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ONLINE PUBLICATION

2018

Csaba BÉKÉS: Détente and the Soviet Bloc, 1975–1991

Document first published in print in:

Rasmus Mariager, Helle Porsdam, Poul Villaume (eds.): *The 'Long 1970s'. Human Rights, East–West Détente, and Transnational Relations*, Routledge, 2016, 165–183.

9 Détente and the Soviet Bloc

From Promoter to Victim,
1975–91

Csaba Békés

In this chapter I will propose the following main arguments:

- 1 Contrary to mainstream opinion, there was no 'Second Cold War' between 1979 and 1985 and the standby détente stage of the Soviet–US relationship in this period was not followed by an automatic worsening of East–West relations in general. Rather, a dynamic rapprochement was unfolding between the two parts of Europe during this period.
- 2 Non-Soviet states of the Eastern Bloc, especially Hungary, played a key role in this process.
- 3 When assessing the impact of the Helsinki process on the Soviet Bloc, Basket II, namely, economic cooperation between East and West, not the Western human rights campaign, was responsible for the destabilization of the Communist systems.
- 4 During the Cold War endgame in 1989–91 the East Central European states became the temporary 'victims' of superpower détente when the West – contrary to the mostly apologetic memoir accounts of key politicians and diplomats of the time – persuaded the newly emerging democratic governments in the region to remain in the Soviet sphere of influence in order to avoid a rapid destabilization of the Soviet Union with unpredictable consequences.

The Impact of the Helsinki Process

The conclusion of the Helsinki Final Act was seen by the Soviet Bloc leaders as a long awaited legal guarantee for the legalization of the European status quo. Therefore they regarded it as a huge success and victory.¹ The price for the compromise was accepting Basket III with a promise that the freer movement of people, information and ideas would be made possible within the Soviet Bloc as well.² It should be remembered, however, that in Yalta in February 1945, Stalin signed the Declaration on Liberated Europe, explicitly promising to hold free elections in Soviet

occupied East-Central Europe. The result of that promise is only too well-known. Indeed, the Soviet Bloc leaders, while aware of the problem, were confident that their authoritarian regimes and closed societies would effectively block Western and internal opposition attempts at using Basket III to undermine their regimes.³ The principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, also included in the Decalogue of the Helsinki Final Act, gave them a convenient legal basis for rejecting any unwanted intervention. While it is widely believed that Basket III and the human rights campaign launched by US President Jimmy Carter in the second half of the 1970s crucially contributed to the eventual collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, in reality its role was marginal. On the other hand, the role of Basket II is generally underestimated although the ever broadening economic cooperation between the Eastern and Western parts of Europe eventually led to serious economic and financial dependency on and indebtedness to the West in most Soviet Bloc states.

We can argue that economic cooperation, originally seen in the East as a vehicle for consolidating Soviet Bloc economies, especially by transfer of developed technologies, became a catalyst in the process of the collapse of the Communist systems by the end of the 1980s. The collapse itself, however, was due neither to the economic nor the human rights factor, but rather occurred as a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, which was underway since the middle of 1988. To be sure, the economic factor was by far the more important of the two. This also means that while credit is generally given to US policy for ending the Cold War on the Western side, the role of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) is usually underestimated. As the number one Western economic partner of most Soviet Bloc states, the role of the FRG in destabilizing the Eastern European countries was much greater than previously assumed. History's irony is, however, that all this was not intentional; on the contrary, Bonn was interested in reforming and stabilizing the Communist regimes as late as the summer of 1989.⁴

For the Soviets, the Helsinki process was explicitly a European project. This is important to emphasize as the involvement of the US in the CSCE led to a general misperception in the West that stabilizing the status quo between the superpowers was a deal effective worldwide, not just in Europe. For the Soviets, however, détente was absolutely compatible with their penetration into the Third World, especially as in most cases their military and economic support was provided for indigenous revolutionary movements.⁵ In reality Moscow did not expect the harsh resistance and criticism it had to face from the US since the countries involved were among the purest in the world and their geopolitical location was mostly peripheral. We can add that in retrospect, the US leaders actually should have been pleased to see how the Kremlin was wasting its limited resources without any sensible reward.

Indeed, the Soviets found themselves in a strategic trap by not being able to resist the temptation of expanding their influence in the world. Such decisions were made partly as a consequence of the absurd secrecy about the real state of the declining Soviet economy. We know from Gorbachev – not from his memoirs, but from a document prepared in 1989 – that even in the early 1980s under Andropov, the state budget of the USSR with the real figures was unavailable even to key Politburo members like Ryzhkov and Gorbachev! ‘Some time ago, when I was already a Politburo member, I basically did not know our budget’ Gorbachev told Egon Krenz, the newly appointed East German party leader on 1 November 1989. ‘Once we were working with Nikolay Ryzhkov on some request of Andropov’s that had to do with budgetary issues, and we naturally decided that we should learn about them. But Yurii V. Andropov said: “Do not go there, it is not your business”. Now we know why he said so. It was not a budget but the devil knows what’.⁶ (Just a few years later, in 1985, Gorbachev assumed the post of General Secretary of the CPSU while Ryzhkov became Prime Minister.)

This truly sensational information demonstrates the utmost absurdity of the Soviet system better than anything else, and it also reminds us that the real question is not why the Soviet Union collapsed but rather how it could have lasted so long. Thus, eventually Moscow had to pay a high price for the unprofitable expansion of the Soviet empire from the 1970s onwards (later including the war in Afghanistan) as it became an important factor in the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union – together with the enormous costs of the arms race that used up the reserves of the state⁷ and the expenses of subsidizing Moscow’s allies in East Central Europe.

Standby Détente, 1979–85

The interpretation of détente as a *new model of superpower coexistence* and the emphasis on the role of *compelled cooperation* and *interdependency*, proposed by this author more than a decade ago,⁸ explains how it was possible that just a few years after the alleged ‘death/fall/demise of détente’ at the end of the 1970s, a rapid rapprochement with spectacular and unprecedented results between the superpowers occurred once Gorbachev entered the scene in 1985. Therefore I argue that in spite of the view held by many, there was no (there could not be a) ‘Second Cold War’ between 1979 and 1985⁹ as that term actually implies that a First Cold War had ended sometime earlier. Such widely accepted but erroneous interpretations assume that through the ‘victory’ of détente between 1969 and 1975 the Cold War disappeared and then resurfaced at the end of the decade, only to finally melt away under Gorbachev. A serious deterioration of the Soviet–US superpower relationship certainly occurred following NATO’s double track decision and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; however, for the first time during the Cold

War era, this was not followed by an automatic worsening of East-West relations in general. First, the previous stages of the East-West confrontational intentions (at least at the level of propaganda) were mutual, existing on both sides. Now, however, this stance appeared only on the American side and even there primarily at the propaganda level. Second, mutually interested in preserving the results of détente, the two parts of Europe started to gravitate towards each other rather than obediently following the superpowers' confrontational line. The Soviet leaders themselves were also keen on preserving the results of détente.

This is why Moscow was so desperately trying to apply the *Mikoyan doctrine*,¹⁰ coined by this author – namely, *using local forces and avoiding Soviet military intervention* – during the resolution of the crisis in Afghanistan. While Mikoyan's proposal to this effect was voted down by the CPSU Presidium in 1956, the Soviet leaders learned the lesson well. In their crisis managing strategy during later conflicts they always sought initially and instinctively to use this doctrine: in 1968 in Czechoslovakia for eight months and in Afghanistan in 1979 for more than one and a half years. The leaders of the Communist Afghan regime established in April 1978 urged Soviet military intervention to support the government against Islamist insurgents no less than 14 times before December, 1979. The Soviets, however, did everything they could to consolidate the political situation by the use of local forces, providing economic, military and logistical support but categorically ruling out sending fighting Soviet troops into the neighbouring state.¹¹ So, while Vietnamization became the US goal in the final stage of the Indochina war, the Kremlin tried to apply the policy of 'Afghanization' at the initial stage of the Afghan conflict. According to the Western interpretation, however, Moscow had breached the tacit agreement based on the European status quo policy since the end of the Second World War by invading Afghanistan. Up to that point, the Soviets did not expand their military presence to any state that did not belong to the tacitly recognized Soviet sphere of influence. On the contrary, the Soviet Union withdrew its military from formerly occupied countries (Czechoslovakia in 1945, Bulgaria in 1947, Austria in 1955 and Romania in 1958)¹² and it did not send troops to fight in Korea or Vietnam. The invasion of Afghanistan was thus seen as an alarming move by the West, the beginning of a new Soviet policy aimed at expanding Soviet influence in the world by sending troops to the allied states if need be. In reality, however, this was nothing more than the application of the Brezhnev doctrine; that is, saving a Communist system in an allied state by the use of Soviet forces as an ultimate solution. It is also important to realize that Afghanistan effectually became part of the Soviet empire as early as April 1978 after the Communist takeover, so the Soviet military occupation of that country itself did not change the East-West status quo. This is why the intensity of the international crisis caused by the Soviet aggression

eventually did not reach the level of the Berlin and Cuban crises at the beginning of the 1960s.

The Warsaw Pact states were not involved in the invasion of Afghanistan, unlike in the case of Czechoslovakia in 1968. However, the ensuing East-West crisis affected Moscow's East Central European allies in a peculiar way. In late January 1980, after the US boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games was announced, the Kremlin became offended and decided to take counter measures. During this campaign Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the GDR were ordered to cancel imminent high-level talks with Western politicians.¹³ This unexpected move caused a serious clash of interests between the Soviet Union and the East European Communist states, since by this time all these countries were interested, to differing degrees and in different ways, in developing their relations with Western Europe. All this resulted in an internal rebellion within the Soviet Bloc that demonstrated the functioning of the strategy of *constructive loyalty* in an excellent way. While perhaps Hungary was a role model, the policy of constructive loyalty in Soviet-East European relations can be applied in a certain sense to all non-Soviet members of the Warsaw Pact (except for Romania), although, of course, the implementation of this policy differed significantly in the different states and even in different periods. On one hand this generally meant a loyal following of the Soviet line in all public announcements and at the international scene, avoiding open debates with Moscow at the Soviet Bloc's *multilateral* forums, as well as flexibility, ceaseless adjustment to Soviet demands and a readiness to cooperate. On the other hand it meant continuous testing of the boundaries of Soviet tolerance via *bilateral* channels, lobbying and fighting for one's national interests (as identified by the Communist leaders of the given state) and making initiatives to confidentially foster their own goals which often differed from Soviet interests.¹⁴

While eventually Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the GDR loyally cancelled their planned visits to Western countries as well as meetings with Western politicians, the Hungarian leadership, at that time in desperate need of Western loans to stabilize the country's economy, urged Moscow to immediately hold a multilateral consultative meeting on the consequences of the situation in Afghanistan for East-West relations. They argued that in the present situation the allies must be consulted regularly on the joint policy of the Soviet Bloc in international politics and that the results of détente must be preserved. This was possible only by maintaining and strengthening the relations of the East European countries with Western Europe. Only this way would it be possible to avoid the continuation of American influence in those countries.

Brezhnev was permanently ill at that time and therefore internal fights intensified between the factions within the Soviet leadership.¹⁵ The Hungarian proposal for consultation was accepted, however, and a meeting of

the Central Committee secretaries for foreign affairs of the 'closely cooperating socialist countries' (the Warsaw Pact states without Romania) was summoned in Moscow on 26 February 1980. At the conference the Hungarian position was adopted and it was declared that 'the socialist countries should make the maximum use of the possibilities contained in existing relations with the West European countries to counter-balance the US' foreign policy line'.¹⁶ This manoeuvre demonstrated the increasing role of the non-Soviet states of the Warsaw Pact within the alliance.¹⁷ It significantly contributed toward supporting the liberal forces in the Soviet leadership interested in maintaining détente, mostly key members of the Central Committee apparatus, in overcoming their adversaries, led by Gromyko, who represented a more belligerent attitude towards the West in that period.¹⁸

Thus the invasion of Afghanistan, in which the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact states were not involved, in fact helped amplify the notion of an East Central Europe pursuing its own interests and having a special identity significantly different from that of the Soviet Union. All this, paradoxically, contributed to the gradual establishment of a common European consciousness that had been formulated since the late 1960s: this slowly emerging virtually united Europe would surely include East Central Europe, but not necessarily the Soviet Union.

Soviet crisis management during the Polish crisis of 1980–81 also demonstrated that Moscow was keen on avoiding another Soviet invasion in order to keep détente alive and preserve the chance for a continued East–West dialogue. From the outset, once again, Moscow sought to apply the Mikoyan doctrine, first trying to find a political solution and then a military solution executed by local forces, and thus to avoid Soviet intervention. While such previous attempts eventually failed (1968, 1979), the first successful application of the doctrine occurred in December 1981 when General Jaruzelski introduced martial law in Poland.¹⁹

The Euro missile crisis created a great challenge for Moscow's attitude towards détente. The Soviet leaders did not repeat their mistake of 1980 after the boycott of the Olympics, namely, applying a general line of retaliation against the West. In December 1983 Moscow sent a guideline to the Soviet Bloc leaders in which they emphasized that:

under the new circumstances it is important to approach the development of relations with the different Western countries in subtle ways. The countries that agreed to the deployment of the missiles should experience the political consequences of this move. Naturally, priority should be given to countries in which no such missiles will be deployed. It seems to be useful to intensify our relations and contacts with the neutral countries of capitalist Europe in every respect and area'.²⁰

This policy of differentiation was clearly aimed at maintaining dialogue with as many partners as possible in the West.

In the second half of the 1970s, three of the Warsaw Pact states were the most important proponents of détente in the Soviet Bloc: Poland, Hungary and Romania. By the beginning of the 1980s, however, two of them, Poland and Romania, were disqualified. Poland lost the sympathy of the Western states after the introduction of martial law in 1981, while Romania ceased to be the West's and especially the US administration's favourite due to its increasingly repressive internal policy. Thus Hungary became the most favoured in the eyes of the West as the most presentable country of the Eastern Bloc. One important aspect of this special status was that it enabled Hungary to develop intensive economic and political relations with Western states precisely during the years of the standby stage of superpower détente from 1979 to 1985. The most spectacular demonstration of this mediation role occurred during the height of the Euro missile crisis in 1984, when three prime ministers, Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher, and Bettino Craxi visited Hungary. Remarkably, all the three states (the FRG, the UK and Italy) were on the Soviet 'black list', mentioned above, as they had consented to the deployment of US–Euro missiles on their territory the previous year. What makes this move even more interesting is that all this was achieved not through a Romanian-type deviant foreign policy action, but by convincing the Soviet leaders about the crucial nature of these visits for the stabilization of Hungary's economy, since by that time the country was increasingly dependent on Western loans.²¹ The maintenance of high level contacts with key leaders of the NATO bloc via a small state mediator was in reality beneficial for Moscow as well, since this channel enabled the Soviet leaders to play the double game of 'punishing' the Euro missile-deploying states and keeping the door open for the resumption of negotiations at the same time.

After Gorbachev entered the scene, the situation changed. Soviet leaders were positioned as the primary promoters of dialogue between East and West. The Hungarian role as initiator and moderator had been preserved all along, but it was now to be relegated to a 'second fiddle' role.

Gorbachev's Détente

Mikhail Gorbachev's entrance onto the scene in 1985 posed a great challenge not only to the US, but also to Western Europe. The most important issue was the security of the Western part of Europe: in other words, the problem of the potential Soviet threat, which since 1945 had been a cardinal issue for Western politicians and societies. The new Soviet policy promising the elimination of confrontation and truly peaceful coexistence of the two systems, as well as ardent urgings to build a new world order based on trust, mutual security, cooperation and overcoming the division of Europe, thus

normalizing relations with the leading powers of Western Europe, seemed to offer a chance for a lasting solution in this respect.²²

Gorbachev's vision of a 'common European home'²³ had the direct implication that a more unified Europe could play a more significant role in the bipolar world order than previously, creating a potential 'third force'. Therefore, many politicians and a large part of the societies in Western Europe received the Soviet initiatives with great sympathy, especially over the course of 1988–89. All this was facilitated by the fact that Gorbachev's 'common European home' idea was an extremely vague conception, allowing varying interpretations and making it easy to be seen as the implementation of the post-Helsinki dream of many in Western Europe: a virtually united Europe where the capitalist West and the states of the Communist East with radically reformed and liberalized (but still Communist) political systems could live side by side and co-operate in a civilized manner as 'normal' partners until the end of time.

This new and extremely cooperative approach was based on the realization that the arms race with the US, the need to maintain parity of nuclear strategy, and the expenses of an irrationally oversized imperial periphery (Cuba, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola and so on) which brought no real profit, as well as the need to support Eastern Europe, had consumed the economic reserves of the Soviet Union to such an extent that the chances for consolidation were rather slim in a socialist economic system that was in any event extremely ineffective. It is important to stress that Gorbachev's cooperative attitude towards the West was also highly influenced by Reagan's SDI project which would have started a new and qualitatively different (unexpectedly expensive) phase in the superpower nuclear arms race. In this new phase, the Soviet Union, with its failing economy, had no chance to continue the competition. Therefore, once it had become clear for the Soviet leader that the US President was not willing to give up on his 'Star Wars' plan²⁴ the only option left for him to block the project was to appeal to the American taxpayers. Why should they spend horrendous sums for a space-based anti-missile system when there was no longer an enemy to fear? In spite of the realization of these problems Gorbachev and his reformist associates did not adequately assess the severity of the forthcoming crisis, even though they were aware of its inevitability. Thus up until 1988 the reforms initially formulated with much caution in terms of *perestroika* and *glasnost* did not significantly improve either the Soviet political conditions or the efficiency of the Soviet economy.

Although the new leadership had emphasized from the beginning its commitment to establishing a new international order that would replace the old superpower conflict, it failed to make the best of this possibility by radically and promptly reducing the armament costs of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet-American disarmament talks became increasingly intensive starting in the middle of the 1980s, and in December 1987 brought a remarkable result with the signing of the INF agreement on eliminating medium-range and short-range nuclear missiles.²⁵ Yet until the summer of 1988, the Soviet leadership refused to concede any unilateral steps in disarmament. As basically all the other Warsaw Pact member states were in a state of permanent economic crisis by the middle of the 1980s, they would have badly needed some relief measures. However, up until mid-1988 they were also not allowed to mollify the situation by cutting their military budgets. Only Romania, the openly deviating black sheep of the bloc, urging for unilateral reductions for years, reduced its armed forces by 5 per cent in 1986 in spite of a definite Soviet 'request' to the contrary.

The Soviets failed to introduce unilateral cuts in spite of the fact that the considerable Soviet numerical superiority, especially in conventional armaments, would have given them a great chance to significantly reduce military expenses. Moreover, this would have had a positive effect on confidence building between East and West, which Gorbachev regarded as especially important. It should also be remembered that a much less amicable Khrushchev did in fact use the 'weapon' of unilateral cuts and troop withdrawals very effectively as confidence building measures in promoting East–West rapprochement at the end of the 1950s.²⁶

However, because of the resistance of the Soviet military lobby and conservative members of the leadership, as well as the traditional imperial attitude which, to quite a large degree, characterized the views even of the reformers, a real turn could only take place at the Warsaw meeting of the Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Pact (WP PCC) on 15–16 July 1988.

Desperate Détente

In his address in the Warsaw Pact meeting, a still *ex officio* optimistic Gorbachev assessed the role of the socialist camp in shaping world politics and its chances for the future as definitely positive. On the other hand, at a closed session of the foreign ministers, Eduard Shevardnadze openly admitted that the Soviet Union was 'facing a critical situation', and it could no longer afford to run a permanent arms race with the West, given that it exceeded the Eastern bloc 'in every possible respect'. Therefore, he stressed that the termination of the arms race had to be given absolute priority and every chance had to be grasped in order to come to an agreement.²⁷ In fact, this dramatic confession was about nothing less than admitting total defeat in the several decade long competition of the two world-systems. Therefore this moment can be considered the beginning of the end for the Soviet Bloc. From then on the agreements absolutely necessary for the survival of

the bloc were not to be achieved in a 'normal way', by mutual compromises based on parity as in the case of the INF Treaty just a year earlier, but at any price. This was the crucial recognition that led to the decisions on the announcement of significant unilateral disarmament measures. Thus the WP PCC meeting of July 1988 in Warsaw can be considered an important turning point in the history of détente as well; from this time on the Soviet Bloc's attitude towards rapprochement with the West was no longer limited by the obligatory search for parity.

With a view to the hard situation, the WP PCC decided to hasten preparations for the forthcoming negotiations on conventional armament, to transform the structure and deployment of the armed forces of the WP (now exclusively for meeting defensive needs), to develop a more flexible negotiating strategy, and in particular – after changing its former position – to take unilateral steps in disarmament.²⁸ The Committee of the Defence Ministers was then commissioned to consider how the real data on the armies and the armament of the Warsaw Pact states could be made public. At its special meeting in Prague in the middle of October 1988, however, the non-Soviet members of the committee were shocked to learn that the vast numerical superiority of the Warsaw Pact in conventional armaments was in fact not the invention of Western propaganda – as they themselves truly believed – but a fact. Thus the Committee concluded that admitting the advantage of the WP in a number of fields before the negotiations started would have an unfavourable effect on the position of the alliance. Therefore this step, which was originally intended to strengthen security and confidence, was postponed to March 1989 when the so-called CFE talks did commence in Vienna.²⁹

The unilateral steps for disarmament, however, had been announced by Gorbachev well before this time when he delivered his speech at the UN General Assembly on 7 December 1988. On this occasion, the Secretary-General of the CPSU announced that the Soviet Union would reduce its armed forces by 500,000 troops, and that this would be accomplished by pulling out some of the forces stationed in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.³⁰ Altogether, he planned to withdraw some 50,000 Soviet troops from these three countries. The worsening of the political-economic situation in the Soviet Union by this time and, as a result of this, the significantly more flexible attitude of the Soviet leadership, are reflected by the fact that just half a year earlier, at the July 1988 Warsaw meeting of the WP PCC, Gorbachev had maintained that the total Soviet reduction could concern only some 70,000 troops and their armaments.³¹

The decision on the unilateral reduction of the armed forces, however, came too late for consolidating the Soviet economy. Moreover, in the short run it signified no reduction in military spending. Quite the contrary: however surprising it might seem, in the summer of 1988 the Moscow leaders

intended to increase the defence budget by 43 per cent (!), including the use of the state reserves as well.³² The imminent comprehensive modernization programme of NATO caught the Soviets – who at that point still wanted to maintain strategic parity by all means – in a trap out of which the only escape was to accomplish the unavoidable reduction simultaneously with the Soviet army's accelerated modernization, which would involve extremely large short-term costs.

One of the most remarkable results of the Gorbachev reforms was undoubtedly the introduction of pragmatic policy making and the reduced emphasis upon Communist ideology in both foreign and home policy. However, almost nothing was achieved in the area that would have offered the Soviet Union the most profit for the least investment: cutting down on the imperial periphery. Gorbachev was ready to replace the Soviet expansionist policy based on supporting the 'liberation movements' of the Third World with a more up-to-date strategy of exporting the revolution via the appeal of the new socialist model which in the meantime would be reformed, he hoped, and made functional. Because of the resistance of the conservative members of the leadership and the need to consider the prestige of the Soviet Union as a world superpower, however, very few concrete steps were taken in this direction before 1988. Although the pullout of troops from Afghanistan started at the beginning of that year, to be followed by the exit of Cuban 'volunteers' from Angola in January 1989, this all happened too late. Even in 1989, financing the imperial periphery inherited mostly from the Brezhnev era consumed huge sums (keeping Cuba alive alone cost 27 billion rubles annually), pushing the economy to the brink of total collapse.³³

This inflexible imperial policy, predetermined by ideological considerations that prohibited the timely elimination of most earlier obligations, eventually led to the loss of Soviet influence over the East Central European region.³⁴ Furthermore, as a result of constant over-expansion and thus exhaustion of the *actio radius* – a problem under which several empires had collapsed before in the course of history – the Soviet Union could eradicate the intolerable economic burden of supporting its allies only through its own dissolution.

Gorbachev's Last Weapon: Floating the Brezhnev Doctrine

At the time Gorbachev rose to power, Soviet policy continued to give the preservation of East Central Europe as a Soviet security zone the absolute priority it had enjoyed without interruption since 1945. Based on currently available sources, it can be clearly established that no significant change in this Soviet attitude occurred before mid-1988. During the summer of that year, however, qualitative changes took place in Soviet policy in several

respects. The programme of modernizing the Stalinist model came to be replaced by an effort to develop a *new model of socialism* that could blend the most advantageous features of both the Communist and the capitalist systems. A new model which, thanks to its capacity for renewal and thus its popularity among the public, could ensure a dominant role for the Communist Party in political life even after free elections. This 'rubber' concept – heavily influenced by the theory of convergence – went through a number of transitions in the coming years. Nobody knew what it really involved until it turned out that it was nothing else but capitalism.

In terms of East Central Europe, there were two fundamental changes in the Soviet policy at this time which greatly determined the fate of the region: the adoption of the principle of 'socialist pluralism' and the introduction of a new strategy in the alliance, coined by this author as the *floating of the Brezhnev doctrine*.³⁵ At the 1988 June Party Conference, Gorbachev declared without preliminary theoretical elaboration that any nation had the right to choose its own socio-economic system.³⁶ The most important goal might have been the introduction of a new type of discourse on the increasingly critical topic of the Soviet Union's relations with the Eastern European states: a discourse which could provide the leaders of the Soviet reforms greater room and possibility to manoeuvre than they had possessed before, thus giving them the chance to respond flexibly to the ever-changing situation.³⁷ The new Soviet thesis cited above was repeated by Gorbachev and other leaders several times and in several forms over the course of 1988–89 and was very soon supplemented by the promise to cease the use of military force. The essence of these multifunctional declarations, simultaneously addressed to all interested parties and deliberately meant to be ambiguous, was that although they implicitly rejected the possibility of military intervention, they never stated categorically that the Soviet Union would not interfere with an ally's domestic affairs should the political transition, *horribile dictu*, result in the total abandonment of socialism and the introduction of parliamentary democracy.³⁸ On the other hand, all this was coupled with continuous warnings from Moscow to the leaders of the East European countries through secret channels and at confidential bilateral talks. The message was as follows: the limit of the transformation is the safekeeping of socialism and the assurance of stability.³⁹ The initially instinctive but later increasingly conscious tactic of floating the Brezhnev doctrine was successful and effective, at least temporarily. It also had a stabilizing effect upon the accelerated transition both in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and contributed to preserving the basically peaceful nature of the changes to a large extent. The same blocking effect deriving from uncertainty can be generally observed in the policy of the opposition forces, although it manifested itself in different forms in the two leading reform countries, Poland and Hungary.⁴⁰

Beyond all this, from the middle of 1988 the floating of the Brezhnev doctrine was virtually the only 'weapon' left to the Soviet leadership with which it could, at least for a short time, retain an influence on the political processes running their course in Eastern Europe. After all, by that point Gorbachev and his associates had given up on the possibility of military intervention. Unlike their predecessors, who possessed much more modest goals, the Soviet reformers striving for a radical reformation of East–West relations and a new world order based on cooperation could simply not afford any kind of armed intervention aimed at restoring the order of the old system without jeopardising the results that had already been achieved. This danger would not only have emerged in world politics, but also would have caused the West to lose its confidence in Gorbachev. This in turn would have meant the fall of *perestroika*, the programme of transformation, Gorbachev's first priority.⁴¹

East Central Europe: The Temporary 'Victim' of Détente, 1989–91

It is essential to realize that by accepting the internal political changes in Eastern Europe in 1989 Gorbachev originally did not envisage giving up Moscow's sphere of influence in the region. His efforts were greatly facilitated by the fact that up until the end of 1990 the Western powers did not support the aspirations of the region's states for full national independence, not even for neutrality. On the contrary, they regarded the Warsaw Pact together with NATO as the fundamental pillars of the European security system. Consequently, in spite of what most former Western politicians and diplomats claim in their memoirs, they urged the new governments of the region, elected by free elections in the spring of 1990, to maintain their membership in the Warsaw Pact and the Comecon.⁴² In other words, during the transition in 1989–90, both Moscow and the Western powers were interested in the *regional Finlandization* of East Central Europe with the West seeking to do its utmost to preserve stability in the region by supporting Gorbachev's reforms. Thus the chance to play a historical role in the process of transformation for the countries of the region actually arose after the completion of the political transformation. The democratic transformation of the states of East Central Europe itself was due not to local factors, but rather to the favourable development of international conditions and above all the imminent, but in 1989 not yet visible, collapse of the dominating superpower of the region, the Soviet Union.⁴³

In the 'fight for independence' the Hungarian and Czechoslovak leadership played leading roles, with Poland joining them somewhat later in August 1990. This process, however, started as a rather difficult endeavour. The most radical approach was taken by the Antall Government in

Hungary that took office in May 1990. The desire to leave the Warsaw Pact was already included in the government programme, although in a not too categorical form. This was not meant to be a unilateral step. Rather, the intention was to achieve it in a gradual and negotiated way. The first step was to be quitting the military structure of the Warsaw Pact, following a kind of 'French model' of the 1960s. At the Warsaw Pact PCC meeting in Moscow in June 1990 József Antall first proposed a radical restructuring of the organization. He also indicated that because the military organization of the WP was outdated in the new international situation, there was no need for it and it should therefore be eliminated by the end of 1991.⁴⁴ In his opening speech Gorbachev himself initiated the transformation of the WP therefore the Hungarian proposal, contrary to popular belief, did not cause a great surprise. In fact, at this meeting the Czechoslovakians had already submitted concrete written proposals for the transformation of the military structures.⁴⁵ Strangely enough, the idea of the elimination of the Warsaw Pact was also raised by Gorbachev himself – even if only as a rhetorical question. 'To what extent are the structures and forms of our alliance appropriate to current challenges, and in what sense should they be restructured? Perhaps it is time to unilaterally declare the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty, or at least of its military organization, altogether. These are questions for which we must find answers or about which we should at least exchange views'.⁴⁶ Gorbachev immediately responded emphatically to his own 'proposal' by pointing out that during the transitional period, the existence of the WP would have a vital importance for negotiations with the West. He also added that the leaders of the Western powers were of exactly the same opinion.⁴⁷ In this context, however, it was of great significance that the representative of a member state put forward a concrete and not-so-distant deadline for the elimination of the military organization of the alliance.

The plans for the transformation of the Warsaw Pact organization were to be worked out by the newly established Steering Committee of Government Representatives, which had its first meetings in Prague and Sofia in July and September 1990, respectively. While a relatively less comprehensive transformation was outlined in Prague, a real breakthrough occurred in Sofia. At Hungarian initiative a secret Czechoslovak–Polish–Hungarian consultation was held at the ambassadorial level in August in Budapest where the parties adopted a radical restructuring plan.⁴⁸ This was tantamount to a minor 'coup' as the Soviet delegation in Sofia was totally unprepared for the coordinated action of 'the Three' and even less so for its direction. They were expecting to further develop the modest proposals outlined in Prague, but now the Czechoslovak representatives were withdrawing their earlier proposals one after the other. Moreover, it turned out that in Moscow there was no consensus on the future of the WP, so the Soviet delegation found itself in a difficult negotiating position. Finally the Soviets retreated and a tentative

decision was made to abolish the Warsaw Pact's military organization by 1 July 1991. At the suggestion of the Hungarians the decision was kept a secret. This secrecy was so successful that the decision is still commonly thought to have been made in February 1991 at the Warsaw Pact PCC meeting in Budapest, when such a plan was indeed made public. In Sofia the Hungarian representative also emphasized the importance of the complete elimination of the *whole alliance*, an idea which was not supported by anyone at the meeting. Informally the Polish and Czechoslovak experts told their Hungarian colleague that for the time being, the survival of a modified and 'weak' Warsaw Pact was still regarded an important goal for their governments.⁴⁹

In the following six months, the main purpose of 'the Three' was to codify the decision made in Sofia, which was scheduled to take place at the WP PCC session planned for November in Budapest. The Soviets, however, were sabotaging the implementation of the plan and consequently the meeting was postponed. The Hungarian government took further steps to persuade the two reluctant partners, thus paving the way for the 'Visegrad' cooperation initiated in Paris in November at the CSCE summit. (A similar, though less successful attempt at establishing such trilateral cooperation had already been made by 8 April 1990, when Polish, Czechoslovakian and Hungarian Presidents Havel, Jaruzelski and Mátyás Szűrös [as interim president], respectively, held a meeting in Bratislava). The breakthrough occurred at the beginning of 1991 when dramatic developments took place in the Baltic States: the Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian foreign ministers met in Budapest in January 1991, where it was decided to enforce the convening of the WP PCC meeting by joint pressure. The initiative was successful and in Budapest on February 25 the member states representatives decided to disband the military structure of the alliance by 1 April 1991, three months before the originally planned date.

At that time it still would have been possible in principle to put the political alliance on a new, democratic footing, at least temporarily. In practice, however, it was too late for such a move. By that time the majority of member states wanted the termination of the alliance and, sensing the impending crisis phenomena leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself, Gorbachev himself did not see the point in a continued struggle. The disintegration process sped up in the first half of 1991: on 28 June in Budapest the Soviet Bloc's economic organization, the Comecon, was dissolved. Three days later, on 1 July, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact was announced in Prague and on 26 December, the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist. Many believe that the Cold War ended at the Malta Summit between Gorbachev and Bush in December 1989 when the General Secretary declared that Moscow did not regard the US as an enemy anymore.⁵⁰ In reality the Cold War as an international structure ceased to exist only when one of its main protagonists, the Soviet Bloc, and its main architect, the Soviet Union, vanished.

Conclusion

For the Soviet Bloc states, détente was a new model of East-West coexistence after 1953 aimed at providing a chance for peaceful internal development by avoiding a direct and fatal clash of the two political-military blocs. Moreover, détente was a vital means for them to survive in the historic competition of the two systems, ironically with the help of their opponents as the Eastern Bloc states became increasingly reliant on Western advanced technology and loans especially from the 1960s onwards. Following the signing of the Helsinki Final Act the ever-broadening economic cooperation between the Eastern and Western parts of Europe eventually led to serious economic and financial dependency and indebtedness to the West in most Soviet Bloc states. Thus, paradoxically, détente and the consequent booming East-West economic cooperation – originally seen in the East as a vehicle for consolidating the Soviet Bloc economies – became a catalyst in the process of the destabilization of the Communist systems at the end of the 1980s.

During the transition in 1989–91, the non-Soviet states of the Soviet Bloc temporarily became the ‘victims’ of the unprecedented, close collaboration between the Western powers and the Soviet Union, with the West seeking to do their utmost to preserve stability in the region by supporting Gorbachev’s reforms. At that crucial historical junction the Western powers were originally willing to accept the regional Finlandization of East Central Europe, establishing democratic systems while preserving the Soviet sphere of influence by maintaining the existing integration organizations: the Warsaw Pact and the Comecon. To Western leaders at the time this seemed a fair price to pay for the peaceful half-liberation of East Central Europe; however, the ensuing collapse of the Soviet Union eventually gave them a good chance to conveniently forget about this transitional deal for good.

Notes

- 1 Research for this paper was supported by the Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
- 2 For two recent collective works on the Helsinki process, see Bange and Niedhart, *Helsinki 1975*; Wenger et al., *Origins of the European security system*.
- 3 For the Soviet Bloc’s policy vis-à-vis the Helsinki process, see Savranskaya and Taubman, ‘Soviet foreign policy’; Békés, ‘Entspannung in Europa’; Békés, ‘Hungary’. On the policies of the individual Soviet Bloc countries, see Grozev and Baev, ‘Bulgaria’; Ionescu, ‘Romania’; Jarzabek, ‘Hope and Reality’.
- 4 The FRG leadership believed that the desired stability in Eastern Europe could only be maintained by avoiding a change of the whole system: that is, the political transition itself. At his meeting with Gorbachev on 14 June 1989, Helmut Kohl outlined his position on the Hungarian transition as follows: ‘We have rather good relations with the Hungarians. However, we also do not want destabilization there. That is why when I meet with the Hungarians, I tell them: we consider the reforms that are underway in your country your internal affair, we are sympathetic. However, if

- you would like to hear our advice, we recommend that you do not accelerate too much, because you might lose control over your mechanism and it will start to work to destroy itself [emphasis added – Cs. B.]’. Record of third conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl, 14 June 1989. Savranskaya et al., *Masterpieces of History*, 477.
- 5 On Soviet interventions in the Third World, see Westad, *The Global Cold War*.
 - 6 Record of conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Egon Krenz, 1 November 1989. In Savranskaya et al., *Masterpieces of history*. 570.
 - 7 We should keep in mind that, according to the author’s estimate, during the Cold War, on average, the US spent approximately 5 per cent of its GDP on military costs, while this figure was around 25 per cent for the Soviet Union.
 - 8 According to this novel theory détente in fact started in 1953 and never ended up until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The main characteristic in the relationship of the conflicting superpowers and their political-military blocs after 1953 was the continuous interdependence and compelled co-operation of the US and the Soviet Union while immanent antagonism obviously remained. Détente was thus not a temporary easing of tension between East and West but a new model of superpower coexistence. Ideological antagonism, competition, conflict and confrontation remained constant elements of the Cold War structure but now they were always controlled by the détente elements: interdependence and compelled co-operation with the aim of avoiding a direct military confrontation of the superpowers. Békés, ‘Cold War’.
 - 9 Békés, ‘Why was there no “Second Cold War”’.
 - 10 At the time of the Hungarian revolution in 1956, it was Anastas Mikoyan, a respected member of the Soviet leadership and the one who knew the Hungarian situation best, who proposed a solution using local forces only: ‘There is no way of mastering the movement without [Imre] Nagy, and so this will make it cheaper for us as well. . . . What can we lose? Let the Hungarians restore order for themselves. Let us try political measures, and only after that send our troops in’. (The ‘Malin notes’ on the Crises in Hungary and Poland, 1956, translated and annotated by Kramer, *CWIHP Bulletin*. For the first publication of the Mikoyan doctrine, see Békés, ‘Cold War’.
 - 11 Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 299–330.
 - 12 In April 1958 Khrushchev planned to withdraw all Soviet troops both from Romania and Hungary. However, at the request of Hungarian leader János Kádár he agreed to the continued presence of the Soviet army in Hungary.
 - 13 As a result two visits of West German politicians had to be cancelled: Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher was to visit Prague, while Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was to have had talks with Erich Honecker in Berlin. In the case of Hungary the Soviets ‘requested’ that the visit of Hungarian Foreign Minister Frigyes Puja to Bonn, which was due in less than a week, be cancelled and similarly the visit of a delegation of the parliament to the US be put off. Although the Bulgarians did not have forthcoming meetings with Western politicians, they too were warned against planning such steps. For a detailed account of this crisis, see Békés, ‘Why was there no “Second Cold War”’.
 - 14 On this concept, introduced by this author, see Békés, ‘Hungarian foreign policy in the Soviet alliance system’.
 - 15 For the analysis of Soviet policy in this period, see Zubok, ‘Soviet foreign policy’.
 - 16 Memorandum of conversation between Vadim Zagladin, first deputy head of the International Department of the CPSU CC and Gyula Horn, deputy head of the HSWP CC Department of Foreign Affairs on debates inside the Soviet leadership

- on issues of international politics [16 July 1980] Magyar Országos Levéltár (MOL) [Hungarian National Archives] (hereafter HNA) M-KS 288 f. 47/ 764.ő.e.
- 17 On the history of Hungarian foreign policy and Hungary's role in shaping East-West relations, see Békés, *Európából Európába.*; Békés, 'Hungarian foreign policy' in the Soviet alliance system'; Békés, 'Hungarian foreign policy in the bipolar world'.
 - 18 Békés, 'Why was there no "Second Cold War"', 227.
 - 19 On the Polish crisis, see Paczkowski and Byrne, *From Solidarity to Martial Law*.
 - 20 HNA, M-KS 288 f. 5/ 897. ő.e.
 - 21 For a detailed analysis of Hungarian foreign policy in this period, see Békés, *Hungary*.
 - 22 For recent archive based analyses of Gorbachev's foreign policy, see Savranskaya, 'The logic of 1989'; Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 303–35. For the author's analysis of the topic, see Békés, 'Back to Europe'.
 - 23 On Gorbachev's 'common European home' conception, see Rey, 'Europe is our common home'. See also Savranskaya, 'The logic of 1989', 18–22.
 - 24 Gorbachev desperately tried to convince Reagan to abandon the plan at their summit meetings, especially those in Geneva and Reykjavik.
 - 25 For an analysis of Soviet-American relations in the 1980s, see Garthoff, *The Great Transition*.
 - 26 On Khrushchev's foreign policy, see Taubman, *Khrushchev*; Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 94–153.
 - 27 Report to the Politburo and the Council of Ministers on the Warsaw meeting of the Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Treaty Member States, 18 July 1988. HNA M-KS-288. f. 11/4453 ő.e.
 - 28 For a documentary history of the Warsaw Pact, see Mastny and Byrne, *A Cardboard Castle?*
 - 29 Comment made by Ferenc Kárpáti, Minister of Defense, at the November 22, 1988 meeting of the HSWP Central Committee, HNA M-KS-288. f. 4/246. ő.e.
 - 30 Report to the Politburo and the Council of Ministers on the Warsaw meeting of the Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Treaty Member States, 18 July 1988. HNA M-KS-288. f. 11/4453 ő.e.
 - 31 For the records of the WPP CC meeting in Warsaw in July 1988 visit the PHP web-site: <http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch/collections/colltopic.cfm?lng=en&id=17113&navinfo=14465>. Accessed 15 September 2003.
 - 32 Comment by Károly Grósz at the 22 July 1988 meeting of the HSWP CC, HNA M-KS-288. f. 5/1031. ő.e.
 - 33 The total Soviet assistance programme cost 41 billion rubles annually. This sum was half of the total annual trade volume (80 million rubles) between the Soviet Union and all the other socialist countries. Notes of CC CPSU Politburo session, 10 March 1988. Savranskaya et al., *Masterpieces of History*, 265.
 - 34 Evidence of the survival of this imperial approach is the fact that for the sake of maintaining Soviet influence, the 10-year occupation of Afghanistan cost the Soviet Union 5 billion (!) US dollars per year, and even after the pullout the leadership reckoned with an annual cost of 3 billion. – Károly Grósz's comment made at the 12 July 1988 meeting of the HSWP Politburo, HNA M-KS-233. f. 5/1031 ő.e.
 - 35 On the theory of the floating of the Brezhnev doctrine, see Békés, 'Back to Europe', 242–5.
 - 36 Levesque, *The Enigma of 1989*, 80–81. For the analysis of Soviet policy towards Eastern Europe in this period, see also Gati, *The Bloc that Failed*.
 - 37 For an interesting novel interpretation of Gorbachev's policies towards the political transformation in East-Central Europe, see Kalmár, *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában*, 776, 515–593.

- 38 One rather characteristic example of this ambiguous attitude is that at the 12 June 1989 talks between Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl, the Soviet leader stated that the Brezhnev doctrine was no longer in force, however, he added that 'we are also in favour of preserving the special features of and traditions of the socialist states'. Record of conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl, 12 June 1989. Savranskaya et al., *Masterpieces of History*, 466.
- 39 Report for the members of the Politburo on the visit of Károly Grósz to the Soviet Union on 23–24 March 1989, in Békés et al., *Political Transition in Hungary*.
- 40 For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Békés, 'Back to Europe', 242–5.
- 41 For an archive based recent analysis of this process, see Savranskaya, 'The logic of 1989'.
- 42 Békés, *Hungary, the Soviet Bloc*, 359. On this issue, see Borhi, 'Magyarország kötelessége'.
- 43 On the process of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, see Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism'.
- 44 Békés, *Hungary, the Soviet Bloc*, 360.
- 45 Mastny and Byrne, *A Cardboard Castle?*, 674–7.
- 46 Speech by the President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, M.S. Gorbachev (Moscow, 7 June 1990), <http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch/collections/colltopic.cfm?lng=en&id=19001&navinfo=14465>. Accessed 15 September 2003.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Report on the second meeting of the Steering Committee of Government Representatives for the revision of the Warsaw Treaty, 27 September 1990. HNA Foreign Ministry, 002686/1/1990.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Soviet transcript of the Malta summit. Savranskaya et al., *Masterpieces of History*, 636.

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