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The visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to the United States culminates a remarkable shift in U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union. As Ronald Reagan begins his last year as president, his personal commitment to improved relations with Moscow and his determination to achieve a major breakthrough in strategic arms control have never been stronger.

Why have Mr. Reagan's views on U.S.-Soviet relations undergone such an extraordinary transformation? Is the near euphoria that greeted Mr. Gorbachev's three-day visit to Washington likely to persist? What does Gorbachev expect of the United States, and how has he sold improved relations with Washington to his colleagues in the Kremlin? Finally, what would a major improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations portend for East Asia?

There are no certain answers to these questions, but one conclusion seems almost self-evident. Despite an undiminished superpower competition in the Third World and stark differences on human rights and regional conflicts, both leaders have decided that improved relations are in their mutual interest.



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However, both have had to accept conditions that neither would have judged palatable several years ago. Mr. Reagan knows (despite repeated intimations of policy change) that the Soviet Union remains entrenched in Afghanistan and has increased its support for Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. He has nevertheless decided to live with these circumstances for the present, and will not let them block an arms control agreement. Mr. Gorbachev knows that President Reagan's convictions about strategic defense have not shifted and that the President remains unwilling to reach an arms control accord that would seriously inhibit his vision of a defensive shield arrayed against Soviet missiles.

The Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement seems equally incongruous in relation to the differences of the two leaders in temperament, personal style, and political circumstances. At age 56, Mr. Gorbachev is a man in a hurry. His physical vigor alone imparts a very different impression of his strength as a leader from that of the three aged figures who preceded him in office. He is also the first Soviet leader to understand the power of mass communication, an ability he has parlayed with remarkable success in the West. Sensing an opportunity, he decided to deal with Ronald Reagan, rather than await the outcome of next November's election.

Mr. Reagan has been uncharacteristically eager to oblige him. For much of his presidency, he seemed either indifferent or opposed to arms control, preferring to concentrate on the steady buildup of American military power. Most of his comments on Soviet behavior suggested very deep suspicions about Moscow's intentions, asserting that Soviet leaders would break any agreement if it served their purposes.

But Reagan believes Gorbachev is different. He has described him as a "modern man" who (allegedly unlike all previous Soviet leaders) does not believe that communism must overthrow capitalism. By implication, Reagan appears convinced that the character of the Soviet Union is changing under Gorbachev, with the new leader prepared to shift toward internal reform and away from external expansion.

President Reagan views the INF agreement as an early indication of such change. With considerable satisfaction, he pointed to Gorbachev's assent to the "zero option" first proposed by the United States in early 1981, but long rejected by Moscow. In addition, for the first time the two superpowers have pledged to destroy operational missiles, with an entire class of weapons systems slated for elimination. Moscow and Washington have also consented to highly intrusive verification procedures that are without precedent in the history of superpower arms control agreements.

Mr. Reagan has only told part of the story. Time is running out on his presidency, with his reputation severely undermined by the Iran-Contra affair. A week after the signing of the INF agreement, the president's approval rating soared to levels not seen since Colonel North's escapades were first revealed in November 1985. The fate of the Reagan presidency may not be in Mr. Gorbachev's hands, but his readiness to sign an agreement with a greatly weakened chief executive gave Mr. Reagan a much-needed boost. Vice President Bush owes Mr. Gorbachev an equally large debt, for President Reagan's enhanced popularity has eased his path to the Republican nomination, and quite possibly to the White House, as well.

What does Mr. Gorbachev expect in return? Even without an explicit quid pro quo in mind, Gorbachev derived clear political benefits from his visit. To a remarkable extent, he dominated the media coverage. He was able to appeal directly to a mass television audience, and to the business community, as well. By imparting a sense of dynamism and flexibility, he was able to influence the emerging terms of debate on U.S.-Soviet relations. The INF agreement and the prospect of further strategic reductions at a Moscow summit in the spring mean that arms control is again at center stage of the Soviet-American relationship, with Afghanistan and other contentious issues diminished in importance. In effect, President Reagan provided a very welcome gift to General Secretary Gorbachev: The principle of linkage would no longer govern his policy toward the Soviet Union.

Too often, however, there is a tendency to ascribe a finely calibrated and flawlessly executed strategic plan to the Soviet leadership. Gorbachev is a clever and resourceful politician, but he should not be credited with endless reserves of strategic acumen. In addition, although Gorbachev's leadership position does not seem seriously endangered at present, his power remains constrained. His early November speech at the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution proved far less daring than various Gorbachev intimates had hinted in advance of the address. The abrupt, forced resignation of Moscow party chief Boris Yeltsin featured accusatory language worthy of a Stalinist purge. Finally, the unexplained hour-and-a-half delay prior to Gorbachev's final negotiating session with President Reagan was probably needed to undertake urgent consultations with his Politburo

colleagues. Nevertheless, Mr. Gorbachev's political skills at home and abroad remain impressive; the force of his personality alone may enable him to dominate Soviet politics for many years to come. But he is not free to act on his own.

In some respects, Mr. Gorbachev behaves like a high wire artist. He has unleashed long pent-up pressures for political change, but must tread very carefully in launching major actions. The USSR still seems trapped in its political past. Stalin has been dead for nearly three and a half decades, yet his ghost still hovers uneasily over current Soviet politics. Gorbachev seems frustrated by these circumstances. There is an impatience and impetuosity in many of his actions -- in effect, he is a vastly more polished and educated version of Khrushchev.

It is too early to tell whether Gorbachev will meet a comparable fate, but some observers of Soviet politics voice profound pessimism over the long-term prospects for major political and economic reform. Although Soviet intellectuals and economists have been extraordinarily daring over the past year, it would be an enormous error to exaggerate the political power of those lobbying for change. The Soviet Union remains a profoundly conservative society both culturally and institutionally. Many parts of the Soviet power structure are content with marginal improvements of the status quo. It is highly doubtful that broad sections of the elite (let alone the citizenry) fear a looming crisis in the Soviet system. In a real sense, therefore, Gorbachev's battles are psychological as much as political.

Equally important, Gorbachev has not assumed the mantle of leadership to preside over the liquidation of the Soviet empire. He does not want to endanger Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe or to

undermine the predominance of the dwindling Russian majority over the rapidly growing numbers of non-Russian minorities. In addition, he must deal very carefully with the Soviet military establishment, whose corporate interests could be profoundly threatened by any major "restructuring" of the Soviet system. The USSR has achieved global power status equal to that of the United States, and Gorbachev has no intention of undermining this singular historical accomplishment.

Yet many observers believe that Gorbachev has no choice but to radically change the present system. To the east, Japan has surpassed the Soviet Union as the world's second leading economic power. China looms as a very different and perhaps even greater challenge, should rapid economic growth be sustained while Western capital and technology continue to be introduced onto the mainland. The rapid development of the island economies of East Asia also continues, with the USSR remaining a marginal factor in the region's technological and industrial dynamism. In addition, America's economic resurgence in the 1980s has had major strategic implications that to some cast serious doubt on Moscow's ability to compete with the United States over the longer term.

It is very doubtful that Gorbachev perceives his options in such starkly pessimistic terms. The Soviet Union may well be an "odd nation out" in the increasing globalization of the world economy, but this hardly makes it an irrelevant factor in the global power equation. Indeed, one of Gorbachev's principal satisfactions must be that political observers again take the Soviet Union seriously. The Reagan administration's extreme eagerness (or, less charitably, unseemly haste) to move toward an arms control accord once Gorbachev was ready to act underscores this impression further: initiative seems more in the hands

of Moscow than Washington. These circumstances undoubtedly appeal to many Soviet leaders, who nurture grievances against the outside world for its dismissive attitudes toward Soviet power. Other leaders in the Kremlin have Gorbachev to thank for putting the Soviet Union back in the political spotlight.

If America is prepared to improve relations with Moscow "decoupled" from broader geopolitical differences, can others be far behind? This is clearly Mr. Gorbachev's hope. Any appreciable shift in the superpower political and strategic relationship sends reverberations around the globe, as smaller states adapt to the new rules of the game.

For Moscow, Western Europe remains the greatest prize. Although some observers have argued that Moscow's advocacy of the INF agreement was intended principally to weaken the organic link between the security of Western Europe and that of the United States, it is still too soon to judge the long-term effects of the accord. But any attenuation of this enduring security relationship would be a major Soviet achievement.

Gorbachev also hopes to enhance the Soviet Union's position in Asia and the Pacific, but most regional states remain unimpressed with Soviet actions to date. Soviet calls for "peace and security in Asia and the Pacific" seem thinly disguised attempts to undermine regional support for the forward deployment of American military power, but little more. Should the INF accord proceed smoothly, the destruction of 170 SS-20 missiles deployed east of the Urals will prove politically useful, even though the nuclear issue in East Asia has always lacked its salience in Western Europe. Thus, the longer term challenge for Soviet-Asian policy remains unfulfilled: forging a credible economic role where none currently exists, and achieving a political breakthrough at the expense

of the United States, but without sacrificing Moscow's geostrategic gains of the past decade.

Realizing these goals will not be easy, although the task seems somewhat less daunting than in the past. Relations with China have improved measurably under Gorbachev, suggesting that the Sino-Soviet confrontation (but not the larger power competition) may prove a relic of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the Sino-Soviet accommodation is not based on explicit strategic understandings between the two sides, both have benefitted by diminished tensions. Other states in the region watch such trends very closely. Their security derives in substantial measure from great power alignments, and they do not want to be surprised or excluded from this process of change.

Gorbachev therefore faces both a challenge and an opportunity. Toward the West, he has proven a resourceful and opportunistic leader, but toward Asia he has yet to win many converts. The much higher Soviet diplomatic profile throughout the region resembles spadework rather than the planting of seeds, let alone the harvesting of crops. Gorbachev has yet to devise an Asian policy that affords a serious prospect for major Soviet gains in the region.

But if U.S.-Soviet relations continue to develop without an American effort to "recouple" movement on arms control to the broader geopolitical competition, Moscow's prospects in East Asia and the Pacific could begin to improve. To make serious headway, however, the Soviet Union will need to do much more than offer its version of "smile diplomacy." Without movement on the political and security issues that still dominate Asian perceptions of Soviet power or the development of meaningful economic relations, the pace of change will be very measured.

It remains for Gorbachev to ponder far more seriously East Asia's potential strategic value, and the price he is prepared to pay to join in the game.