

**IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO:
HOW MOSCOW'S INFLUENCE ON THE UNITED
NATIONS WAS SHAPED BY WASHINGTON**

By Time Destroyer

To get a more profound insight into Gorbachev's motivations for introducing the New Political Thinking, a better insight into the political situation of the U.S.S.R. is crucial. In 1985, the U.S.S.R. had been involved in the dead-end war in Afghanistan; in Eastern Europe, there was a significant political-economic stagnation and the relations with the West were depressing (Sakwa, 1990). Foreign policy lacked all direction after four years of inaction, and the prestige of the U.S.S.R. was quickly eroding.

These factors suggest that the New Political Thinking was not merely inspired by a belief in a new political system, but also by the pragmatic triviality of the necessity for change and for a new realism (Sakwa, 1990, p.315). Many of these ideas had already been maturing in the glacial Brezhnev era and now burst out, resulting in the notion of mutual vulnerability, that eventually changed the attitude towards the military, and made the U.S.S.R. engage truly in international organisations in the late 1980s (Kull, 1992).

The influence of the New Political Thinking on Moscow's U.N. policy

When opposed to the old ideology of Lenin, the thing that is most striking about the New Political Thinking is the decoupling of ideology and security. Gorbachev used a language free of dogma, which reflected a new conception of collective security and international law; a conception positive towards a notion of *world federalism* (Weiss & Kessler, 1990, p.101) and a stronger International Court of Justice-jurisdiction. This is particularly remarkable if one considers the historical antipathy of the U.S.S.R. towards international law and interdependence. The common security agenda focused on global issues rather than the U.S.-U.S.S.R. rivalry, and on arms-control and political accommodation. Security was redefined as an economic, ecological, political and humanitarian concept. This shift implied the idea of non-

interference, the right of each people to choose the ways and forms of its development, international mediation and confidence-building measures, settlement of the third world debt issue, diversion of resources for military expenditure, more political and social rights, and the implementation of the principles of the charter adopted at the founding conference of the U.N. in 1945 (Sakwa, 1990, p.319). Gorbachev judged the U.N. to be the most appropriate forum to elucidate this view of universal human values (McCauley, 1998), as well as the appropriate vehicle for action (Golan, 1990) and a supreme decision-making body in global affairs (Lo, 2002). This new willingness for international engagement was illustrated by Shevardnadze's speech for the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) of 1988:

What we are speaking of now is voluntary delegating of a portion of the national rights, in the interest of all, and, paradoxically enough, in order to strengthen the national security while at the same time strengthening universal security. (Kull, 1992, p.166)

This statement clearly indicates the growing importance of interdependence on the international level in a comprehensive system of international security (Sakwa, 1990, p.319). A speech by Petrovsky one year later went even further by renouncing the idea of a nuclear or chemical war, and advocating the destruction of nuclear weapons and reduction of armed forces in a framework of deeper co-operation.

[Deterrence] can no longer serve as a basis for rational policies. Mankind has to pay too dearly in material, moral and psychological terms for the constant fear of annihilation. The transition to a qualitatively new deterrence is required – not through military and technological, but political and legal means, and, in the long run, with deterrence, as such, dying off all together, and security based on qualitatively new principles will be built. (Renninger, 1989, p.21)

However appealing these new idealistic conceptions might sound, a few remarks are to be made. First, it should be noted that there was still a very broad

scene where old rhetoric based on militarism and the exploitationist nature of capitalism was predominant (Sakwa, 1990, p.318). Second, proposals made by Moscow were often impracticable - such as the stationing of troops along the borders of conflict-regions (Weiss & Kessler, 1990, p.109). This might be ascribed to mere naivety on the part of a new player in the international context, but it could also be a deliberate strategy to create a favourable public opinion without having to take any action. A last remark here is that idealism was certainly not the only reason for initiating a new policy towards the U.N. The idea that world progress is only possible if there is progress towards a *new world order* (McGiffert-Ekedahl & Goodman, 1997, p.54) is also based on lessons drawn from near-history and present-day realities. There was a need for greater interaction to ease the ever-growing tensions with the West (Pravda, 1989, p.100), as well as an urgent need for money to revitalise the whole domestic system in order to keep the population satisfied and to remain an attractive example for third world countries. There were two major ways to make money available: withdrawing from conflict-areas and cutting down on arms. A more active support for the U.N. was seen as a means to realize both without creating a power vacuum (Weiss & Kessler, 1990, p.102). Other pragmatic considerations for a growing engagement were visible in the effort to have more influence in peace-keeping operations (P.K.O.) by providing forces and training facilities; in advocating integration in international economic and scientific organisations such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank¹, in an effort to give the domestic economy a boost; in the growing attention to ecological safety in international organisations, to accommodate domestic problems; and, lastly, in the creation of the possibility of legitimate leadership through focusing on the U.N. and the economical logic of disarmament (Weiss & Kessler, 1990, p.102). To convince the world of the abrupt discontinuity that had taken place in Soviet thinking, several speeches were held and

¹ Shevardnadze's address to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1988 implied that these organisations were no longer seen as instruments of the capitalist world, but as the centres of real actions in the world, and that efforts to substitute the Soviet alternatives for these organisations by the international ones would be made (Weiss & Kessler, 1990).

actions undertaken. The landmark speech was Gorbachev's address to the UNGA in 1988 – in big contrast with the last U.S.S.R. address to the UNGA by a shoe-banging Khrushchev in 1960, where the commitment to arms control and defensive rather than offensive strategies was made concrete. Some elementary principles were proposed, such as the self-restraint every nation should have to refrain from the use of force in international relations and the joining of forces to ensure the primacy of universal human values (Gorbachev, 1996, p.593). Furthermore, a few concrete measures were announced, such as a unilateral cut of three quarters of the Soviet navy in the Pacific and of the troops by 500,000 soldiers, plus a cut of twenty per cent in tanks and artillery (Bowker, 1997). Gorbachev judged his speech to be highly successful. However, some points are to be highlighted. Only a few hours after the speech, Chief of General Staff Sergei Akhromeyev resigned. This can be seen as an indication that Gorbachev's agenda did not have the broad support back home that he liked to claim for it². Also, in the West, there was no unequivocal enthusiasm; weariness over the possibility that this was mere propaganda to pressurize the West to stop modernizing the NATO was in place. Nonetheless, the speech was a milestone in that it did show the goodwill and incited multilateral tasks. It gained momentum when the implied action plan was actually carried out (Bowker, 1997).³ Earlier, in September 1987, Gorbachev had already published an article in Pravda that envisaged the revival of the moribund Military Staff Committee, the establishment of a U.N. military reserve, the establishment of U.N. observation posts in explosive areas, the development of a U.N. naval force to patrol the

² For a clear refutation of this view, see Gorbachev, 1996, p.593. According to him, the plan was discussed with Shevardnadze, Yakovlev, Chernyaev, Dobrynin and Falin, and all agreed significant cuts in the military had to be made. Furthermore, in the Politburo and the milithere there were no objections of principle. McGiffert-Ekedahl & Goodman (1997), however, argued that there was no consultation whatsoever about the speech, and that this ended the dialogue between the ministry of foreign affairs and the military.

³ It should be remarked that only the part where the U.S.S.R. unilaterally involved was realized, the part that demanded concessions from the U.S. was only realized to a lesser degree. This will be discussed in part three.

Persian Gulf, the stationing of U.N. forces along the border of any country that seeks to protect itself from outside interference, and conversion of the Trusteeship Council into the World Ecological Council, etc. Further indications about the veracity of the engagement were to be found in the paying-off of the outstanding debt to the U.N., reducing the latter from \$200 to \$125 million. This was particularly significant because it can be seen as a sign of a broad endorsement rather than one based on a narrow conception of self-interest. (Weiss & Kessler, 1990). To support these proposals and actions in the U.N. forum, major personnel shifts in cabinet, press, diplomacy and universities took place, the most important of which was probably the replacement of Andrei – Mr Nyet – Gromyko by Eduard Shevardnadze as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Shevardnadze was an effective diplomat, who based his international relations on common sense. However, it is often argued that he was mainly chosen because he had little experience and no rigid agenda of his own, and thus followed Gorbachev voluntarily (Doder & Branson, 1990). These shifts combined with the greater autonomy resulted in a non-ideological and pragmatic foreign policy team. Nonetheless, whatever good intentions there were, there were some negative consequences to these changes as well. For one, most people who made the foreign policy, including Gorbachev, were new to their jobs. So even though they created a favourable image, very few substantial concessions were made to the U.S.S.R.. Frequent shifts in personnel also prevented diplomats from becoming real heavyweights in their jobs. Still, these changes initiated by Gorbachev and Petrovsky in 1987 showed the world that the Soviet had more than just empty rhetoric – that they in fact had genuine commitment to international security. Whereas in earlier days Soviet leaders have, as a general rule, always paid lipservice to the U.N.⁴, now it became clear that the *Mr Nyet-policies* of yesteryears had truly given way to a more active and positive involvement in international organisations that ended the earlier paralysis caused by financial crises, East-West hostilities and the presence of personalities such as Gromyko

⁴ Until 1985, there was a big discrepancy between words and deeds in Soviet policy towards the U.N. This was visible in attempts to limit the budget and refusal to pay their contributions, as well as in opposition to UNSC resolutions and frequent changes in Moscow controlled UN-personnel. (Weiss & Kessler, 1990)

(Sakwa, 1990, p.350). This forthcoming attitude in the UNGA and the abandonment of the anti-Western rhetoric was clearly illustrated by Gorbachev when he states:

We were gradually freeing ourselves of stereotyped thinking and the habit of blaming everything on the “imperialist Western states” [...] We considered effective cooperation with the United Nations our top priority (Gorbachev, 1996, p.569-570)

Influence of the Reagan-administration on Moscow’s policy towards the U.N.

The problem of this whole ‘de-ideological’ turn for the U.S. was that Washington was accustomed to a far less co-operative U.S.S.R., and now encountered the problem of how to interpret this N.P.T.: Can the slogans be taken seriously or are they just aimed at a favourable world opinion and are Soviets still Marxist-Leninist in their hearts? If they can be taken seriously, what is the extent of their commitment? (Weiss & Kessler, 1990, p.94) It was – whether correctly or not- presumed that the U.S.S.R.’s commitment to re-energizing the U.N. did not imply a readiness to relinquish power, but rather, to grow stronger, in a fast and legitimate way, through a strengthened U.N. This assumption obviously caused a considerable amount of weariness.

However, there is also a big influence of the Reagan administration. Reagan’s entire political career was based on hard-line anti-communism. Intimidation of the immoral *evil empire* was seen as the only way to stop them from advancing their goals of world-domination (Naylor, 1988, p.156). Moreover, there was a strong belief that Moscow had military superiority, therefore the U.S. felt justified to leave arms control negotiations for what they were – and even breach SALT II - and engage in the incredibly costly Strategic Defence Initiative. This had the aberrant effect of re-enforcing Gorbachev’s image of a peacemaker, more so because of his disciplined response to Reagan, ‘more often than not, he simply ignored him’ (Naylor, 1988, p.174). Even the Reagan-doctrine, indicating two alarming developments – the U.S. placing itself above the U.N. and international law,

and the denial of U.S.S.R.'s legitimate interests in the third world – provoked only a subdued reaction. In his second term of presidency, however, Reagan's rhetoric became decisively softer and more sophisticated. The turning point was his speech of 16 January 1984, where he stated he was determined to 'deal with our differences peacefully through negotiations. We're prepared to discuss the problems that divide us, and to work for practical, fair solutions on the basis of mutual compromise' (Graebner, 1993, p.120). However, the tough U.S. policy in the third world of backing anti-soviet guerrillas⁵ and the continued stress on *roll-back*, incite one to believe that it was not the U.S. that was going to water its wine. At the same time, Reagan's words implied that if the U.S.S.R. wanted peace, there would be peace, a prospect that had serious consequences once Gorbachev came to power. All in all, there was an improvement in the relations and the co-operation with the U.N. during Reagan's second term, but there were very little tangible results. Proposals almost always stood so far from what was acceptable for the S.U. that they seemed to be designed to prevent an agreement. The Soviet approach of continuing dialogue with the U.S. in the U.N. thus met with a rather provocative and unyielding U.S. policy, such as the persistent demands of curtailment of Soviet U.N.-personnel, resulting in the departure of twenty-five Soviet U.N. employees (Adomeit, 1988). This U.S. approach was strongly supported by U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Jeanne Kirkpatrick (Boyle, 1991). This strategy strongly undermined the standing of the U.S. in the U.N., where it became the leading foot-dragger (Weiss & Kessler, 1990, p.105). Until 1985, Washington had been able to keep up its positive image by blaming the U.S.S.R. for all lack of development. But now the tables had turned, and the S.U. not only came up with genuinely new initiatives, but also paid back its debt and approved of interventions in its own sphere of influence; conversely, the U.S. did not engage and still aggressively, unilaterally interfered or supported rebels in Grenada, Libya, Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia and Nicaragua. It thus seems safe to state that there was hardly any multilateral approach to security on the part of the Reagan administration, except when it clearly served their interest.

⁵ For more details on the actions undertaken by the U.S. in this context, see Adomeit, 1988 & Boyle 1991

When Bush came to power in 1989, the opportunities of superpower co-operation were theoretically recognized, but this did not lead to massive action along that line in the U.N., mainly because of the persistently strong anti-Sovietism. There were some symbolic initiatives that were meant to mark the beginning of a new period of multilateral cooperation in the U.N., such as the joint press conference and resolution of 1989 (Weiss & Kessler, 1990, p.112). However, these seem to have had only a moderately positive impact on the workings of the U.N. It thus became clear that U.S. policy towards the U.S.S.R. in the U.N. was full of contradictions. For example, when domestic discontent in Soviet Union grew, Chief-of-Staff James Baker declared that this indicated the near-collapse of the U.S.S.R.. But at the same time, there was a nervousness over Gorbachev's being challenged, regarding which Washington adopted a more conciliatory role. An example thereof is the moral support for Shevardnadze (Krause, 1991, p.207).

U.N. realities

The U.N. was obviously dealing with two very different logics. Rational choice theory predicts that in such a situation, the least demanding option will win, and this is what happened in the U.N. Broadly speaking, there would have been progress in U.N.-integration if the U.S. perceived this to be beneficial for their national interest. Thus, despite the far-reaching reform proposals of the U.S.S.R., relatively little changed in reality. Moscow took several steps, like substantial payments for P.K.O.'s, putting a soviet armed forces contingent at the disposal of the U.N., presenting U.N.-document A/43/629 in 1988, proposing to enlarge the role of U.N. peacekeeping forces, calling for the renewal of the Military Staff Committee so that it could act 'as a full-fledged guarantor of peace in any region' (Kull, 1992, p.167), and advocating the installation of a U.N. naval force police in the Persian gulf and elsewhere. One year later, the first cosponsoring of the UNGA resolution - aimed at reinforcing the work of the organization - took place. Other actions

were the efforts to strengthen the International Court of Justice (ICJ) by calling for a compulsory jurisdiction on a wider number of issues, such as drug-trafficking and the proposal of a U.N.-control authority to monitor the implementation of international agreements, with the right for on-site inspections. There were even positive comments being made about the possibility for international organisations to intervene in domestic politics. The phrase 'the principle of non-interference doesn't apply to the cause of protecting human rights and democracy [...] there should be an international guarantee to democracy' by Petrovsky (Kull, 1992, p.167) might be one of the clearest indications of a rupture with the past. All these proposals, just like Gorbachev's speech, however, met great difficulties in materializing, when faced with the reluctant U.S. attitude in the U.N. Nonetheless, the Soviet representatives to the U.N. started to effectively use their membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to help solve global crises, and support the establishment of several PKO's in 1988-89. The first sign of a change came on 18 April 1986, when the U.S.S.R. voted with the other fourteen members of the UNSC to renew UNIFIL's mandate for three months. (Petro & Rubinstein, 1997). Moreover, they became increasingly involved in behind-the-scene diplomacy in South Africa and Southeast Asia. The next section will examine these actions a little closer. For the five first P.K.O.'s, the most important thing to retain was that in the Afghan case - where a P.K.O. was to monitor the withdrawal of the Red army - the agreement came about for strategic reasons from both sides, rather than for idealism. The U.S. saw it as a way to terminate Soviet influence there, whereas the U.S.S.R. saw it as a relatively painless way out of Afghanistan, one that wouldn't collapse its relations with the clients in Kabul (Doder & Branson, 1990). The P.K.O.'s in Angola and Cambodia also factually terminated the indirect Soviet involvement there (Donaldson & Nogee, 2005). Contrary to this permissive attitude of the U.S.S.R. towards interference in its zone of influence, we see a sharp rejection of the U.S. to allow the same in their zone of influence, resulting, for example, in nothing more than a U.N.-observer group in Central-America. The Gulf War was another illustration of how realist dynamics were still very present. Here it was the U.S.S.R. that played an ambiguous role, since Iraq was a former ally of Moscow's. The official reason given for

this attitude was that they called for a more flexible response and for political rather than military means for resolving the crisis (Gorbachev, 1996, p.569). This shows how ideological arguments are often used to sell strategic interests. Eventually, under pressure from other members of the UNSC, Moscow decided to support UNSC resolution 660 that implied the use of force to repel Iraq and restore Kuwait's sovereignty, but not to participate in the invasion. This case presented a challenge for the N.P.T.: Moscow was in a difficult position between Washington and Baghdad, but it can be argued that they turned this to their advantage, acting as a key-mediator for Baghdad⁶, and persuading the U.S. to gain international legitimacy for their actions⁷. On the other hand, it also shows that despite numerous attempts at cooperation and rapprochement, there still were client-relations and rational considerations on both sides, which continue to be predominant in the U.N.-forum.

Conclusion: Looking back in hindsight

The implications of this superpower dialectic are not as straightforward as they might at first seem to be. Even though there was a considerable degree of anti-Sovietism from the side of the U.S., the U.S. cannot be seen as the only nation responsible for everything that has gone wrong; in Moscow's policy there were still ample aspects of old-school thinking that affected their U.N.-policy. The period of 1985-1991 was thus only the beginning of a process of change and the way was paved for further co-operation, but no real profound changes took place yet. These only took place after the ending of the Cold War. This is noticeable when one looks, for

⁶ Later that year, Shevardnadze declared that the U.S.S.R. was willing 'in principle' to take part in an international military force under the flag of the U.N., However, when he resigned in December he declared that military participation has never been a real option. The latter is most likely inspired by the public opposition against another uncertain military action I in the Gulf, against a former ally, and under the effective command of the U.S. (Bowker, 1997).

⁷ For a confutation of this idea, see Bowker, 1997

example, at the number of passed resolutions in the UNSC.

To come back to the title and the figure of the speech of tango: it was Reagan who stated that ‘it takes two to tango’ when asked about possible progress in U.S.–U.S.S.R. relations (Mandelbaum, 1987, p.33), suggesting that the U.S. was willing to take the lead. However, when Gorbachev came to power in 1985, making numerous proposals that sought to place the U.N.-system on firmer foundations and enforce respect for international law, thereby turning the Soviet Union into a willing and more prestigious dance-partner, it became clear that Washington’s self-declared preparedness to dance was rather modest. Maybe there has been a careful probing of simple basic steps, resulting in a greater dedication and willingness to perform the next dance together, but there has most definitely not been any fast or perfectly performed sacada during that period. One could argue that this is because, just like in tango, there was a learning process of trial and error and a process of getting to know one’s partner. However, sixteen years after the ending of the Cold War, it is still very doubtful if we will ever see a truly enflamed tango pasión between these two partners at the U.N.

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