even well-informed and wise commentators to underestimate the perils the
Soviet Union faced. It led Carter, in his final year as president, to adopt the
muscular rhetoric of Cold War and to put into motion an exploding defense
budget. This policy, which Reagan would embrace, appealed to the American
public. It made them feel strong again. The irony is that, in the Cold War
during the Carter years, Americans were much stronger than they, or their
president, knew.

Soviet foreign policy from détente to
Gorbachev, 1975–1985
VLADISLAV M. ZUBOK

Soviet international behavior in the decade before Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika is still an understudied and highly controversial topic. Some authors have long argued that the Soviet Union was greatly interested in détente in Europe, while neoconservative critics claimed that the USSR masterfully used détente in its quest for inexorable expansion and military superiority. At the time, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and most Soviet dissidents energetically supported the latter view.

Critics of détente made some excellent points. Soviet power reached its pinnacle in the late 1970s. Military expenditures, after rapid increases in the previous decades, stabilized at a high level. Three-fourths of all the research and development (R&D) potential of the country was located within the military-industrial complex. There were forty-seven “closed cities” with 1.5 million inhabitants, where military R&D labs and nuclear reactors were located, under the jurisdiction of the Atomic Ministry and the Ministry of Defense. The Politburo and General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev himself rarely argued with the decisions and programs of the Military-Industrial Commission. In April 1976, after the death of Andrei Grechko, the former head of this commission, Dmitri Ustinov, became the minister of defense. In 1976, the Soviet military began to

1 See Raymond Garthoff, Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to
2 Richard Pipes, Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,
deploy the Pioneer – which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) called the SS-20 – the new mobile, accurate, medium-range missile system carrying three warheads. Some experts had asserted that by the end of the 1970s the Soviet military would begin to surpass the United States in numbers of both missiles and nuclear warheads. The Soviet navy began to build a global infrastructure for the first time in its history. In addition to their base in the Horn of Africa, they acquired a base in Vietnam on the South China Sea.

Still, the neoconservatives, as well as Soviet dissidents, misjudged Soviet intentions. In retrospect, one has to recognize that from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s the Soviet Union lost its dynamism and sense of purpose. Soviet imperial expansion led to costly overextension. By 1985, the Soviet empire was more vulnerable than at any other time in its history. In one scholar’s perceptive summary, the United States recovered from its time of troubles, "while the Soviet Union looked increasingly isolated and backward."

This chapter begins with an explanation of the causes of this remarkable downturn. Soviet political leadership weakened, and there was stagnation in the ideological, economic, and social spheres. It then discusses how all these factors contributed to the unfocused imperial and military expansion that had neither strategic nor tactical goals, and that culminated in the invasion of Afghanistan. The chapter also dwells on the reaction to the Polish revolution – the pivotal moment in the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, when all the limitations of Soviet power came to light, and when the Kremlin began to explore the possibilities of retrenchment and retreat.

Leonid Brezhnev and stagnation

In the period 1970-74, Brezhnev himself was the main architect of détente on the Soviet side. Through a combination of enormous institutional power, tactical skill, and alliances (with the Foreign Ministry, the “enlightened” segments of the central party apparatus, the foreign-oriented sections of the security and intelligence agency, the KGB, the managers in the economy, industry, technology, and science, and even the majority of party secretaries), he managed to neutralize, split, and defeat the domestic critics of détente. Soviet foreign-policy achievements in that period became personalized as the achievements of Brezhnev’s statesmanship, the results of his policy of peace.

Leonid Brezhnev and stagnation

In the period 1970-74, Brezhnev himself was the main architect of détente on the Soviet side. Through a combination of enormous institutional power, tactical skill, and alliances (with the Foreign Ministry, the “enlightened” segments of the central party apparatus, the foreign-oriented sections of the security and intelligence agency, the KGB, the managers in the economy, industry, technology, and science, and even the majority of party secretaries), he managed to neutralize, split, and defeat the domestic critics of détente. Soviet foreign-policy achievements in that period became personalized as the achievements of Brezhnev’s statesmanship, the results of his policy of peace.

Leonid Brezhnev and stagnation

In the period 1970-74, Brezhnev himself was the main architect of détente on the Soviet side. Through a combination of enormous institutional power, tactical skill, and alliances (with the Foreign Ministry, the “enlightened” segments of the central party apparatus, the foreign-oriented sections of the security and intelligence agency, the KGB, the managers in the economy, industry, technology, and science, and even the majority of party secretaries), he managed to neutralize, split, and defeat the domestic critics of détente. Soviet foreign-policy achievements in that period became personalized as the achievements of Brezhnev’s statesmanship, the results of his policy of peace.

After 1975, however, Brezhnev’s illness and dependence on medication led to prolonged absences from the Politburo and to the disruption of the decisionmaking process. Soviet foreign policy stalled, while Soviet armament policy continued without discussion, propelled by the colossal lobbying power of the military-industrial complex. In the absence of a dynamic leader, foreign and security policy were in the hands of the “troika” of Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, the KGB’s Iurii Andropov, and Minister of Defense Ustinov. Yet, this troika did not act as a dynamic team. Instead, it was an uneasy alliance of aging functionaries, involved in mutual logrolling and back-scratching. They all owed their prominence to Brezhnev; at the same time (as the fall of Nikita Khrushchev had demonstrated), together they represented a political threat to the general secretary. Even the hint of a partnership among them could make them suspect in the eyes of Brezhnev and spell an end to their careers. For that reason, the troika took great care to see each other only in formal settings, at Politburo meetings. They were also extremely reluctant to challenge each other’s bureaucratic territory. All three members of the troika had an interest in perpetuating the status quo, which was the increasingly fictitious leadership of Brezhnev. The general secretary remained the only authority that validated the troika’s predominance over other Politburo members.

There were no other forces within the Soviet political system that could revise outmoded policies, draw new lessons, and correct missteps in foreign policy. And the broad support for Brezhnev’s détente inside the Soviet political and bureaucratic classes was conditional on the continuation of policies and budgetary priorities that preceded détente and conflicted with it. There were powerful bureaucratic forces – above all the military-industrial complex, the more xenophobic elements of party elites, and the majority in the army and the KGB – who did not see immediate benefits from détente or who continued to regard the negotiations and agreements with the West as a risky, potentially dangerous, and ideologically questionable development.

As a result of weak political leadership, there were no conceptual debates in the Kremlin on foreign-policy strategy and tactics. The early achievements of détente – agreements on strategic arms, anti-ballistic missiles, Germany, and security and cooperation in Europe – became the official canon that had to be followed, but not discussed and reappraised. From the Kremlin’s perspective,

Leonid Brezhnev and stagnation

In the period 1970-74, Brezhnev himself was the main architect of détente on the Soviet side. Through a combination of enormous institutional power, tactical skill, and alliances (with the Foreign Ministry, the “enlightened” segments of the central party apparatus, the foreign-oriented sections of the security and intelligence agency, the KGB, the managers in the economy, industry, technology, and science, and even the majority of party secretaries), he managed to neutralize, split, and defeat the domestic critics of détente. Soviet foreign-policy achievements in that period became personalized as the achievements of Brezhnev’s statesmanship, the results of his policy of peace.

90

Leonid Brezhnev and stagnation

In the period 1970-74, Brezhnev himself was the main architect of détente on the Soviet side. Through a combination of enormous institutional power, tactical skill, and alliances (with the Foreign Ministry, the “enlightened” segments of the central party apparatus, the foreign-oriented sections of the security and intelligence agency, the KGB, the managers in the economy, industry, technology, and science, and even the majority of party secretaries), he managed to neutralize, split, and defeat the domestic critics of détente. Soviet foreign-policy achievements in that period became personalized as the achievements of Brezhnev’s statesmanship, the results of his policy of peace.

7 G. Kornienko in US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Middle East and Africa in the 1970s: transcript from a Workshop at Yale University, October 1-3, 1994, transcribed by Gall Adams Kvern, ed. by Odd Arne Westad (Oslo: Norwegian Nobel Institute, 1995), 78.
detente had given the Soviet Union its most advantageous international position since 1945. West European countries had embraced detente and had invested in it economically and politically. The painful Soviet setbacks in the Middle East, above all the defection of Anwar Sadat's Egypt, seemed to be compensated by the “carnation revolution” in Portugal in April 1974 and the opening of southern Africa to Soviet influence. The fall of South Vietnam in April 1975 had crowned the humiliating defeat of the United States in Southeast Asia. China remained hostile, yet the danger of a Sino-Soviet war had subsided after Mao Zedong, the Kremlin's arch-rival, died in 1976.

The crises of détente (the Indian–Pakistani war of 1971, the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the Angolan war in 1975, and the war in the Horn of Africa in 1977) did not make Soviet leaders question their policies. Officials in the Kremlin assumed that the Soviet Union could reinforce European détente and the partnership with the United States while at the same time expanding Soviet influence in the Third World. The compartmentalization of policy responsibility for different regions of the world made Soviet behavior even less cohesive and consistent than it had been in the 1960s. Gromyko, the chief interpreter and implementer of Soviet foreign policy, was interested only in great power politics. He left sub-Saharan African and Latin American affairs (including relations with Cuba) to the foreign-policy apparatchiks of the Central Committee's international departments and to the foreign divisions of the KGB. Neither these bureaucratic players nor Gromyko felt a responsibility to present their foreign-policy recommendations in a broader conceptual context.

The Moscow-based think tanks, such as the Institute of World Economics and International Affairs, the Institute of the United States and Canada, the Institute of Oriental Studies, and the Institute of Africa (all part of the Academy of Sciences), are often described by scholars as having been oases of free thinking. Yet, during the détente years, the experts of these think tanks (known as institutschiki) played only a marginal role in Soviet foreign policymaking. Their occasional access to Brezhnev—often as speechwriters—did not significantly affect the content of specific Soviet policies. There were no conceptual thinkers among them. And even if any existed, they lacked the political channels for translating new ideas into policies.

The decade after 1975 became known in Soviet history as the time of stagnation (zastoi). Above all, it was a time of drift and inertia, bereft of ideological, economic, and social vitality. By the 1980s, the Soviet model had exhausted its innovative potential and had lost its international credibility (except in parts of the Third World). Above all, the model began to lose its appeal within Soviet society, even among the bureaucrats, educated elites, and skilled professionals, who since the 1950s had formed the growing Soviet “middle class.”

As official ideology, Marxism-Leninism became an increasingly ritualistic public language, with the sole purpose of legitimizing the existing political regime. Yet, for party elites, bureaucrats, and the professional middle class, the official political theory became almost completely detached from their more specific beliefs, values, and interests. The idealism of earlier decades was replaced by pervasive cynicism. Younger Soviet intellectuals of the 1960s generation, who had believed in “Communism with a human face,” lost their faith in any form of ideology. According to one astute observer, Marxism-Leninism “died a quiet death sometime during the reign of Brezhnev.”

---

3. Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko, who took over as general secretary of the Communist Party after Iuri Andropov's death in 1984, here flanked by Minister of Defense Dmitrii Ustinov (left) and Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov (right). Andropov had died after fifteen months in office. His successor succumbed after only thirteen months.

---

Moscow, genuine Marxists became a vanishing breed. Duplicity, double-think, and cynicism became social and cultural norms.

Ideas and concepts originating from various strands of Russian nationalism, both pre- and postrevolutionary, spread through the ranks of Soviet bureaucracies and won numerous supporters in the party, military, and KGB hierarchies. These nationalist thinkers, among them established writers, journalists, and party ideologues, rejected the internationalist and revolutionary elements of Marxist-Leninist ideology and openly proclaimed "traditional Russian" nationalisms and values, associated with anti-Westernism, anti-Semitism, and anti-intellectualism. They viewed Communism as a transitional phase toward the triumph of Russia as a world power. At some point, Russian nationalists believed, the Communist shell would be tossed off and "Great Russia" would reemerge in the world. One could imagine how, under a more dynamic and intellectually vigorous Soviet leadership, the earlier achievements of détente could have led to the reformation of the rationale underlying Soviet international behavior. This rationale was still based on the imperial-revolutionary paradigm, rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Stalinist imperial mentality with a great deal of Russian chauvinism.

This official ideological facade and chauvinism made it difficult for Soviet foreign policy to move toward any kind of great power Realpolitik. Unfortunately for Brezhnev's détente, momentum in the United States was dissipating quickly after the Watergate scandal and the resignation of Richard M. Nixon in 1974. With the White House weakened throughout the 1970s, and the critics of détente in the United States closing ranks, the Kremlin no longer had a pragmatic and reliable partner in Washington. The détente process, always a mixture of cooperation and confrontation, began, in the absence of breakthrough agreements, to tilt to the latter at the expense of the former. The Chinese Communist leadership could abandon a highly ideological foreign policy in favor of a Chinese version of Realpolitik in 1971-72 because Mao was still in power, and because the United States was interested in building a Washington-Beijing axis to counterbalance Moscow. There was no room for such a revolutionary development in the Kremlin. Americans predictably rejected all Brezhnev's attempts to offer the White House a version of the "two-policemen" model of the world. Instead, in 1978 they played the "China card" against the Soviet Union. And, of course, Brezhnev was too timid politically and ideologically to act as boldly as had Mao or later Deng Xiaoping.

In the economic sphere, the Soviet Union was a curiosity. Its economy began to open up to the outside world, but it operated by its own autarchical rules, and its ruble was not convertible into other world currencies. Soviet imports of goods and technology continued to grow during the second half of the 1970s, fueled to a considerable degree by the influx of "petro-dollars" (revenues from the sales of Soviet oil and gas) after the spike in global oil prices after 1973. Although the USSR became more involved in international trade, it could not fully benefit from it. While Soviet industry, science, and technology depended on the import of foreign machinery and knowhow, it was only raw materials, primarily oil and gas, that the country could sell on international markets. Moreover, since 1963 the USSR had relied on the import of grain and meat to maintain the meager living standards of the Soviet population, and this dependence increased the vulnerability of the Soviet economy.

Military expenditures remained extremely high but, contrary to widespread assumptions in the West, they were not the biggest item in the Soviet budget. "Soviet entitlements" were actually a larger portion of the budget and grew more quickly, including subsidies to Soviet peasants. There were subsidies for food, housing, and "affirmative-action" social programs in the less-developed Soviet republics, especially in Central Asia. The former head of the Soviet planning agency (Gosplan), Nikolai Baibakov, recalled that "what we got for oil and gas" was $15 billion in 1976-80 and $35 billion in 1981-85. Of this money, the Soviets spent, respectively, $14 billion and $26.3 billion to buy grain, both to feed the cattle on collective farms and to put bread on the tables of Soviet citizens. The Soviet "welfare state" actually became dependent on external trade and on détente, even while the military buildup endangered that same détente.

---


In the social sphere, the corruption of the top echelons of the Soviet political class continued to expand. The hierarchical system provided privileged elites with special access to imported consumer goods from the West. The economic and consumerist perks the elites had enjoyed during the Stalinist period, which had isolated them from the "masses," but which had declined under Khrushchev, were revived: the special apartments, the gated dacha (country house) communities, special stores, and restaurants with symbolic prices. Wholesale and retail trade became part of the "grey" and "black-market" segments of the economy; consumer goods were sold at their "real" price or traded for important services. The bulk of Soviet society, especially the urbanized population, but also increasing segments of the collectivized peasantry, participated in these practices. Yet people's well-being did not increase. Any comparison between Soviet society and that of other countries (including some developing countries of Asia) produced shock and a sense of inferiority among elites and regular citizens.

Détente became a substitute for domestic economic, financial, and political reforms. Soviet consumers and the Soviet state became more dependent on the capitalist world than at any other time in its history (with the exception of the war against the Nazis). Détente exposed the Soviet people to alternative ways of life, eroded the myth of Soviet exceptionality, and weakened the messianic spirit that had nourished the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. Jobs and careers that involved trips abroad became socially prestigious and enormously profitable. Soviet diplomats, trade representatives, "advisers" in Third World client-countries, and interpreters received salaries in special "foreign-currency checks": the purchasing value of these salaries was 15-20 times higher than an average Soviet salary at the time. After a few years of working abroad, a Soviet citizen could buy an apartment in Moscow, cars, a dacha, and Western-made consumer goods. Their own material interest encouraged Soviet bureaucrats and the military to lobby for "international assistance" to Western-made consumer goods. Their own material interest encouraged various African regimes with an allegedly "socialist orientation." I4 Whole and retail trade became part of the "grey" and "black-market" segments of the economy; consumer goods were sold at their "real" price or traded for important services. The bulk of Soviet society, especially the urbanized population, but also increasing segments of the collectivized peasantry, participated in these practices. Yet people's well-being did not increase. Any comparison between Soviet society and that of other countries (including some developing countries of Asia) produced shock and a sense of inferiority among elites and regular citizens.

Détente became a substitute for domestic economic, financial, and political reforms. Soviet consumers and the Soviet state became more dependent on the capitalist world than at any other time in its history (with the exception of the war against the Nazis). Détente exposed the Soviet people to alternative ways of life, eroded the myth of Soviet exceptionality, and weakened the messianic spirit that had nourished the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. Jobs and careers that involved trips abroad became socially prestigious and enormously profitable. Soviet diplomats, trade representatives, "advisers" in Third World client-countries, and interpreters received salaries in special "foreign-currency checks": the purchasing value of these salaries was 15-20 times higher than an average Soviet salary at the time. After a few years of working abroad, a Soviet citizen could buy an apartment in Moscow, cars, a dacha, and Western-made consumer goods. Their own material interest encouraged Soviet bureaucrats and the military to lobby for "international assistance" to various African regimes with an allegedly "socialist orientation." I4

In the Soviet bloc, détente brought international recognition of the postwar borders. By signing the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975, Western countries seemed to acknowledge the legitimacy of Soviet domination in Central and Eastern Europe. For almost a decade, this region remained politically calm and socially stable. The Kremlin celebrated these achievements, but the price for them turned out to be steep. The Final Act made it more difficult for repressive measures to be used against "dissidents" in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union itself. Even more importantly, détente helped to undermine traditional Soviet/Russian fears of aggression from the West, which had been "a powerful ... bond 'linking' the regime and its peoples and ... the various sectors of the Soviet elite." I5 During the 1970s, this bond began to weaken. The Kremlin, in a relaxed mood, had fewer incentives to reform relations with its satellites and to develop a common strategy for political, social, and ideological reform.

Meanwhile, the political stability in Central and Eastern Europe was deceptive and tenuous. Fear of Soviet intervention (after the invasion of Czechoslovakia) temporarily discouraged national liberation movements. Yet the East European regimes' desperate need to prop up their legitimacy pushed them inexorably toward asserting their "national" character as distinct from the Soviet model. Kremlin leaders closed their eyes to these developments. The absence of dynamic leadership in the Kremlin contributed to the potentially dangerous drift. Brezhnev might grumble that Romania had "betrayed" the Soviet camp, but he did nothing to alter Nicolae Ceaușescu's behavior. Likewise, Erich Honecker in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Edward Gierek in Poland, and János Kádár in Hungary had considerable domestic autonomy as long as their policies preserved the semblance of stability.

Economically, the Soviet empire in Central and Eastern Europe was foundering. There were growing imbalances in economic and trade relations among members of the Warsaw Pact. Attempts to build economic and financial ties had produced a bureaucratic monster in which barter and political deals took the place of mutually profitable trade. The Comecon was an ongoing failure; its members became individually dependent on Western Europe. The Kremlin had granted the East European regimes considerable autonomy in making economic deals. For Brezhnev and his aides, it was the only realistic solution. The Soviet Union could not risk a reduction of living standards in the region and at the same time could not afford to continue subsidizing East European societies by offering cheaper Soviet oil

---

and other resources. One by one, leaders in Warsaw, Budapest, Sofia, Bucharest, and East Berlin began looking to the West in their desperate search for investments, new technology, and consumer goods.

In Poland, this led to an explosive situation after Gierrek unwisely created false expectations among his people. The regime counted on Western technology, trade, and credits. Yet Polish economic policies were disastrous. Between 1975 and 1980, Poland's hard-currency debt to the West tripled, from $7.4 billion to over $21 billion. Poland's credit rating collapsed, as the purchase of Western technologies did not heighten productivity or engender an economic miracle. Sobered, the authorities backtracked, precipitating widespread anger among Polish workers. This prepared the ground for the Solidarity movement in 1980.  

African gambles and the worsening of US-Soviet relations

The most striking example of haphazard, fragmented decisionmaking can be found in Soviet expansion in Africa. South of the Sahara, the revolutionary-imperial paradigm showed its worst features. In European affairs and in relations with the United States, this paradigm encouraged pragmatism, profitable economic interaction, arms agreements, and mutual respect for spheres of influence. In Africa, however, the same paradigm promoted the expansion of Soviet "socialism" or an "empire of justice," attuned to the anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, the loss of Egypt and, above all, the de facto alliance of the People's Republic of China (PRC) with the United States showed that the Soviet model of development was losing its appeal. Soviet investments in the Third World produced not an "inexorable march of socialism," but costly imperial commitments. These new circumstances, however, never initiated a policy debate in the Kremlin. Rather than reassess the overall strategy, Soviet bureaucrats and military leaders were tempted to recoup their losses when new areas in southern Africa and the Horn of Africa became "open" for Soviet involvement and influence.

16 Ibid., 1966-67. See also the chapter by Jacques Lévesque in this volume.
17 For the definition and applications of this paradigm, see Vladislav Zubok and Constantin Pleshakov, Inside the Kremlin's Cold War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), and Vladislav Zubok, A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
18 I have borrowed this term from Odd Arne Westad's Global Cold War.

20 Karen Brument, Thirty Years on Staroi ploshchad (Moscow: Mekhdunarodnye otnoshenia, 1998), 268.
21 Karen Brumten, Fort Lauderdale, 22, 23.
the influence of anti-détente forces. The appointment of Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, known for his anti-Communism, raised immediate concerns in Moscow.23

Carter’s emphasis on human rights agitated Kremlin leaders. It appeared likely that the new US foreign policy would include insistence that the Soviets live up to the promises made in Helsinki. In early 1977, the KGB cracked down on Helsinki Watch groups, created by dissidents, and arrested their activists, including Iurii Orlov, Aleksandr Ginzburg, and Anatolii Sharanski. On February 18, Dobrynin was instructed to tell Secretary of State Cyrus Vance that the new American policy violated the Basic Principles that Brezhnev and Nixon had agreed upon in 1972. The warning did not change Carter’s attitudes. Ten days later, he invited dissident Vladimir Bukovsky to the White House. 24

Brezhnev sought to return US-Soviet relations to a positive track by focusing on the old agenda. Speaking in Tula on January 18, 1977, he presented Soviet security doctrine in defensive terms. Brezhnev expected that his speech would neutralize growing American fears about a Soviet military threat.25 Instead, Carter sent Vance to Moscow with a new proposal that discarded the framework of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II) so painfully negotiated by Brezhnev and President Gerald R. Ford in Vladivostok. Vance offered “deep cuts” in some strategic systems, especially those valued by the Soviet Union, in exchange for much smaller US concessions.26 Brezhnev was dismayed, believing he had already made significant concessions and had fought at length with his own military advisers to get them to accept the Vladivostok agreement. He and Gromyko sent the US delegation back home empty-handed, rubbing salt in the wounds of the new administration.27

This bad start undermined relations between top Soviet and American officials, many of whom had previously supported détente. In February 1977, Brezhnev, on Gromyko’s advice, wrote to Carter that he would meet him only when the SALT treaty was ready for signing. As a result, the next Soviet-American summit did not take place until June 1979 in Vienna, when Brezhnev was in poor physical health.

In the absence of conspicuous advances in US-Soviet relations, numerous conflicts of interest between the two superpowers became urgent. The Soviets felt, with justification, that the United States sought to push them out of the Middle East and to negotiate a separate truce between Israel and Egypt.28 Brezhnev lamented “Sadat’s betrayal” and grew even angrier when the Carter administration began to use the “China card” to increase pressure on the Soviet Union. In the Middle East, the Soviets tried to recoup their position by increasing their assistance to Syria, Iraq, Libya, and other radical regimes in the Arab world. Soviet military “assistance” to the Third World jumped dramatically around the mid-1970s. In 1966–75, the Soviet Union supplied $9.2 billion worth of armaments and military technology to “developing countries.” In 1978–82, this amount jumped to $35.4 billion.29 In Asia, the

Kremlin continued to build military forces in the Soviet Far East and Mongolia and developed strategic relations with India and Vietnam.

Although the Vienna summit in June 1979 showed that under better circumstances Brezhnev and Carter might have become partners, they were unable to stop the erosion of the US-Soviet détente. The backlash against détente in the United States grew. In September 1979, US-Soviet relations soured further as a result of trumped-up American charges about the presence of a "Soviet brigade" in Cuba (it was a training unit that had been there since 1962). And then, several months later, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

The invasion of Afghanistan

The background to and reasons for this invasion provide the most dramatic evidence of the Soviet inability to reassess the changing global situation and foresee the consequences of imperial overextension. There were two fundamental causes for Soviet miscalculations in Afghanistan and in the Middle East. First, the Kremlin was fixated on the bipolar geopolitical competition as a "natural" extension of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. For Soviet leaders, "Islamic revolutions" had no part in this vision. Second, the decisionmaking process was paralyzed because of problems with the all-important agent at the top of the Soviet institutional hierarchy: Brezhnev was in a poor state of health.

Ironically, there was no lack of expertise and experience in the Soviet Union in dealing with Muslim countries and Islam. In fact, Soviet–Russian expertise in this regard stretched back to the eighteenth century and was considerably greater than that in the United States. There were many professional "Orientalists" working in the International Department of the Central Committee, the KGB, Soviet military intelligence, the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, and various institutions in the republics of Soviet Central Asia. "Losing" Afghanistan, neutral or allied, was unacceptable, and the US–Chinese rapprochement in 1978 made the country even more valuable. In this context, the military-revolutionary coup that brought a pro-Soviet Marxist movement to power in Kabul in April 1978 was an unexpected but pleasant surprise for Moscow. Soviet–Afghan contacts quickly mushroomed via the Defense and Foreign Ministries and the KGB. The channels of "fraternal assistance" broadened, and Soviet officials dealing with economy, trade, construction, and education flocked to Kabul. Among them were party delegations and many advisers from Central Asian Soviet republics eager to share their experience in "constructing a socialist society." Cosy commitments, including Brezhnev's own, were made to the Afghan junta.

Meanwhile, the secular revolutionary regime antagonized the Islamic population and caused a massive exodus of refugees to Iran and Pakistan. In March 1979, a rebellion against the Kabul regime erupted in Herat. Noor Mohammad Taraki, the head of the revolutionary Afghan government, asked for Soviet military intervention. Initially, the troika of Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko voiced their support for the military invasion. At the time, however, geopolitical considerations in the Kremlin still favored the diplomacy of détente. Brezhnev, who was still interested in a summit with Carter, restrained the interventionism of his lieutenants. In October 1979, however, Taraki's assassination by his lieutenant Hafizullah Amin tipped the balance in the Kremlin in favor of intervention. Other international developments contributed to this fateful step. As a result of the controversy over the Soviet brigade in Cuba, US–Soviet détente was clearly moribund. And, on December 6, West Germany supported NATO's double-track decision, opening the way to deployment of US Pershing and cruise missiles in Western Europe. This prompted Andropov to alert Brezhnev to the "dangers on the southern borders of the Soviet Union and a possibility of American short-range missiles being deployed in Afghanistan and aimed at strategic sites in Kazakhstan, Siberia, and elsewhere." Although reservations were voiced by the General Staff,

30 Garthoff, A Journey through the Cold War, 285; Aleksandr Liakhovskii, Pamia Afgana [The Afghan Conflagration] (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), 11–46.
Ustinov quickly dismissed them. On December 12, the same day that NATO approved the Ustinov-Andropov plan to "save" Afghanistan and remove Amin from power. The KGB failed to do it "quietly": a bloody invasion led to the murder of Amin as well as his family and guards.34

Fierce American and international reaction caused the entire edifice of superpower détente to crumble. Brezhnev and his advisers were taken by surprise. Experts in the Central Committee apparatus, Foreign Ministry, and academic think tanks were shocked and dismayed.35 In June 1980, Georgii Arbatov and a few other "enlightened" apparatchiks sought to convince Brezhnev and Andropov to withdraw from Afghanistan. Yet there was no political will in the Kremlin to do so. Immediate withdrawal in the face of military resistance inside Afghanistan and in view of US support of the mujahedin would have looked like a defeat.

European security and the Polish crisis
Frustrated with Carter and his policies, Brezhnev concentrated his waning energy between 1977 and 1979 on preserving European détente. France and West Germany became the focus of his personal diplomacy. Brezhnev’s relations with President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt remained good. They brought increasing economic benefits to the Soviet Union and buttressed Brezhnev’s reputation as a peacemaker among Soviet elites and the population.36

European détente, however, also suffered from the rigidity and militarism of Soviet policies. During Schmidt’s visit to Moscow in May 1978, he asked Brezhnev to reconsider the deployment of Soviet medium-range missiles R-16 (SS-20s) that presented a security threat to Western Europe. Brezhnev, however, refused to do so. He was under pressure from the military, who believed that the deployment would "finally lift the threat of surrounding NATO bases to the Soviet Union."37 As a result, Schmidt became convinced of the necessity of a "double-track" policy, one that combined negotiations with a commitment to deploy a new generation of American missiles in Western Europe. This decision taken by NATO countries contributed, in turn, to the Kremlin’s decision to invade Afghanistan.

After the invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet leaders desperately sought to salvage the remnants of European détente and convince West European countries (as well as a wary Third World) of its "peaceful" intentions. The biggest Soviet international undertaking in this regard was the lavishly conducted Olympic Games in Moscow during the summer of 1980. The games took place despite a US-led boycott. Earlier, Brezhnev had considered the games too expensive.38 In contrast, after January 1980, no expense was spared. When most West European countries decided to send athletes to the games, Politburo members were convinced that, just as after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, European members of NATO did not want to antagonize the Soviet Union.

The games had barely ended when a severe political crisis in Poland called into question Soviet gains from European détente. The popularity of Solidarity threatened to destroy the Soviet sphere of influence in Europe. Soviet experts suspected a "hidden hand," perhaps a well-trained "underground" funded from abroad. Kremlin analysts regarded (not without justification) Pope John Paul II (Polish-born Karol Józef Wojtyła), Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the US Polish community as part of an anti-Communist conspiracy aimed at rolling back the Soviet empire.

The turmoil in Poland had political and psychological repercussions in the borderlands of the Soviet Union. In 1981, the KGB reported that mass strikes at some plants and factories in the Baltic republics were under the influence of the Polish workers’ movement. The same was reportedly true in western Ukraine and Belarus.39 Soviet authorities shut the borders with Poland and ended tourism, student programs, and cultural exchange with their "fraternal" neighbor. Subscriptions to Polish periodicals were suspended, and Polish radio broadcasts were jammed.40

34 Liakhovskii, Plamia Afgana, 121; General Valentin I. Varennikov in Lysebu 2, 85–86.
35 The diary of Cherniaev, December 30, 1979, National Security Archive.
37 Aleksandrov-Agentov, Ot Kolotiloi do Gorbatcheva, 194–95.
Poland was much more important than Afghanistan; it was a crucial link between the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany and the Soviet Union. Marshal Viktor Kulikov, the commander-in-chief of the Warsaw Treaty Organization advocated “saving” Poland at any cost.41 The Kremlin used the threat of invasion to convince the leader of the Polish Communist Party, Stanisław Kania, and General Wojciech Jaruzelski to crack down on Solidarity.42 Kania equivocated, and Jaruzelski agreed to crush Solidarity, but believed it would be too risky to do so without Soviet military support. In December 1980, Warsaw Pact forces and the KGB began a full-scale campaign of intimidation of Poland, including large-scale military exercises that lasted three weeks.43 Only after the end of the Cold War did it become known that Brezhnev, Andropov, and even Ustinov were firmly against military intervention.44

Aside from the prospective political and military costs of another invasion, there were the anticipated economic costs. If Warsaw Pact forces invaded Poland, the USSR would have to pick up the tab. But Soviet finances were already strained. In November 1980, Brezhnev informed the leaders of the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria that the Soviet Union would have to cut supplies of oil to these countries “with a view of selling this oil on the capitalist market and transferring the hard currency gained” to help the Polish regime.45

In November 1981, Moscow managed to convince General Jaruzelski to introduce martial law in Poland to suppress Solidarity. Jaruzelski’s action on December 13 removed the immediate political challenge to the Warsaw Pact. At the same time, however, the Polish crisis accelerated the financial crisis within the Soviet bloc. Soviet assistance to Jaruzelski remained at a high level, including $1.5 billion worth of economic aid in 1981, and total emergency assistance equalled about 4 billion “convertible” rubles (or about $5 billion) in 1980–81.46 Western sanctions against Jaruzelski’s regime turned Poland into a permanent financial “black hole” for the Soviet Union. This “fraternal assistance” to the Polish regime aggravated the consumer crisis in Soviet society; the butter and meat that went to Poland were sorely missed in Soviet cities and towns.

Reform or empire?

When Jaruzelski asked for Soviet troops as a backup, the Politburo refused. Andropov said: “We must be concerned above all with our own country and the strengthening of the Soviet Union.” The KGB chief knew about food shortages and long lines in major Soviet cities, and feared labor unrest in the USSR. Andropov’s comrades in the Kremlin agreed.47 For the first time, Kremlin leaders viewed the maintenance of domestic stability and the preservation of external empire as mutually conflicting priorities. Soviet society in the early 1980s was already predominantly urban, with many million intellectuals, white-collar employees, and workers in secure jobs, receiving benefits such as free health care and education. The Soviet leaders feared that any drop in living standards could trigger labor unrest and a political crisis inside the Soviet Union. In the early 1980s, as gold reserves declined, oil revenues decreased, and government expenditures mounted, the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe faced a real economic crisis. Yet, characteristically, Brezhnev failed to act. There was no emergency session of the Comecon, no panels of experts, and, of course, no discussion in the press. Problems were swept under the carpet.

Against this backdrop, imperial overcommitments began to bite. Soviet subsidies and other forms of assistance went to sixty-nine clients and allies in the Third World. The Kremlin became the number one weapons seller in the world, but made very little profit from such sales.48 The similar “zero-sum game” between Soviet domestic priorities and these imperial commitments could no longer be ignored. Soviet leaders realized that they could not continue to treat Soviet society as infinitely docile and quiescent.

Soviet responses to Reagan’s “crusade”

Ronald Reagan ended the US–Soviet détente, the process begun under the Carter administration. He also launched a worldwide anti-Soviet, anti-Communist “crusade” and initiated the largest defense buildup since the

43 Nikolai S. Leonov, Likholetie [Cursed Years] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1995), 215.
47 Bystrova, “Voienno-promyshlenii kompleks SSR,” 146–47.
Korean War. Suddenly, aging Soviet leaders saw that the global balance of forces could be reversed. They were profoundly dismayed.

Martial law in Poland exacerbated relations between Moscow and Washington. Reagan (who had earlier lifted the grain embargo on the USSR) resolved to squeeze the Soviets economically whenever he could. After December 1981, he pressured West European countries to cease construction of the transcontinental gas pipeline, a project pivotal for increasing Soviet revenues in the future. Gradually, this action and sinking world oil prices depleted Soviet hard-currency reserves and endangered the financial stability of the Soviet Union.

Above all, the actions of the Reagan administration aroused old fears in the Kremlin of a surprise nuclear attack. In May 1981, Andropov, with Brezhnev’s consent, launched a new strategic early-warning system. Simultaneously, the Kremlin fomented the anti-nuclear movement in Western Europe and the United States. Moscow also said it would never resort to nuclear weapons first, and hoped the United States would embrace the same declaratory policy.

Soviet leaders also worried about military collusion between the United States and China. Before Reagan came to power, Sino-Soviet relations had remained openly hostile. Experts on China in the Foreign Ministry, the KGB, the Central Committee, and the military establishment treated the PRC as a strategic enemy and even resisted revival of economic relations with the country. Yet, the problems in Afghanistan and Poland, as well as the perceived aggression of the Reagan administration, convinced Brezhnev and a number of his advisers to reconsider their anti-Chinese inclinations. In March 1982, speaking in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Brezhnev expressed his desire to improve relations with China. In his view, the main Soviet enemy was the United States, and everything should be done to avoid pushing the Chinese into the US embrace. Afterwards, Sino-Soviet relations began to thaw, under the pressure of Soviet geostrategic fears. At the same time, the PRC also began to reconsider its global priorities, degrading the Soviet threat. As a result of this mutual reappraisal, Sino-Soviet relations began to improve slowly.

On November 10, 1982, Leonid Brezhnev died. The 68-year-old Andropov became leader, and “enlightened” apparatchiks hoped that he would embark on a new course. They expected him to withdraw from Afghanistan, liberalize the Soviet regime, heal relations with East European countries, remove the SS-20s from Europe, and rein in the Soviet military-industrial complex. Andropov, however, was not ready for radical change. He was intensely suspicious of the United States and believed liberalization might undercut the Soviet regime. Knowing that he was dying of kidney disease, he had a dark, pessimistic streak that dominated his worldview.

A series of events in 1983 aggravated his fears. On March 8, 1983, the US president spoke of the Soviet Union as “an evil empire”; fifteen days later, Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) with the goal of making all nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete.” Although a panel of Soviet experts concluded that SDI did not require immediate countermeasures, others were alarmed. And their worries grew after September 1, 1983, when a Soviet jet fighter shot down a Korean civilian airliner and US officials condemned the Kremlin for an “act of unprecedented barbarism.” While Andropov was already incensed, the US invasion of Grenada in October 1983 made him even more wary of renewed American imperialism. He ordered Soviet negotiators to walk out of the Geneva arms-control talks. In 1983, for the first time since 1962, nuclear fears began to percolate down to the Soviet public.

Andropov died in February 1984, replaced by another septuagenarian, Konstantin Chernenko. The remaining “duo” of Ustinov and Gromyko retained a virtual monopoly in military and foreign affairs. They dismissed Reagan’s personal overtures and continued to believe that his administration wanted to beat the Soviet Union into the ground. Not since early 1953, the time of Stalin’s death, had Soviet leaders reacted so narrowly and so fearfully.

49 Sergei F. Aklромеев and Georgii M. Komienko, Glazami marshala i diplomata: kriticheskii vzgliad na vnevniiiu politiku SSSR do i po Suej 1986 goda [Through the Eyes of a Marshal and a Diplomat: A Critical View of the USSR’s Foreign Policy] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnaya otnoshenii, 1992), 14; Anatoliy Dobrynin, In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents (New York: Times Books, 1995), 322.
50 Aleksandrov-Agentov, Ot Kolomats do Grobochvka, 171-72.
Yet, they could not come up with any new policies in response to the perceived dangers. They had scant financial resources. Total defense-related expenses, including indirect costs, as Brezhnev admitted in 1976, were around 40 percent of the budget. This figure was higher than in 1940, when the Soviet Union was preparing for World War II. Any additional rise in defense expenditures would lead to a drastic cut in living standards. Neither the aged Kremlin leadership nor the elites and the rest of Soviet society were prepared for this. Talk of increased military expenditures was quickly squashed.

What remained of Andropov’s programs to enforce discipline and promote a work ethic among blue-collar laborers and white-collar bureaucrats quickly degenerated into a farce. The huge human resources Stalin had mobilized—those millions of peasants, young urban workers, and enthusiastic party cadres—were no longer available. There was little idealism among elite, educated youth; frustrated consumerism, cynicism, and pleasure-seeking had taken its place. Even the Politburo leaders were not the same as forty years earlier; because of their old age, most of them thought more about their health, their work load, and their retirement perks than about the preservation of Soviet power.

Tactically, in 1980-84, the Kremlin’s “old guard” recognized the limits of Soviet power and wanted only to preserve the status quo. And it was their final act. Ustinov died on December 20, 1984, and on March 10, 1985, it was Chernenko’s turn. While the latter’s funeral was being prepared, there was a flurry of behind-the-scenes bargaining. The last survivor of the ruling troika, Andrei Gromyko, cast his decisive vote for Mikhail Gorbachev, the youngest Politburo member.

In return for his support, Gromyko soon became the head of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, an elevated position of a largely ceremonial nature. The complete deadlock in domestic and foreign policies, the growing fears of war, and the humiliating picture of the old guard clinging to power convinced elites that a social explosion might occur not only in Eastern Europe but in the Soviet homeland itself. Many hoped Gorbachev would be able to solve the conundrum: reinvigorating the Soviet system without eroding the Soviet empire. They would be proven wrong on both counts.

This chapter demonstrates that the collapse of détente cannot be interpreted and understood through the prism of international affairs alone. Soviet foreign policy was shaped by profound internal decay. In a highly centralized political system, as the Soviet state was, the absence of dynamic leadership was especially problematic. Bureaucratic “log-rolling” dominated decisionmaking, and was driven by hidden economic motives. At the same time, Soviet policies were hostage to the ideological predilections and strategic anxieties of aging Politburo politicians. With Brezhnev incapacitated, Soviet foreign policy failed to respond to new challenges in the Middle East and Eastern Europe as well as to heightened concerns stemming from declining oil revenues and growing support for human rights. Ultimately, Soviet foreign policy lost its momentum and became reactive, driven by preexisting commitments, the paranoia of elderly leaders, and the venal impulses of bureaucratic and military elites.

American pressure on the USSR brought all these problems into focus. But it would be wrong to exaggerate the impact of this pressure. It perpetuated the Soviet confrontational stance and, among Soviet citizens, revived the image of the United States as the enemy. It was Reagan’s luck that his presidency coincided with generational change in the Kremlin, that is, with the exit of the old guard and the rise of the Westernized “enlightened” apparatchiks around Mikhail Gorbachev.

This period of Soviet torpor made party and professional elites realize that the war in Afghanistan and the Polish crisis had strained Soviet resources and endangered living standards in the Soviet Union. If conditions worsened, they perceived that a social explosion might occur not only in Eastern Europe but in the Soviet homeland itself. Many hoped Gorbachev would be able to solve the conundrum: reinvigorating the Soviet system without eroding the Soviet empire. They would be proven wrong on both counts.