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Vulnerabilities and Strengths of the Soviet Union in a Changing International Environment

"We are watching the successful external expansion of an internally declining regime." Richard Lowenthal, 1970

One of the main problems in talking about the new or changing international environment is to distinguish between an international scene whose phases have been changing in dazzling fashion and the structural trends of the international system. My impression is that the Soviets are better attuned to this distinction than is the West; although they run the corresponding risks of being slow to recognize fundamental changes and of being unable to resist short-term opportunities, they do combine a long-range perspective on the "world correlation of forces" with short-term opportunistic and—more often than not—reactive tactics. Hence it may be mistaken to see them "postponing" or "returning to" world revolution, or adopting a European priority or going back to a Third World one, with every new speech or article by an official ideologue.

On the other hand, spectacular changes in world politics do appear and cancel each other out at great speed, especially concerning the relations of the United States with the world: the American-European and American-Japanese crises of 1971 and 1973 seem to have been replaced by harmony with the respective governments. Dr. Kissinger's magic seemed to be lost in the spring of 1975, to be won back in early summer with the Middle East agreement, lost again in the winter with Angola. Southern Europe seemed engulfed in a revolutionary crisis in 1974-75, the evolution in Portugal and Spain seems to belie this perspective in early 1976, while the evolution of Italy and France seems to foreshadow a deeper and more momentous crisis.

Even changes which appear to be structural have this fragile character: the emergence of the OPEC countries as a new center of power seemed to put the West into jeopardy in 1973, and to lead to a manageable compatibility of interests in 1975, especially with the United States, thereby leaving the Soviet Union in a marginal position; while in 1976, the economic power of some of them (like Iran) seems in danger, and Third-World radicalism may be again putting the United States on the defensive and giving the Soviet Union a chance for a Khrushchev-style offensive. The Soviet economy itself seemed to be desperately dependent on Western grain and technology in 1972-73, to be riding high in a world of scarcities in 1974, to be more deeply affected than anyone expected both by the crisis of the West and by her own inefficiencies in 1975-76.
Finally the decline in the utility of force, and the primacy of economic interdependence and global common concerns which have become the Western orthodoxy of the seventies, seem neither so new nor so decisive now that the Soviet Union is beginning to flex its newly-acquired but very traditional muscles. (This seems particularly true for Marxists, who since the nineteenth century have framed their analyses in terms of economic imperialism and transnational interests, and who since the early 1920s have had to deal with the dilemmas of economic cooperation with a capitalist environment.) This raises the second difficulty in defining the new international environment. The prevalent definitions in terms of interdependence, cooperation and common tasks are essentially Western, and more particularly American. This to a great extent is because it genuinely so happens that, for various reasons, this part of the world is more liberated from the fetters of nationalism, ideology and resentment and is able to take a less parochial view of global problems. But there is no denying that such a view also corresponds to the interests of the West, and particularly of the United States. Whatever the fairness of practical proposals or the ability of others to beat the U.S. at its own game, it is an American game, to be played either by American rules or by universal ones, like those of free access, for which the United States is better prepared through historical tradition or present position. There is a certain naïveté in the programs consisting of engaging the Soviet Union in a broad cooperative and responsible kind of game as if she did not notice what is openly proclaimed, i.e., that it would limit her ability to play the more brutal kind of game in which she excels.

There are alternative views of the international environment which are all based on a more conflictual and asymmetrical conception of change: the official Soviet one, based on the East-West struggle (with its Western anti-communist counterpart), the “Tricontinental” (or early Chinese) one based on the struggle of the South versus the North, the “have-not” versus the “haves”; or the “Gaullist-Romanian (and late Chinese) one of the struggle between small and middle powers and the Superpowers. All these views have, at some point and to some degree, to take into account the objective realities which unite and endanger at the same time nation-states, ideological camps, and the planet as a whole. But to recognize that nuclear interaction, economic and ecological interdependence and social interpenetration create common problems, which require some new rules of the international game, does not mean that each power does not try to define or adapt these rules according to its own situation and to its own advantage. Such attempts reflect each country’s own sense of identity, vulnerability, and frustration. Some, like the United States, have an interest in cooperation for they are likely to be able to influence its rules more than anyone else. Some would be destroyed if they did not cooperate or if the old rules were not superseded by new ones: this is the case, for instance, of small oil-rich states with powerful, hungry neighbors. Some, like the Soviet Union, may, precisely in a new environment, see