INTRODUCTION

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External Influences on Soviet Domestic Politics: An Introduction

The manner and extent to which international developments can influence the internal politics of a major industrial nation is a question of immense intellectual and practical significance. Are key elements in the external environment of the Soviet Union fostering certain kinds of domestic political change? If so, which external factors are producing what kinds of political change? How significant are these changes? To what extent are these developments the result of dimly perceived impersonal forces and uncontrollable trends, or are they the effects of direct, purposeful action by foreign states or nongovernmental institutions? To what degree can external forces be marshalled or manipulated to achieve certain ends? What ends should be pursued? And how do the current Soviet leaders perceive the nature, significance, purposefulness, and consequences of external influences?

The goal of the Columbia University conference on “The External Environment and Political Change in the Soviet Union” was to further understanding of these and related questions. The aim of the present essay is to discuss some of the intellectual and practical issues associated with these questions, to analyze a few of the conferees’ responses, and to identify selected areas in which the theoretical observations and empirical information put forward may have been particularly helpful in understanding contemporary politics. Also, I wish to present several ideas that received little, if any, attention at the meeting.

Embarking on this task, I first reviewed some of the general literature on international relations and comparative politics. And, from the outset, some surprises were forthcoming.

First, contemporary Western scholars (especially political scientists) have engaged in remarkably little theorizing about the external environment and political change in major nation-states. I knew that there exists much more literature on the domestic sources of foreign policy than vice versa. But I was unprepared for the dearth of theory and research on the external determinants of policy, domestic and foreign. What, for example, is the relative importance of internal and external factors in shaping the national policies of different types of states under various conditions? How do the international actions of democratic industrialized countries, the foreign activities of nongovernmental institutions, and the worldwide “scientific and technological revolution” shape an authoritarian power’s domestic politics, foreign policy behavior, and the international system? How does a Communist nation’s political, economic, and military relations with non-Communist states and
groups affect its domestic and international goals and priorities, and its na-
tional policymaking procedures? The paucity of theoretical or comparative
studies on these and related questions has been publicly lamented by a few
major theorists. Indeed, the present state of international relations theory
has prompted two analysts to ask rhetorically: "why study foreign policy if
you are going to ignore the outcomes which decisionmakers hope to bring
about with that policy?"

Second, the current "pre-theories" and conceptual distinctions about ex-
ternal influences on domestic politics would seem to be of little, although
perhaps increasing, usefulness in understanding present-day Soviet-American
and Soviet-West European relations. Stressing the growing significance of
"transnational relations"—communication between governments and subunits
of other societies, and coalitions among subunits of different governments
and societies, for the purpose of influencing public policy—two Western
theorists contrast a traditional with a more contemporary view of inter-
national relations. Figure 1 depicts the familiar "state-centric interaction
pattern"; Figure 2 adds to the usual elements of interstate politics the most
basic "transnational interactions."

FIGURE 1. A STATE-CENTRIC INTERACTION PATTERN

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1. E.g., James Rosenau, "Political Science in a Shrinking World," in Linkage

2. Patrick McGowan and Howard Shapiro, The Comparative Study of Foreign Pol-
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3. Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane, "Transnational Relations and World Politics:
An Introduction," in Transnational Relations and World Politics, eds. Nye and Keohane