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THE STATECRAFT OF EDUARD SHEVARDNADZE

CORE COURSE 1 ESSAY

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INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1980's, as the Soviet Union faced the beginnings of what would become a period of almost unprecedented change both domestically and in foreign affairs, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev selected the relatively unknown Eduard Shevardnadze to be his Foreign Minister. Shevardnadze went on to serve in that capacity through the end of the Cold War until his resignation in 1991.

This paper will describe Shevardnadze's statecraft during his service as Soviet Foreign Minister: the environment in which he operated; his ideals, assumptions and vision of Soviet national interests, the manner in which he sought to achieve the goals that would fulfill the vision; and an assessment of the successes and failures of Shevardnadze's statecraft during this pivotal period.

ENVIRONMENT, ASSUMPTIONS, AND PREDISPOSITIONS

When he was elevated to national prominence in 1985, Eduard Shevardnadze became Foreign Minister of a very troubled nation. Like Gorbachev, Shevardnadze saw the Soviet Union traveling alone down a different path from the rest of the world--a path that was taking the country to ruin. He saw a long line of past Soviet leaders who had been consumed by ideological conflict with the West, preserving an "irreconcilable hostility between capitalism and communist states."¹ As he observed growing unity, diversity and interdependence throughout the world, he was confronted with the troubling image of his own nation acting unilaterally and in ways inconsistent not only with world opinion, but most likely at odds with the Soviet populace as well. As Foreign Minister he spoke out against past unilateral actions such as the invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, and in the case of the former even issued an apology. A proponent of expression of public opinion, even dissent, he went public himself in criticizing the U.S.S.R.'s past track record, saying, "The notion that we can ignore the world around us and

disregard other people's interest has cost our people and socialism dearly in the past."

Shevardnadze was especially critical of the pre-Gorbachev leadership's foreign policy with regard to the United States. In the early 1980's, the anti-Soviet sentiment of the Reagan administration and the U.S.S.R.'s strongly ideological response to that sentiment assured continuance of the Cold War. Shevardnadze characterized U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations as extremely antagonistic: suspicious, untrusting and vengeful. As they had for years, Cold Warriors on both sides pursued an arms race, one which adversely affected the economies of both nations but which had particularly severe consequences for the Soviets. Shevardnadze spoke disparagingly of many political decisions that were made without consideration of the economic consequences, but saved his greatest criticism for the Soviets' preoccupation with military spending, regarding it as the principal reason for the country's economic distress. Not only that, he didn't regard a military buildup as the way to achieve national security, saying that "security does not mean having more weapons ourselves, but having fewer weapons against us."

As Foreign Minister, Shevardnadze made his views known to the Soviet Union and the world. Stated briefly, his views included a belief in domestic economic revolution, an end to the U.S.S.R.'s isolation from the world, development of a prominent role Soviet in the international arena, finding sources of national strength other than military power, and implementing a process of "democratization" at home.

NATIONAL INTERESTS

Armed with these ideals and faced with what he regarded as impending doom for the U.S.S.R., Shevardnadze took over the Foreign Ministry in 1985 with a different vision of national interests than had been seen before in Soviet leaders. He did have one area of common ground with the Cold Warriors, however: the physical security and defense of the Soviet Union. As he told attendees at a foreign policy conference, "Defense is the chief priority of a

state...[u]nder no circumstances can we permit military superiority over us."⁴ While this rings of Cold War/arms race rhetoric when taken out of context, we will see later how Shevardnadze's view of proper military strength represented a marked departure from the Cold Warriors.

Another basic national interest held in high importance by Shevardnadze was protecting the life and peaceful existence of the Soviet people. He wanted the citizens of the U.S.S.R. to be able to live their lives with economic security, freedom from both domestic and foreign threats, and a greater measure of initiative and responsibility than that to which they were accustomed. He was particularly mindful of the threat presented by nuclear weaponry to the Soviet people and to mankind in general. As a result, he took measures to ensure nuclear catastrophe wouldn't occur, especially as the result of some action by the Soviet Union.

Shevardnadze placed great importance on how Soviet actions were viewed in the world community. International prestige was, in his mind, another national interest, and it was key to the U.S.S.R. joining the world community, holding credibility around the globe and remaining a major power.

Despite his efforts at democratization at home and in foreign affairs, Shevardnadze still held great stock in socialism and socialist values. Even as he denounced the unilateral and militaristic actions of leaders before Gorbachev, Shevardnadze remained a proponent of supporting and promoting socialism outside the U.S.S.R., claiming that "socialism can provide man with more than any other sociopolitical system."⁵

With these national interests defining his vision, Shevardnadze used his position as Foreign Minister and key advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev to pursue goals that would help the U.S.S.R. realize this cold new vision.

GOALS

Foremost among Gorbachev's and Shevardnadze's goals for foreign policy decision-making was a shift from military-political confrontation to political interaction. The new leadership wanted a new face on Soviet international

relations, one founded on democratization and humanization instead of militarization. It followed then that they wanted the U.S.S.R. to become a full-fledged and contributing member of the world community. The new concept included a shift from the unilateral actions of past regimes to a foreign policy that correlated national interests with those of other countries to create a coexistence marked by non-aggression, respect for sovereignty, national independence, and non-interference in internal affairs. Promotion of the socialist system remained a goal, but through example-setting and improved ties with other socialist countries, instead of through forceful projection.

The shift away from past militarism included a new concept of national defense, "'reasonable sufficiency,' a notion of nonoffensive defense,"⁶ in which nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction would be eliminated and a nation's military activities would be limited to territory within its own frontiers.

Faced with a growing economic crisis at home, one of Shevardnadze's key foreign policy goals was for the U.S.S.R. to "enter the common channel of the world economy" through improved ties with the capitalist economies of the West. He regarded a greatly improved scientific and technical capability at home as key to economic recovery, and similarly sought more and better contacts between Soviet scientists and their western counterparts.

The new Soviet emphasis on international image and a pragmatic view of what would persuade other nations to help the Soviet Union come out of isolation resulted in the realization that domestic efforts must precede or be made in concert with foreign policy initiatives. Thus, the concept of democratization was applied within Soviet borders to convince the world of their resolve in becoming a member of the modern global community.

INSTRUMENTS

A number of initiatives were undertaken so the U.S.S.R. could achieve the various goals that would best serve the national interest, but the primary tool of Foreign Minister Shevardnadze was diplomacy. He had little use for the ideologues who for decades had dominated Soviet thought (foreign policy included) and blamed them for the isolation in which the U.S.S.R. found itself in the 1980's. His approach was to "deideologize"⁹ Soviet foreign policy, to depart from the concept of class conflict as a basis for foreign relations, and orient foreign policy instead toward defense of universal values. Diplomacy under Shevardnadze bore a heavy imprint of his personal style--his doggedness, his persuasiveness, his ability to build rapport with counterparts, and the personal credibility which he built over time.

To develop this credibility he acted on foreign policy issues in a way that demonstrated the Soviet resolve toward change e.g., withdrawal from Afghanistan, acknowledgment of the U.S.S.R.'s responsibilities for the Cold War, support of coalition nations during the Gulf War, and earnest efforts in nuclear arms control. He correctly identified a link between domestic and foreign policy, promoting democratization programs at home that would be seen as in step with what he was promoting in Soviet foreign policy. These domestic actions included greater attention paid to public opinion, development and conduct of foreign policy "in the sunshine" (to borrow an American term), recognition of citizens' right of dissent and emigration, release of political prisoners, and vast reforms in domestic criminal law.

In pursuit of the U.S.S.R.'s inclusion in the world community, Shevardnadze shifted the Foreign Ministry's focus toward involvement in international economic institutions, cooperation in international environmental programs, greater use of scientific and technology-oriented exchange programs with the West, and active involvement in efforts to establish an international economic order.

ANALYSIS

Although Gorbachev and Shevardnadze fell short of accomplishing all of their goals for the Soviet Union, important progress was made in the late 1980's, particularly in U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations, and it was the statecraft of Eduard Shevardnadze that was central to many of those successes. Although his detractors claimed he was simply an activist who lacked strategic vision, this writer is persuaded that he did have a vision--one which included demilitarization and economic restructuring at home, and a world community in which the U.S.S.R. would play an important role. He had no prior experience or expertise in foreign affairs, yet he applied the principal tool of a foreign minister--diplomacy--with notable success. He understood what would convince the international community of Soviet resolve and took the necessary actions at home and abroad. The rapport he was able to develop with his U.S. counterparts, George Schultz and James Baker, was key to persuading the American leadership that the Soviet Union was no longer the evil empire and was genuinely devoted to ending the arms race and the Cold War.

Despite his strengths and successes, Shevardnadze was subjected to much criticism at home, and ultimately resigned in frustration prior to the demise of the Soviet Union. While he and other Gorbachev-era leaders shared a common vision for their nation, the agreement didn't extend to a strategic plan that would fulfill the vision.

By his own admission, Shevardnadze pushed too hard from the top in trying to democratize a totalitarian state. His foreign policy victories were not seen as such by the considerable number of ideologues and Cold Warriors who remained in positions of power in the U.S.S.R. They regarded the whole spectrum of demilitarization (disarmament, withdrawal from Afghanistan, reduced arms sales) and failure of communist regimes in eastern Europe as unilateral concessions to the West and/or defeats for which they sought a scapegoat. Further, they were humiliated at the thought of going to the West for technical and economic aid, as Shevardnadze insisted was necessary.

For his part, Shevardnadze was frustrated that some of those in the Soviet leadership who shared his vision--most notably Gorbachev--did not share his own strength of resolve and were too quick to compromise with those resisting the wave of change. Given the demise of the Soviet Union and Gorbachev's fall from power, one might be inclined to agree with Shevardnadze's view. However, this writer is not convinced that the uncompromising approach favored by Shevardnadze would have worked either, given the entrenched resistance throughout the bureaucracy and the lack of bottom-up support.

CONCLUSION

Eduard Shevardnadze has earned his place among the prominent statesmen of this century. Despite the breakup of the Soviet Union, much of Shevardnadze's strategic vision was realized at least in part: significant reductions in nuclear arms, an end to Soviet isolation and greater acceptance in the world community, and a wave of reforms to support the process of democratization at home.

Most importantly, Shevardnadze can claim a large share of the credit for ending a resource-draining cold war and forging the beginnings of a productive partnership between the United States and the Soviet Union, a chain of events with favorable consequences for the entire world.

¹ Carolyn M. Ekecahl and Melvin A. Goodman, Chapter 2, The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze (State College Penn State UP, forthcoming 1996) 4

² Eduard Shevardnadze, "Foreign Policy and Perestroyka," USSR Supreme Soviet, Moscow, 23 Oct. 1989.

³ Shevardnadze, 23 Oct. 1989.

⁴ Eduard Shevardnadze, "Report on the 19th All-Union CPSU Conference Foreign Policy and Diplomacy," USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs Conference, 25 Jul. 1988

⁵ Shevardnadze, 25 Jul. 1988.

⁶ Shevarcnacze, 25 Jul. 1988

⁷ Shevarcnacze, 25 Jul. 1988.

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