making a particularly difficult decision, the substance of which he did not mention, he had called Gorbachev and asked for his “opinion.” The answer was that Grósz should be “guided by his conscience.”

The episode, which struck me as authentic, confirms the impression of Western observers that under Gorbachev most East European policies do not require prior Soviet approval. The East European leaders have obtained considerable elbow room, even if their growing autonomy is still circumscribed by their perception of geopolitical realities, by the extent of their countries’ economic dependence on the Soviet Union and by their knowledge that the political survival of the region’s one-party systems ultimately still depends on Moscow.

What, then, can be made of Gorbachev’s more paternalistic approach to Eastern Europe? Clearly, Soviet hegemony is not giving way to full respect for the principles of sovereignty and noninterference. There are circumstances that would prompt Moscow to resort to the use of force on behalf of its geopolitical—if not ideological—interests, claiming that the Warsaw Pact’s common interests were threatened. Indeed, the important question is not whether the Brezhnev Doctrine is alive or dead. Even if it were declared null and void, East Europeans would remain uncertain and skeptical. The more realistic questions are these: To what extent has the threshold of Soviet

tolerance changed? How far can an East European country go without inviting Soviet military intervention?

One answer is that as long as a given East European country remains in the Warsaw Pact and accepts socialism, there will be no intervention. Thus, were history to repeat itself, Gorbachev might again decide to crush Nagy's Hungary but might not invade Dubček's Czechoslovakia. A second answer is that the Soviet threshold of tolerance is higher for the region's small and strategically insignificant countries (Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary) than it is for East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The third—and safest—answer is that only if and when an upheaval occurs will Gorbachev himself know and decide what to do, and therefore the outside world cannot know in advance either.

Absent upheavals, there are two important differences between the domineering Soviet policies of the past and Gorbachev's more paternalistic approach. First, in the past Moscow did not hesitate to tell the East European leaders both what they should and should not do, issuing imperatives as well as prohibitions. Today, Moscow is satisfied with indicating only what they should not do, issuing (probably unspecified but well-understood) prohibitions. Within the confines of such prohibitions—against leaving the Warsaw Pact and renouncing socialism—the East European regimes have gained sufficient autonomy to decide on their own what sort of economic and even political arrangements would suit their circumstances.

Second, Moscow's major preoccupation, even more than in the past, is the region's stability, meaning peace and quiet at almost any price. A spontaneous, popular upheaval similar to that which engulfed Poland at the beginning of this decade is today's Soviet nightmare. Although Soviet officials claim that a repetition of the events of 1956, 1968 or 1980–81 could not deter them from their program of domestic reform, they certainly know that large-scale East European disturbances would weaken and perhaps defeat perestroika and glasnost. This is why Gorbachev, fearful of disorder, has shied away from trying to dislodge the orthodox leaders of still-quiescent Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. The more idealistic goal of yesteryear—creating a cohesive and viable "socialist commonwealth"—has been shelved for the time being.

Yet even the limited and relatively modest goal of stability remains beyond Moscow's reach. Evaluations of the region's

economic condition range from serious to catastrophic. Hungarian and Polish reformers are uncertain of and divided over what to do next, while the antireformist contingent skirts trouble in the longer run by adhering to the repressive policies of the past. Meanwhile, the present mix of Soviet toleration of rigid East European regimes and Gorbachev's concurrent calls for dynamic change at home is—unwittingly—fueling the fire of rapidly growing East European popular demands. The irony, as Zbigniew Brzezinski has observed, is that “if the viewpoint that a Soviet military intervention is in fact unlikely becomes more widespread [in Eastern Europe], this perception might make a revolutionary upheaval more probable.”³

Hence the underlying problem is that while Moscow seeks peace and quiet in Eastern Europe, the East European peoples feel encouraged by Gorbachev's domestic policies and rhetoric to seek change. In fact, so basic is the change they propose in some countries that, according to a rudimentary but telling survey of public opinion, most East Europeans see even Gorbachev as being “good” for the Soviet Union but not good enough for Eastern Europe.⁴

IV

The most important change in Eastern Europe is the increasingly autonomous behavior of the region's communist parties. Given the current crop of leaders in power, however, this is proving to be a mixed blessing. Defying Gorbachev, most regimes use their newly granted autonomy to stand still. Only a few are making use of the opportunity to move forward. Consider East Germany and Hungary.

In East Germany, 1988 began with the confiscation by the post office of four issues of the Soviet weekly *New Times*. (Germans being Germans, subscribers received refunds for the undelivered copies.) In the summer, the Soviet film *Repentance* was shown on television in West Germany—and attacked in the East German press as anti-Soviet propaganda! In October, Kurt Hager, East Germany's leading ideologist, asserted that the “forms and methods” of perestroika “are not transferable to other socialist countries.” In November, further distribution of the Soviet monthly press digest *Sputnik* was abruptly banned.

³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Special Address,” *Problems of Communism*, May-August 1988, pp. 69–70.

⁴ *East European Perceptions of Gorbachev and the Soviet Reforms*, Munich: Radio Free Europe Audience and Opinion Research Department, July 1988.

While East Germany shows its fear of glasnost, Hungary is racing ahead of Gorbachev. Independent associations, some of which are incipient political parties in everything but name, have publicly announced their intention to compete for legislative seats in the 1990 parliamentary elections. The largest among them, the Democratic Forum, already has 380 branches throughout the country. Last November the Hungarian government approved new laws that were officially interpreted to have recognized "the possibility of a multiparty system." The authorities apparently intend to allow several political parties to function, although they have not addressed the key question: What if these parties win a parliamentary majority that would entitle them to control the government? While Professor Kálmán Kulcsár, the new minister of justice, calls the new laws a "breakthrough," party chief Grósz is—perhaps purposefully—equivocal. He affirms the legal right of several parties to exist, but he finds the political consequences of a multiparty system undesirable. One day Grósz says that he could "live" with a multiparty system and on another he calls such notions "premature." Hence skepticism is very much in order. But, as the country's leaders time and again speak of the current "crisis" and even the possibility of an "explosion," might they yet try to square the political circle? For example, it now seems merely unlikely—and no longer inconceivable—that they would try to alter Hungarian political institutions in such a way as to assure the party's leading role in defense, internal security and foreign affairs while letting a popularly elected political order deal with economic and social issues.

As the Hungarian regime takes advantage of Moscow's "green light," East German leaders have different assessments of what they must do to stay in power and maintain stability.

The regime in East Berlin correctly assumes that it can still rely mainly on the economic carrot (and some repression, of course) to keep its people quiet and the country orderly. The East German economy enjoys three unique advantages. One is that Germans, under whatever system they live, tend to be hard-working and productive. The second is that East Germany receives an extraordinary annual subsidy of between DM 4.5 billion and DM 5 billion from West Germany. The third advantage is that because of its special relationship with Bonn, East Germany has become a *de facto* member of the Common Market. Given these unique circumstances, and despite declining growth rates and growing shortages in recent years, the

East German economy may yet recover from its current slump, and living standards may improve. If so, the regime of Erich Honecker can expect to muddle through and stay afloat, even if it also must be ready to resort to repression and to contain erosive Soviet influences in order to achieve that modest goal.

By sharp contrast, Hungary can no longer afford to rely on “goulash communism” as a means of alleviating political tension. On a per capita basis, Hungary is the most heavily indebted country in Eastern Europe. Because it has pursued a reformist course for two decades, its economy is now experiencing problems stemming from both the plan and the market:

- Decontrolling the price of agricultural goods has brought more food to the cities, but it has also sparked an inflationary spiral.
- Letting the private sector grow has improved the supply of goods and services, but the new entrepreneurs’ high incomes have set the poor against the rich and exacerbated social discord.
- Forcing a few unprofitable firms to go out of business has made for savings and efficiency, but bankruptcies have produced some unemployment.
- Economic decentralization has improved performance, but it has sparked immense pressures for political decentralization and indeed political pluralism.

Accordingly, what the people criticize and indeed reject in Hungary is an economic system that has already been reformed. Witness—as printed in the provincial party daily *Dunántúli Napló*—the following hostile questions that a group of miners posed to the authorities (after two decades of reform): “Why aren’t those incompetent leaders brought to account who squandered away [Hungary’s Western debt of] \$15 billion? How come the socialist countries are getting poorer while nonaligned Austria and Finland have been getting richer?” Not incidentally, the miners also asked this question (which also was published): “Last but not least, if the party and the government are so sure that they enjoy the confidence of the people, why don’t we have free elections under international supervision?”

v

With such questions on the public agenda in Hungary (and in Poland) and surely on the private agenda in East Germany and elsewhere, all East European regimes are on the defensive. What are they to do? What can they do?

First, the basic point of departure for reformist and orthodox regimes alike is that from now on they must fend for themselves. The Soviet Union may be largely or exclusively responsible for their present predicament, but it will not take responsibility either for saving them economically or protecting them from domestic upheavals. Rightly or wrongly, all official calculations now proceed from these assumptions.

Second, the regimes' preferred road to peace and quiet is still some version of "goulash communism": food, consumer goods, housing, price stability and full employment. Alas, with the exception of East Germany and possibly Czechoslovakia, this road is now closed for extensive and perhaps permanent repairs.

Third, the unconventional approach to dealing with popular discontent would be political accommodation. This is what Poland and Hungary are trying to do. Their human rights record has markedly improved. Their new "laws of association" are promising. Their press is diverse. Their citizens can travel to the West. Yet pluralism of the Western kind—one that would include several independent parties competing for power and the company unions coexisting with independent unions—remains ideologically unacceptable and untested, and thus unlikely.

Fourth, the conventional approach to ensuring a semblance of stability is, of course, force employed by the local security forces and the military. This is a tested option, and is still the most likely choice. Yet, especially if it is to be used on a large scale, force is no magic wand. It may settle the issue of power, but it does not solve the issue of stability. Moreover, as the coercive Romanian government's recent problems with its restive citizenry show, repression can no longer include massive terror; in the Europe of the Gorbachev era, the idea of a "Khmer Rouge" approach to disorder is passé. Finally, as the Polish experience in 1980–81 implied, the availability, reliability and effectiveness of the military and perhaps even the local security forces cannot be assured in the absence of a Soviet guarantee to back them up.

Hence the strange reason why this region is becoming more unstable now is that the East European regimes are in effect deprived of the tools of both governing and ruling. They lack sufficient resources—carrots that are sweet enough and sticks that are stout enough—to either reward or repress their people. With only half-measures available to them, all they can do

is to drift dangerously between the forbidding past and the forbidden future.

VI

Mikhail Gorbachev's plan, announced at the United Nations last December, to withdraw 50,000 of Moscow's 565,000 troops from East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, rekindles an old debate: Why has Moscow maintained such a large garrison in Eastern Europe? The West has based its policies and military deployments on the assumption of Moscow's offensive intent; the Soviet Union has pleaded defensive needs. Such ready and familiar answers aside, many Western specialists on Eastern Europe, notably Christopher Jones, have long argued that the primary purpose of the Soviet army in the region has been to maintain Moscow's "ultimate control" over Eastern Europe.⁵ In this view, the more specific, additional objective has been the prevention of German reunification.

The thinning out of Soviet forces will in no way lessen Moscow's ultimate control over the region—that is, the Soviet Union's ability to protect its vital interests from forces or regimes hostile to it. Whether Moscow has 565,000 or 515,000 troops deployed in Eastern Europe has no effect at all on that capability. At the same time, however, the psychological and political impact of the Soviet decision could be considerable and possibly dramatic—especially because it was made unilaterally, without comparable Western concessions. The expected psychological impact on the peoples of Eastern Europe will be to encourage them to believe that Moscow might not stifle their aspirations to be free and independent. The expected political impact on the East European regimes will be to increase their sense of vulnerability—their anxiety about being left on their own. Therefore, Gorbachev's plan will make it more difficult for the region's regimes, reformist and orthodox alike, to maintain peace and quiet.

Whether Moscow's announcement will prove to have a greater impact on the East European peoples or on their regimes depends on the type of crisis Eastern Europe will experience in the years ahead. Broadly speaking, two major

⁵ *Soviet Influence in Eastern Europe: Political Autonomy and the Warsaw Pact*, New York: Praeger, 1980.

crisis scenarios have been identified and articulated.⁶ One foresees the likelihood of revolutionary upheavals demanding the capitulation of East European regimes; the other foresees the likelihood of radical reformist movements urging the regimes to make major concessions.

According to the first scenario, Eastern Europe will experience a spontaneous, popular and violent upheaval of the 1956 Hungarian type, with the possibility that once it occurs in one country it could spread to others as well. Whether such revolts would uphold socialist principles or not, they would aim at eliminating one-party rule and creating an independent, pluralist and possibly neutralist political and economic order in Eastern Europe.

The planned reduction of Soviet troops in the region would not cause but could greatly encourage such a fundamental challenge to the Soviet position in Eastern Europe. This is so because some East Europeans might interpret Moscow's decision as another sign of Soviet retrenchment, and thus they would come to believe—or would want to believe—that Gorbachev would not intervene. After all, is he not withdrawing from Afghanistan? Has he not shown reluctance to dispatch his troops to Estonia? Is he not even taking some forces out of Eastern Europe too? What matters most according to this scenario, then, is the psychological impact on the East European peoples of recent Soviet decisions and declarations.

The second scenario foresees popular pressures against conservative regimes rather than revolts against the communist system, something along the lines of the Prague Spring of 1968. Such movements may be initiated under the aegis of the party, pressing for radical reforms, although their momentum could eventually carry them far beyond what Gorbachev would approve—toward demands for national sovereignty rather than party autonomy, democracy rather than “democratization.” Yet, because this would still be a somewhat limited challenge, aimed at in-system change, what matters most according to this scenario is the political impact of recent Soviet

⁶ See Brzezinski, *op. cit.*, and Timothy Garton Ash's three-part series on central Europe in *The New York Review of Books*, “Empire in Decay,” Sept. 29, 1988, pp. 53–60; “The Opposition,” Oct. 13, 1988, pp. 3–6; and “Reform or Revolution,” Oct. 29, 1988, pp. 47–56. For a slightly different formulation of the two scenarios, see also Robert L. Hutchings, “Soviet Dilemmas in Eastern Europe: Stalin to Gorbachev,” a paper presented at the annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, in Honolulu, Nov. 20, 1988. Of course, there is also a third, “non-crisis” scenario which foresees continued and steady decline in Eastern Europe without violent upheavals or major disruptions.

decisions and declarations on East European regimes. Won't they interpret the planned withdrawal of Soviet troops and other recent Soviet signals to mean that they should make concessions and accept a political solution rather than attempt a local crackdown Moscow might not support? Won't they try to save whatever they can of the "cause of socialism," even if it is only a veneer?

To sum up: while Gorbachev's decision to withdraw some Soviet forces has no bearing on Moscow's military capacity to handle East European crises of any type, it is going to heighten the East European regimes' already existing doubts about Soviet intent. If, under the circumstances, the East European peoples give these regimes a chance to make concessions rather than press them to capitulate, the regimes will make concessions and they will do so with Moscow's blessing. If, on the other hand, the East European peoples are so emboldened by recent Soviet policies as to demand capitulation rather than concessions, neither the Soviet Union nor the Eastern European regimes can be expected to oblige. True, the planned force reductions at home and in Eastern Europe confirm that the Soviet Union has entered a period of external retrenchment. And it is also true that the political ice under the East European regimes is getting thinner. But the Soviet Union will not simply go home, and its allies will not sink, without a fight.

VII

In conceptual terms, the United States has a prudent policy in place to deal with Eastern Europe. Called, awkwardly, "differentiation" and practiced since the early 1960s, it consists of three propositions. First, although the United States does not "accept" the permanent division of Europe, it will not attempt to change the European status quo by force. Specifically, Washington will not incite or encourage the East European peoples to seek such confrontations with the Soviet Union as the United States could not assist without risking war. Second, relying on peaceful means, the United States will nonetheless encourage evolutionary tendencies, supporting those regimes and unofficial movements that favor human rights, political pluralism and market-oriented economies. And third, the United States will also encourage, by peaceful means, East European departures from militant Soviet policies abroad—a proposition, it should be stressed, that was last formulated in 1982 and has lost some of its relevance since.

Though the guidelines are admirably clear, differentiation has encountered both ideological and practical difficulties.

The ideological problem is that differentiation is so cerebral as to be emotionally unsatisfying and so subtle that it lacks broad political appeal. True, American liberals and conservatives alike can and do support its provisions about human rights. Beyond that common ground, however, unstated agendas have tended to impede effective implementation. It seems that some liberals in the United States would prefer less activism, because they see Eastern Europe as an obstacle to improved U.S.-Soviet relations; according to this view, the importance of Eastern Europe to the United States has been blown out of proportion by intransigent cold warriors. Some conservatives would prefer more activism against all of the regimes—penalties, no rewards—because they see communism as such as the obstacle to improved U.S.-Soviet relations. Caught in the political cross fire, a realistic and prudent American policy that seeks marginal and gradual change in Eastern Europe without either appeasing or unduly provoking the Soviet Union is thus deprived of a strong domestic political base.

The practical problem is the lack of sufficient resources that could be used to reward those reformist regimes that deserve it. Due primarily to Deputy Secretary of State John C. Whitehead's interest in the region, high-level contacts have markedly increased during the Reagan Administration's second term. Scholarly exchanges are steadily expanding under agreements negotiated by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), a private organization that receives some government funds. The United States Information Agency has been more active during the last year or two than ever before. Solidarity receives rather generous support from the National Endowment for Democracy. Some foundations, notably the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, have taken an interest in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. Yet when all is said and done it is the instrument of economic policy that could make the biggest difference, by assisting reform-minded East European regimes to overcome difficulties during the transition to market-oriented economies.

Funds for such objectives are seldom available. The reason is obvious. If Congress or the State Department is faced with a choice between granting some type of economic assistance to El Salvador or to Hungary, the decision will favor El Salvador. Aiding communist reformism in the few cases when it seems

warranted offers little prospect of political rewards or emotionally satisfying achievements, and it does not have a constituency in Washington.

In President George Bush, his national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, and Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, the new administration has more high-level expertise on Eastern Europe than any of its predecessors. But there is no reason to believe that they will divide the foreign-aid pie differently by offering a somewhat larger slice to East European reformers. Only if an East European regime presents dramatic and indeed eye-catching evidence of substantial political change, such as the introduction of a genuine multiparty system in Hungary or unconditional acceptance of labor-union pluralism in Poland, is it realistic to anticipate that Washington will reorder its priorities and play a more active economic role in shaping the region's future. In the meantime, West European countries (notably West Germany) as well as Japan have increased their loan exposure in Eastern Europe, but their political agenda is either different from America's or non-existent.

The unspectacular conclusion is that differentiation is a conceptually sound policy and that it has not outlived its usefulness. Although there are great limitations on American economic involvement in the region, and some change in that respect would be desirable, what the United States does and what it is have made and will continue to make a difference. Given America's current economic stringencies, however, it is only prudent to devote available resources to modest political goals. For that reason, the United States should continue to differentiate in favor of the region's reformist contingent and maintain no more than a watchful if open-minded presence elsewhere.

VIII

As the policy of differentiation has successfully encouraged gradual changes, it is in need of only "more of the same." However, the expected East European crises of the 1990s call for a bolder supplement: direct talks with Moscow about the region's future. The purpose of initiating such a dialogue would be not to settle but to probe; bilateral contact might also pave the way for subsequent multilateral discussions.

Absent such preventive diplomacy, both the United States and the Soviet Union have much to lose. Eastern Europe is

where World War I, World War II and the cold war began. The postwar era has witnessed military conflict on the continent only among members of the Warsaw Pact, not between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. And today, too, Eastern Europe is the "sick man of Europe." No one should doubt the recurrence of upheavals in the 1990s, nor the destructive impact of Soviet interventions or large-scale local crackdowns on the delicate fabric of East-West relations. Indeed, the impact on the West is likely to be greater than in the past, because an East European upheaval followed by the use of force will no longer only disappoint or anger but also shatter Western confidence in Moscow's "new thinking." Because of high expectations of Gorbachev in the West, the damage could be significant and lasting.

In Moscow, meanwhile, his colleagues will blame Gorbachev and his policies for East European disturbances. His political future will be on the line—whether he feels compelled to intervene or, especially, if he does not. This is probably why last summer Soviet experts discussed, for the first time, the future of Eastern Europe with American specialists—a discussion that is scheduled to continue in Moscow this autumn. The very fact that the meeting, organized by IREX and the Soviet Academy of Sciences, was held should be seen as a promising sign. As to the substance under discussion, it was evident that, obvious differences of interpretation and opinion notwithstanding, the Soviet specialists were deeply concerned about potential crises in Eastern Europe, wondering how the United States interpreted its interests in the region's future. "Old thinking" about Eastern Europe—"what's mine is mine, what's yours is negotiable"—was all but absent.

What is needed next is quiet diplomacy conducted by professionals to discover if there is anything that the two superpowers can usefully discuss. If there is, Eastern Europe should become one of the regional issues treated at regular intervals between diplomats of the two countries. If such talks were promising, Eastern Europe should be on the agenda for the next superpower summit as well.

Whether, and when, the Soviet Union will find it opportune to hold such discussions remains to be seen. It would be unusual for Moscow, or for that matter any other capital, even to discuss seriously any problems before a crisis actually erupted; such preventive diplomacy is a rare commodity in international relations. Political issues of this sort are also extremely complex

and troublesome, and Moscow may well be suspicious of American intentions and mindful of its allies' apprehensions as well. Given the resistance to Gorbachev by Eastern Europe's "Gang of Four," it cannot be taken for granted that they would necessarily implement whatever understandings the Soviet Union and the United States might reach.

The problem on the American side is that it may prove to be difficult to overcome the prevailing sense of unconcern and fatalism about Eastern Europe in this country. Some American liberals might contend that any proposed linkage between U.S. economic involvement and Soviet political concessions would only push Gorbachev against the wall. Why complicate his agenda? Some American conservatives might contend that aiding East European regimes amounts to abetting the enemy—they made their bed, let them lie in it. Besides, why uproot the European status quo that has proved its durability for so long?

Yet, for the first time in four decades, the interests of the two superpowers concerning the region's future may have begun to converge in Eastern Europe—and to reflect the aspirations of the people of Eastern Europe as well. Broadly speaking, the American interest is evolutionary change under at least relatively stable conditions. No U.S. interest would be served by violent East European upheavals that might prompt Soviet military intervention and very possibly mark the end of the reform process in both Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Nor, of course, does the United States have any possible interest in the expansion of the Western alliance system into Eastern Europe.

The overriding Soviet interest today is stability, which is not at hand. It could be had if Moscow were to apply "new thinking" both to the concept of Soviet security in the age of perestroika and to the role of Eastern Europe in East-West relations. In that light, the Soviet interest calls for an internationally guaranteed zone of peace in Eastern Europe, an area that would consist of a group of truly friendly states mindful of legitimate Soviet interests. Whether in the end they would be like neutral Austria or Finland, or find an independent and pluralist existence within the Warsaw Pact framework, is almost beside the point for the time being. What would count is a recognition on the part of the Soviet Union of the paradox of its East European empire: that the region Stalin acquired after

World War II in order to enhance Soviet security has since become—in its present form—a major source of insecurity.

Once that recognition obtains, there is much to be discussed and even more to be done by both sides.⁷ In very general terms, however, the results are predictable. By aggressively promoting Western investments and joint projects, and by facilitating the region's integration into the world economy, the United States would help fashion a market-oriented economic environment in Eastern Europe—and thus contribute to the region's viability and stability at a time of radical change. By aggressively promoting political changes that reflect popular expectations, the Soviet Union would concurrently help fashion a pluralist political order in Eastern Europe—and thus contribute to the region's long-term viability and stability. An understanding along these lines would eliminate the most important legacy of the cold war, give content to Gorbachev's concept of a "common European home," make possible the devolution of the Soviet empire under peaceful and stable conditions, and afford Eastern Europe an opportunity to get on its feet and stand on its own.

⁷ For a particularly imaginative discussion of what the United States could and should do in Eastern Europe within the framework of differentiation, see Mark Palmer, "Western Policy—An Agenda for Action," in William E. Griffith, ed., *Central and Eastern Europe and the West*, Boulder (Colo.): Westview Press, 1989 (forthcoming).