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US/SOVIET RELATIONS: GORBACHEV'S POSITION

SUMMARY

1. AN ATTEMPT TO ASSESS, ON THE EVE OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON, HOW GORBACHEV NOW VIEWS THE SUPER-POWER RELATIONSHIP.

DETAIL

2. GORBACHEV'S FIRST PRIORITY REMAINS THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE SOVIET ECONOMY AND THE ATTEMPT TO REVITALISE IT SUFFICIENTLY TO, AT LEAST, PREVENT THE LAG BEHIND THE US FROM WIDENING. EXTERNALLY, THIS IMPLIES TWO REQUIREMENTS:-

A DEGREE OF STABILITY IN EAST/WEST RELATIONS SUFFICIENT TO MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR THE CONSERVATIVES TO ARGUE AGAINST RADICAL INTERNAL CHANGE DURING A PERIOD OF EXTERNAL THREAT; AND AVOIDANCE OF A QUALITATIVE LEAP IN DEFENCE-RELATED R AND D NECESSITATING FURTHER DIVERSION OF RESOURCES FROM THE CIVILIAN SECTOR. INTERNALLY, GORBACHEV'S PRIME POLITICAL REQUIREMENT IS TO MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE HIS PERSONAL AUTHORITY IN THE PARTY, AND IN THE COUNTRY AT LARGE, IN ORDER TO PUSH HIS REFORM PROGRAMME THROUGH.

3. REYKJAVIK, AS IT SEEMS FROM MOSCOW, WAS A BOLD AND NOT UNSKILFUL, THOUGH UNSCRUPULOUS, ATTEMPT TO SECURE ALL THREE REQUIREMENTS:- TO ENHANCE EAST/WEST STABILITY BY ESTABLISHING THE BASIS FOR ARMS CONTROL AGREEMENTS; TO PLAY OFF PRESIDENT REAGAN'S VISION OF A NUCLEAR-FREE WORLD AGAINST HIS OTHER VISION, OF A DEFENSIVE SHIELD IN SPACE, THEREBY AVERTING THE NEED FOR A COSTLY SOVIET RESPONSE; AND, FINALLY, TO ENSURE THAT THE NEXT SUMMIT

SOVIET RESPONSE; AND, FINALLY, TO ENSURE THAT THE NEXT SUMMIT WOULD BE A POLITICAL TRIUMPH FOR GORBACHEV RATHER THAN A POLITICAL LIABILITY AT HOME. THE ODDS AGAINST SUCCESS WERE LONG (ALTHOUGH GORBACHEV DID IN FACT SUCCEED IN BOUNCING PRESIDENT REAGAN INTO A RADICAL CHANGE OF POSITION ON STRATEGIC ARMS REDUCTIONS). BUT FAILURE WOULD, AND DID, NEVERTHELESS LEAVE THE PROPAGANDA ADVANTAGE, TO PUT IT NO HIGHER, WITH THE SOVIET UNION.

4. IN ORDER TO RETRIEVE THE BAIT WHICH GORBACHEV PUT ON THE TABLE AT REYKJAVIK IN AN ATTEMPT TO HOOK THE SDI, THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP HAS SINCE BEEN AT PAINS TO STRENGTHEN THE LINKAGE BETWEEN ALL THE COMPONENTS OF THE SOVIET PACKAGE WHICH WAS PUT FORWARD THERE. IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT THE BAIT LABELLED 'ELIMINATION OF ALL STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS' WAS IN ANY CASE TAINTED; GORBACHEV AND HIS ADVISERS CAN SCARCELY HAVE BELIEVED THAT, EVEN IF THE INITIAL GOAL OF 50% REDUCTIONS WERE TO BE ACHIEVED, THE PROBLEMS PRESENTED BY UK, FRENCH AND (PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANTLY) CHINESE NUCLEAR SYSTEMS COULD BE RESOLVED WITHIN A FURTHER 5 YEARS. BUT THE PRICE WAS NOT IN ANY CASE SUFFICIENTLY HIGH TO WEAN PRESIDENT REAGAN FROM THE SDI AND GORBACHEV MUST NOW REALISE THAT HIS PROSPECTS OF CONSTRAINING THE SDI PROGRAMME DURING REAGAN'S REMAINING TWO YEARS ARE VIRTUALLY NON-EXISTENT. HIS HOPES OF AVOIDING THE ASTRONOMIC EXPENSE OF A SOVIET COUNTER-PROGRAMME, THEREFORE, MUST NOW REST ON THE CHARACTER OF REAGAN'S SUCCESSOR.

5. THE REQUIREMENT FOR AN ADEQUATE DEGREE OF EAST/WEST STABILITY NONETHELESS REMAINS. THE DIALOGUE AT GENEVA AND IN VIENNA IS THEREFORE LIKELY TO CONTINUE, WITH THE RUSSIANS CONCENTRATING ON SEEKING TO NAIL DOWN THOSE RECENT MODIFICATIONS OF US POSITIONS WHICH ARE ATTRACTIVE TO THEM WHILE MAKING THEIR OWN CONCESSIONS DEPENDENT ON ABMT AMENDMENTS. SOME MOVEMENT MAY BE ALLOWED ON CW AND THE RUSSIANS WILL TRY TO LOOK FORTHCOMING ON CONVENTIONAL ARMS REDUCTIONS. BUT WITHOUT, AT THIS STAGE, PERMITTING PROGRESS ON SUBSTANCE. SHEVERNADZE HAS HINTED (MY TELNO 1330) THAT THE SOVIET MORATORIUM ON NUCLEAR TESTING CANNOT LAST MUCH LONGER. THE PROSPECTS FOR A SECOND REAGAN/GORBACHEV SUMMIT MUST NOW BE VERY PROBLEMATIC. THIS MAY NOT BE OF GREAT CONCERN TO GORBACHEV, WHO DOUBTLESS CALCULATES THAT THE AMERICANS WILL ATTRACT MOST OF THE BLAME.

6. AFTER A SUITABLE INTERVAL, HOWEVER, GORBACHEV MIGHT SEE ADVANTAGE IN LOOSENING HIS REYKJAVIK PACKAGE TO THE EXTENT OF AGREEING TO THE NEGOTIATION OF A SEPARATE AGREEMENT ON INF, ON THE BASIS ENVISAGED AT REYKJAVIK. THE ZERO OPTION IN WESTERN EUROPE WOULD ENABLE BOTH WASHINGTON AND MOSCOW TO CLAIM A FAMOUS VICTORY, WHATEVER THE MISGIVINGS OF THE WEST EUROPEANS (AND THE SATISFACTION OF THE SOVIET MILITARY) OVER THE DEPARTURE OF CRUISE AND PERSHING II TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC. WHETHER AN INF AGREEMENT, EVEN WITH A SUPPORTING CAST OF LESSER ACCORDS, WOULD BE AN ADEQUATE PRIZE FOR GORBACHEV TO BRING BACK FROM A WASHINGTON SUMMIT IS QUESTIONABLE. WHAT IS CERTAIN IS THAT THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP WILL BE STUDYING EVIDENCE OF POSSIBLE VOLATILITY IN TRANS-ATLANTIC RELATIONS WITH CLOSE ATTENTION. AFTER THE NOT UNEXPECTED FAILURE OF HIS DASH FOR THE SUMMIT AT REYKJAVIK, GORBACHEV AND HIS COLLEAGUES WILL NOW DEVOTE MORE EFFORT TO CONSOLIDATING SOVIET PROPAGANDA POSITIONS IN THE WEST EUROPEAN FOOT-HILLS BEFORE EMBARKING ON THE NEXT ATTEMPT. THE NATURE AND TIMING OF GORBACHEV'S NEXT INITIATIVE WILL DEPEND SIGNIFICANTLY ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH HE IS ABLE TO FOMENT DISCONTENT WITH US POLICIES AMONG THE WEST EUROPEANS AND APPROACH A FURTHER MEETING WITH REAGAN AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF ALLIANCE DISUNITY. THERE IS OF COURSE A PARADOX IN THAT THE IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCE OF REYKJAVIK HAS BEEN TO STRENGTHEN THE ARGUMENTS OF THOSE WHOM THE RUSSIANS REGARD AS HARD-LINEERS RATHER THAN THE ANTI-NUCLEAR LOBBY WHICH IS THE MORE NATURAL SOVIET CONSTITUENCY.