COMMENTARY

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GORBACHEV'S ROLE
IN INTERNATIONAL
DÉTENTE: TRUE GRIT?

Contending Concepts and Explanations

What was M. S. Gorbachev's role in easing Soviet tensions with the West and with China? Was he a mere instrument of historical forces or did he help channel international relations toward East-West détente? If he acted not merely as oarsman but as helmsman, what tools did he use to thwart the winds of Cold War and avoid the shoals of nuclear brinkmanship? To what extent did he profit from earlier experiments in tension-reduction?

To approach these questions we must establish a broad framework. First we must discuss several theories of conflict resolution that help us to understand the ups and downs of Soviet relations with the West and China. Second we examine several rounds of tension-reduction and triangular diplomacy in Soviet-American-Chinese relations on which Gorbachev could build. We compare Gorbachev's approach to tension-reduction with that of his predecessors and attempt to evaluate the utility of "niceness" and firmness in foreign policy. This approach should shed light on Gorbachev and also upon the means by which foes can become, if not friends, partners.

Techniques of Conflict Resolution

Governments talk not only with words but with carrots and sticks. Their words may appeal to reason and morality, but they often seek to motivate others through a range of positive and negative inducements. Carrots include nice words, generous actions, promised rewards; sticks vary from denunciations to threats to punishments, coercion and war.
Soviet leaders in the Cold War often accused the United States of trying to "bargain from positions of strength." No doubt the Kremlin wished to do the same. Lenin's *kto kogo* orientation led generations of Soviet leaders to consider diplomacy an extension of warfare by other means.¹

How can hostile adversaries defuse their conflicts? How should they blend "niceness" and "toughness" to defend their interests while trying to shift from confrontation to cooperation? Should they "do unto others as they would have others do unto them?" Or "speak softly and carry a big stick?" One school of thought endorses tit-for-tat (TFT); the other, graduated reciprocation in tension-reduction (GRIT).

**Tit-for-Tat**

A computer tournament once explored the question: What is the winning strategy in Prisoner's Dilemma situations? When and how often should a player defect and cooperate? When should he or she be "nice" or "tough"?

The winning strategy proved to be quite simple: It followed the principle of tit-for-tat. This approach succeeded in eliciting "good." cooperative outcomes and minimizing "poor" ones. It followed two rules: cooperate on the first move and reciprocate the other player's previous move thereafter. But there was an important condition: TFT requires that both players operate under the "shadow of the future" and pass up immediate gains in favor of long-term rewards.²

TFT and other strategies that do well in such tournaments have four characteristics. First, they are "nice"—never being the first to defect; second, they are "provokable"—responding immediately to provocation with a counterblow; third, they are "forgiving"—returning to cooperation as soon as the other side cooperates; fourth, they possess a "clarity" quickly comprehensible to the other player. In effect, TFT penalizes nasty behavior and rewards cooperation. Tit-for-tat coincides with political realism. It dictates that one harsh move be countered in the same coin. In real life a TFT strategy could easily land two antagonists on a treadmill and keep them there. A computer may remember that Side A began with a conciliatory move and did not defect until B defected. If Side B experiments with a

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1. For one disciple's views, see F. Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* (Moscow: Terra, 1991). Foreign affairs dominate the first 125 pages.