

April 16, 1986

GORBACHEV AND THE 27th SOVIET PARTY CONGRESS SAY NYET TO CHANGE

INTRODUCTION

Two important aspects of the Soviet system under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev surfaced during the recent 27th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party: 1) the General Secretary has successfully planted his own appointees throughout the Soviet Party and government bureaucracy; and 2) the system remains fiercely resistant to change.

The speeches by Gorbachev and other top Party officials and the basic documents adopted by the Congress (the new Party Program, the new Party Statutes, and the economic plans for the years 1986-1990 and up to the year 2000) all indicate no fundamental changes in those policies that have brought economic stagnation, demoralization, and repression at home and the export of the brutal Soviet social system abroad. Although Gorbachev talked at the Party Congress about the need for speeding economic growth, he showed no interest in reforming the Soviet centrally planned economy. Nor is any change signaled by his calls for "openness" in public life. This has nothing to do with a pluralistic spontaneous exchange of ideas but is rather a tool for purging the Soviet bureaucracy of Brezhnev's "old guard." Gorbachev's foreign policy may talk of "new beginnings," but it rests firmly on the old strategies designed to undermine American security interests.

In the light of no essential change in the Soviet political scene, U.S. policy toward Moscow should stay the course of the past several years: the U.S. arsenal must be expanded and modernized; U.S. military strength must be a precondition of arms control negotiations; the goal of negotiations must be to improve U.S. security and the prospects of world peace; Washington must not sign treaties with Moscow simply for the sake of concluding treaties; the U.S. must restrict and monitor carefully the transfer of militarily significant know-how and technology to the Soviet Union; the U.S. must continue to

challenge the Soviet empire at its periphery, since rolling back the Soviet Empire is an appropriate goal; the U.S. thus must support anticommunist freedom fighters in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Nicaragua; and the U.S. must affirm its commitment to human rights for all, including inhabitants of the Soviet bloc.

WHAT IS A PARTY CONGRESS?

According to the Statutes of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), congresses are the Party's supreme decision-making body and must convene at least every five years. In theory, the Party Congress elects the Central Committee, which, in turn, elects the ruling Politburo and the Secretariat of the Central Committee. The reality is quite different. It is the Politburo and the Secretariat which select the delegates to a Party Congress, prepare the political documents and economic plans that invariably are approved unanimously by the Congress, and submit the list of the members of the Central Committee to be rubber stamped by the Congress. The Communist Party elite can run the Soviet Union very well without any party congresses. Stalin did so between the 18th Party Congress of 1939 and the 19th of 1952.

THE NEW PARTY PROGRAM: THE ELUSIVE UTOPIA

The new Party Program adopted by the Congress abandons the grand promises of Nikita Khrushchev's 1961 Party Program.¹ The new program concedes that the transition to communism is nowhere in sight, and that growth of the Soviet citizen's real income must be determined by the "economic potential" of the Soviet Union. Although the program promises to provide "practically" every family with its own apartment by the year 2000, the word "practically" indicates that Soviet leaders do not believe this promise themselves. The Soviet people, used to the empty promises of the last 68 years, will hardly be energized by this Party Program.

1. The Program of Soviet Communist Party, adopted by the 22nd Party Congress under Nikita Khrushchev's reign, and in force until the 27th Party Congress, long had been embarrassing to Soviet officials: it confidently predicted that by 1980 the Soviet Union would be the most wealthy and developed country in the world, that Soviet citizens would no longer be engaged in manual labor, but would enjoy free and plentiful housing and free public transportation.

No Change in Soviet Political System

The past year's speeches, and those at the Congress, by Gorbachev and other political figures, plus the documents adopted at the Congress, indicate no shift at all from the dictatorship of the Communist Party elite. Gorbachev has launched a campaign in the Soviet mass media against shortcomings in Soviet everyday life, but his goals are limited in time and scope: he wants to use this campaign to get rid of Brezhnev's "old guard" and shift the blame for the state of affairs in the Soviet Union away from the communist system to individual bureaucrats.

But the political system itself, which bestows enormous privileges on the ruling elite, is off limits to criticism. This February 13, Pravda apparently erred in publishing a letter from a citizen demanding an end to privileges for Communist Party functionaries. These privileges include special hospitals, special shops, and special canteens. Demanded the letter: "Let the boss go with everybody else to an ordinary store and stand in line like everyone else." In his speech to the Congress, Gorbachev's second-in-command, Politburo member, and Central Committee Secretary Yegor Ligachev, reprimanded Pravda for publishing the letter. And Gorbachev, at a meeting with top Soviet media officials, instructed that media criticism should be aimed not at the Party but at 'bureaucrats'²--a venerable if somewhat dusty target of Soviet satirists since the days of Lenin.

The best litmus test of any Soviet leader's intentions to relax the iron-fisted control of Soviet society is his attitude toward Stalin and the KGB. At the Congress, Gorbachev did not mention Stalin. But several days before the Congress, when asked by a French communist journalist about the "residue" of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev responded: "Stalinism is a concept invented by the enemies of communism...in order to smear the Soviet Union."³ This is an explicit and unambiguous reaffirmation of a continuity between Stalin's political system and Gorbachev's. Denouncing the Stalinist heritage, Gorbachev apparently realizes (as Khrushchev did not), is tantamount to denouncing the political system over which he presides.

Another clear signal is that, in preparation for the Congress, Gorbachev appointed Aleksandr Aksyonov to head the Soviet Committee for Radio and Television. Aksyonov is the KGB officer who organized the suppression of the Solidarity free trade union movement when he was the Soviet Ambassador to Poland from 1983 to 1985.

2. "Vstrecha v TsK KPSS," Pravda, March 15, 1986.

3. Pravda, February 8, 1986.

KGB in the Forefront

The new Party Program lauds the KGB and the Armed Forces together as the main guarantors of the regime's stability. In his speech at the Congress, Gorbachev praised the KGB. Viktor Chebrikov, the KGB boss whom Gorbachev promoted to the Politburo, vowed in his Congress speech to eradicate the human rights movement in the Soviet Union. Further, Gorbachev vowed to prevent "opening up" the Soviet Union to Western ideas and to prevent visitors from the West from "abusing the hospitality" of the Soviets by spreading noncommunist ideas.⁴

Reinforcement of Personal Power

The Party Congress demonstrated Gorbachev's great success at staffing the Party and government machinery with his own people. His loyalists now occupy the pinnacles of power in the Politburo and Secretariat of the Central Committee.⁵ New faces, of course, do not necessarily mean new ideas and policies. Some of Gorbachev's "new" people, like Yegor Ligachev, a Central Committee Secretary and Politburo member, or Georgiy Razumovskiy, a Secretary and a candidate Politburo member, have been professional Party workers. Others, such as Lev Zaikov, a Politburo member and Secretary responsible for the defense industry, or Nikolay Ryzhkov, the Prime Minister and Politburo member, had been promoted years ago from high-ranking positions in the industrial bureaucracy into the top stratum of Soviet political elite.

The appointment of Anatoly Dobrynin, long-time Soviet Ambassador to the U.S., as a Secretary of the Central Committee will not result in any shift from communist orthodoxy in Soviet foreign policy. Former Soviet Ambassador Arkady Shevchenko, who knew Dobrynin well, describes him as a "staunch supporter of the Soviet system..." who views the U.S. as "his opponent, and...is determined to win."⁶

4. Pravda, March 1, 1986.

5. He has introduced five new full (voting) members into the twelve-man Politburo; five new candidate (nonvoting) members of the Politburo (there are seven nonvoting members altogether); seven out of ten secretaries of the Central Committee have been appointed by Gorbachev, who, as General Secretary, is the eleventh. The membership of the Central Committee, announced at the Congress, includes 124 new members, a 40 percent turnover in the 307-person body.

6. Arkady Shevchenko, Breaking With Moscow (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1985), p. 195.

Economy: Unrealistic Plans

At the Congress, Gorbachev promised a significant improvement in the Soviet economy. But the Soviets' recent economic performance and the lack of any evidence at the Congress of a forthcoming shift away from centralized economic planning make these promises sound utopian. The Twelfth Five-Year Economic Plan adopted at the Congress anticipates growth in gross national product of 3.5 percent annually for 1986-1990 and about 5 percent annually in 1991-2000. In 1985, Gorbachev's first year in power, according to calculations of the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency, Soviet GNP grew by only 1.6 percent.

Gorbachev's economic policies proclaimed at the Congress show no clear way for achieving considerably faster rates of growth. One of the causes for low worker productivity is the shortage of quality consumer goods; this will not be remedied easily or soon (if ever), despite Gorbachev's promises at the Congress. It appears from Prime Minister Ryzhkov's speech that, while investment in machine building will receive an 80 percent increase in the next five years, consumer spending will suffer.

Defense Industry Still Tops the List

This means that, without much fanfare, the Soviet defense industry is still the Kremlin's top priority, because machine building constitutes the backbone of Soviet military-industrial capacity. Gorbachev apparently is responding to the concerns, voiced recently by several Soviet military leaders, that the increasing tempo of scientific and technological progress in the West may make the Soviet arsenal obsolete if Soviet economic development does not speed up. Hence the boost in investment in machine building. Although Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders at the Congress avoided the issue of a direct relationship between the proposed Soviet "scientific-technological revolution" and the military buildup, the official journal of the Soviet Ministry of Defense, Communist of the Armed Forces, made this relationship clear. An October 1985 article explaining the Communist Party's military policy in preparation for the Congress said:

7. "The Soviet Economy Under a New Leader," A Report Presented to the Subcommittee on Economic Resources, Competitiveness, and Security Economics of the Joint Economic Committee, by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, March 19, 1986, pp. 12, 15.

8. Keith Bush, "Ryzhkov's Speech to the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress: A Tone of Sobriety," Radio Liberty Research Bulletin No. 109, 1986, pp. 2, 3.

Today it is difficult to overestimate the Party's concern for the cardinal acceleration of scientific-technological progress in the matter of strengthening military-economic potential. After all, the leading directions of scientific-technological progress--the robot technology, computer technology, instrument making, and electronics--are simultaneously the basic catalyst of military-technical progress.

Stalinist Economic System Left Intact

Gorbachev and his colleagues want the fruits of advanced science and technology but not the free market conditions that foster these advances in the West. This would be incompatible with the Communist Party's monopoly of power. Indeed, at the Congress, Gorbachev spoke about strengthening the mechanism of central economic planning, but he did not say a word about moving toward a market economy. Without the free market to set prices, economic decisions will continue to be arbitrary.

Soviet planners cannot even trust their own statistics, because managers "pad" prices of goods manufactured by their enterprises to make their production quotas look better. While official statistics show, for instance, that production of certain sectors of machine building, measured in rubles, grew in 1980-1985 by 40 percent or more, the real output of machinery increased by only 5 to 10 percent.⁹ Gorbachev's remedy, proposed at the Congress, however, was to establish a new system of equally arbitrary prices.

Other economic policies emphasized by Gorbachev have a similarly bureaucratic character. In agriculture, which showed no growth at all in 1985, Gorbachev told the Congress of his newly created Agro-Industrial Committee. This is a giant super-ministry, which has absorbed five different ministries and one state committee; under its control, moreover, are three ministries and one state committee. And it coordinates its work with a host of other ministries. This bureaucratic elephant almost certainly will quash Gorbachev's cautious attempts, mentioned at the Congress, to allow some independent contract work in agriculture by small teams or even individual families.

The same bureaucratic mentality characterizes Gorbachev's attempts to make Soviet science more productive. At the Congress, Gorbachev promoted yet another organizational form for the Soviet

9. V. Selyunin and G. Khanin, "Pyl' v glaza," Pravda, December 30, 1985; Vladimir Kontorovich and Boris Rumer, "Recalculations Put Gorbachev and Co. Deeper in the Hole," The Wall Street Journal, February 27, 1986.

scientific establishment: Inter-Branch Scientific-Technological Complexes. Each Complex will deal with a single science and technology topic (lasers, industrial robots, and so forth) and will be the sole research and development organization responsible for it. The Complexes will be headed by major research institutes and include research and development and production facilities throughout the country. Not only do the Complexes appear to be typically clumsy giants, but they will lack real autonomy. They will be subordinated to industrial ministries notorious for narrow mindedness or to the Academy of Sciences, which traditionally has had problems in transferring scientific advances to industry. And further, the Complexes will depend upon the supply system of the State Committee for Supplies, a well-known bottleneck.¹⁰

Tightening the Discipline

Sloth, corruption, and mismanagement reached fantastic proportions during Brezhnev's reign. Simply by cleaning the stables, therefore, Gorbachev should be able to spur economic improvement in the short- to mid-term. But because he is not changing the system, his appointees almost certainly will eventually become as corrupt and inefficient as their predecessors.¹¹ Marginal improvements cannot provide the Soviet Union with the modern technology needed for maintaining its superpower status.

FOREIGN POLICY

Need for Western High Technology

Though Soviet leaders are eagerly eyeing Western technology, not a word about this was uttered at the Congress. Two months earlier, however, addressing the annual meeting of the American-Soviet Trade and Economic Council in Moscow, Gorbachev attacked U.S. controls on exports of high technology to the Soviet Union. He demanded the removal of such controls and called for sales of the most modern U.S. technology to the Soviet Union. Prime Minister Ryzhkov, speaking a week later to the heads of Comecon¹² countries, was even more

10. G. Marchuk, Chairman of the State Committee for Science and Technology, "Magistrali progressa," Izvestiya, December 17, 1985.

11. See Vladimir Kontorovich, "Discipline and Growth in Soviet Economy," Problems of Communism, November-December 1985, pp. 18-31.

12. Comecon--Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, is an economic organization of communist states, including the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Hungary, Vietnam, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, and Mongolia.

candid. He said that the restrictions established by the West were meant to "upset the military-strategic parity" and called upon the Comecon countries to unite against this danger.¹³

Moscow has other problems than Western restrictions in importing technology. In 1985, production of oil in the Soviet Union fell 3 percent below the 1984 figure, thereby squeezing Soviet hard currency reserves. Nearly half of Soviet hard currency earnings in 1983 depended on oil exports. As a result, the Soviets ended 1985 with an \$8 billion hard currency debt.¹⁴

U.S.-Soviet Relations

While most of the Western reporting from the Party Congress focused on Soviet economic issues, other matters also commanded attention. Gorbachev began his speech, as his predecessors had, with a detailed analysis of the domestic politics of and relations between noncommunist nations. This was a reaffirmation of the Soviet Communist Party's claim to control the processes of social change throughout the world.

When he turned to relations with the U.S., Gorbachev's message to the Congress was that an arms control agreement on Soviet terms would be needed to create a breathing spell for the Soviet economy. Such an agreement would ban the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative, but leave Moscow considerable leeway for continuing work on ground-based ballistic missile defenses and for preserving an advantage in offensive weapons. At the same time, Gorbachev appealed to West Europeans to uncouple their security policies from those of the U.S.

Soviet Peace Offensive

At the Congress, Gorbachev said that "one or two peace offensives" are not enough: a continuous peace offensive is required to carry out the goals of Soviet foreign policy. He pinpointed two groups in the West willing, in his opinion, to cooperate with Soviet peace offensive: social democratic parties and religious organizations.

13. Pravda, December 11, 1985; Izvestiya, December 18, 1985. The U.S. government recently provided a well-documented description of the gigantic Soviet effort for illegal acquisition by the Soviets of Western militarily significant technologies: Soviet Acquisition of Militarily Significant Technologies: An Update (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985).

14. Pravda, January 26, 1986; Celestine Bohlen, "Moscow Feels Hard Currency Pinch," The Washington Post, January 31, 1986; "Russia's Money Squeeze," The Wall Street Journal, February 5, 1986.

Afghanistan: No Change

Gorbachev told the Congress that the Soviet Union would like to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan as soon as possible but would do so only if resistance to the communist regime in Kabul were to cease. Since it is the existence of a pro-Soviet government in Kabul, and not foreign aid to Afghan freedom fighters, that generates the resistance, his proposal means no change in Soviet policy in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

The 27th Soviet Communist Party Congress revealed the ascendancy of a new and younger generation of Soviet Party bureaucrats, still unable and unwilling to shake off those policies that have led to economic stagnation and repression inside the Soviet Union and to confrontation and proliferation of totalitarian regimes outside. Gorbachev's domestic policies, as they appeared at the Congress, are traditional: placing his own appointees in all important positions, enhancing the role of the KGB's repressive machinery, giving priority to the machine building branches of industry essential for the Soviet military buildup, and hiding these realities behind the smokescreen of phrases about "radical change."

Gorbachev has not tried to ease the Communist Party's grip on every sphere of Soviet life. He is unlikely to do so. His campaign of criticism in the mass media before and after the Congress was intended to blame the failures of the Soviet system on individual bureaucrats. Everything said at the Congress indicates that, as economic stimulus, Gorbachev prefers the traditional Soviet instruments of repression and discipline to free market experiments. Though prodding the bureaucracy may spur some economic growth, it will not trigger a revolution in science and technology, as Gorbachev claims. He will have no choice but to turn to the West for high technology.

The Party Congress makes it clear that Gorbachev is going to continue defense spending in the high range of 15 to 17 percent of gross national product (compared to an estimated 6.8 percent for the U.S. in 1986) and that he will continue to push for annual defense spending growth of 5 percent (compared to less than 5 percent for the U.S.).¹⁵

15. "The Soviet Economy Under a New Leader," op. cit., pp. 35-36. The rate of increase in U.S. defense spending is taken from the latest Senate Budget Committee proposal projected at 4 percent.

Gorbachev's foreign policy in the aftermath of the Congress is the old mixture of disarmament rhetoric aimed at Western "peace movements," hard-nosed arms control strategies intended to preserve Soviet military advantages, aid to totalitarian forces in Third World nations, and trying to prevent the U.S. from pursuing its national interests.

For Washington the message from the 27th Party Congress is clear: Soviet domestic and foreign policies are not about to change. As such, the U.S. should not slow its defense modernization, should not allow leakage of militarily significant technologies to the Soviets, should not permit Soviet propaganda offensives to go unchallenged, and should aid freedom fighters against Soviet imperialism worldwide. In short, the Party Congress affirmed Ronald Reagan's reading of Soviet policies and goals. When it comes to U.S. relations with Moscow, therefore, Reagan should stay the course.

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