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AMERICAN-SOVIET RELATIONS: INFORMAL REMARKS

by

THE HONORABLE HELMUT SONNENFELDT

This article is adapted from the address given by Mr. Sonnenfeldt before the 22d Annual National Security Seminar at the US Army War College, 3 June 1976.

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The problem of American-Soviet relations is obviously one that is central to our security and well-being.

While we should not make the mistake of being mesmerized by it as the single and only one that colors and determines all else, it is clear, particularly for those of you in the military, that it is a central issue. It has preoccupied us for the last 30 or more years.

In a nutshell, what we are facing—we in the United States and the world at large—is the emergence in the last generation of Soviet Russia as a global superpower. Of course, Russia itself has been a great power for a long time, and it has been an expansionist power, as many of the peoples around its periphery have known only too well, for centuries. There were even times in Russian history, from the late 18th Century into the 19th Century, when Russian expansionism ventured beyond the continental confines of the Eurasian land mass, even into North America and the oceans of the world.

Nevertheless, historically the Russians were most prominent on the Eurasian land mass, and when we think of Russia as a great power—when we think of the Russian Bear or the Steamroller—we think of it essentially as a great continental power rather than one with a global or maritime outlook. On the other hand, there has always been in the Russian outlook a sense of religious mission and a

universalist perspective. But unlike the great empires—Rome, or Britain, or Portugal, or Spain—these universalist and missionary components of the Russian outlook were very rarely, if ever, translated into practical political ambition on a world scale. But it is well to remember that the advent of Bolshevism in the Soviet Union did not represent the first time that Russia has looked out upon the world with a universalist sense of mission; such an outlook is very much in the Russian tradition. At any rate, what we have seen since the Second World War, particularly in the last 15 years, is the emergence of Russia not merely as a continental great power, but as a power with global aspirations and with an increasing propensity to define its interests in global terms. And it is a rather novel development in both Russian history and the evolution of the international political system that Russia should appear as a major actor on the world stage, not simply on the Eurasian stage.

The elements of power that have gone along with this emergence of Soviet Russia as a global power are quite familiar to you. I would only stress, however, that the acquisition of intercontinental strategic delivery systems by the Soviet Union is for them psychologically quite a novel experience. It has not been a long time since the Russians began to understand that ICBMs are not simply another form of artillery that supports land armies marching across the plains, but that they are weapons which have a truly global reach which can influence distant adversaries and distant events. This capability is something that the Russians

never had. We, the British, and others have been accustomed to this through our naval traditions even though, of course, the navies of yesteryear and today are different from strategic strike systems which can get where they have to go in minutes. Nevertheless, the idea of materially affecting events in far off places is one to which we, the British, and other maritime powers have long been accustomed. But this is not something that the Russians have been familiar with; they are only just becoming acquainted with it. The same is true for their naval power. Having gone through a frantic building program—which, although not quite so frantic now as it was, has nevertheless been very substantial for over the last 20 years—they only in recent years are acquiring the knack of trying to use this naval power to influence events in distant places.

The Soviets are still, in many respects, on a learning curve. This has two implications that we should be clear about. The first is that the Soviets are still in the process of learning to use global power in various ways, and therefore they should not be thought of as all-knowing geniuses for whom everything they touch turns to gold.

The second and particularly chastening implication that we have got to be clear about is that the Soviet emergence as a global power is probably only in its infancy. It is a process that has been underway for a very short period of time—at best a generation. We Americans and others have to accustom ourselves to the prospect of having to deal with this problem for a long time to come. In the context of present debates, some may, in a simpleminded way, view this as a Spenglerian vision that the West, and therefore the United States, is declining. This is a view of Spengler mostly held by people who have not read him. And in any event, I am not presenting such a pessimistic or doomsday vision at all. What I am saying is that as we look out on our third century, we have got a series of major challenges to contend with, and we better steel ourselves to solving them. I am convinced we can, but we obviously should not minimize the challenge we face.

Now, let me say that I do not think it does any particular good for us to go into orgies of self-accusation and self-flagellation about the growth of Soviet power. It has in fact been the inevitable by-product of their indigenous economic and technological growth over the last 20 or 30 years. Although it may change in the future, the contribution made by the outside world to this Soviet economic and technological growth is on the whole quite marginal. Furthermore, any society that is prepared as single-mindedly and systematically as the Stalinist and Post-Stalinist Communist society to allocate resources and to establish priorities is bound in some form or other to acquire the means of power projection that the Soviets have acquired. I think there is very little, if anything, that any outside power, even one as powerful as the United States, could have done or can do to prevent the acquisition of this kind of power.

What we do have to deal with—and this we can influence in a major way—is how this power is used, and how the uses of this power

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can be influenced so that it will not injure our own interests. This then gets me to the second basic proposition that I want to put to you: it is that although Soviet imperial power has come to be global and has grown enormously in its physical and military dimensions, it has also grown with extraordinary unevenness. The Soviet system itself is in many respects a highly unbalanced and uneven one. The Soviet economy—while obviously capable of setting the kinds of priorities which you are all familiar with, and which I was just referring to—is nevertheless highly flawed. In most respects it is not comparable in sophistication, innovation, or productivity to the economies of the industrialized countries of the West. This is partly a structural problem inherent in the Communist system itself. But in any event, the Soviet economy clearly is not a well-functioning economic machine in many significant respects. As we have seen, agriculture is one of the most dramatic examples.

Soviet society, although proclaiming itself revolutionary, is largely a stagnant society when compared to our societies in the Western industrialized world. This may make it an easier place to rule in some respects, but it also means that there are enormous problems with inertia and waste. There is also a lack of mobility, and I mean by this not just the physical mobility that is constrained by their system of internal passports and the like, but also the social mobility that should be inherent in a growing society. In this allegedly classless society, stratification is in most respects far more pronounced than it is in our Western democratic societies. And the Soviets pay penalties for this in terms of the evolution of their society and, above all, in the evolution of their economic activity. Because of these many problems, the Soviets are penalized in terms of the relevance of their system to the rest of the world. I think that the Stalinist myth of the forties and fifties that this system is indeed the wave of the future has just not turned out to be the case. It may be the wave of the future in the Soviet Union, but there is almost no one around the world, except some Western intellectuals—I should not shortchange some

nonintellectuals—who regards the Soviet economic and social systems as models relevant to his own experience, especially if he is in the Third World.

To some extent, there are those who are impressed by the seeming order of the Soviet autocratic system—attributes which are reflected in some of the more authoritarian systems of the rest of the world—but they have transplanted very little of the Soviet experience to the rest of the world. Therefore, the Soviet system, which was marketed to the world as historically and scientifically ordained to be the pioneer of a new age, is, in fact, isolated. And where it is duplicated at all, it has been only because Soviet physical power has been there to do it, such as in the areas adjacent to the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and Mongolia.

I think it is important for Americans and the rest of the world to understand that the Soviet problem, at least so far, has been largely the problem of the projection of physical power, not the exercise of some magical magnetism by the Soviet system. What we see around the world is the application of Soviet military power; the sometimes quite skillful Soviet political manipulation of instabilities in other parts of the world. We also see a certain number of Communist parties which, the more they are identified with the Soviet Union, the weaker they are in their own societies in their own context.

I do not necessarily think this description of the Soviet problem will hold forever. There is some evolution in the Soviet Union. There is also a generational problem, and sooner or later a new generation will come to power in the Soviet Union which may add more systemic or societal components to the military underpinnings of the Soviet global role. But so far, this has turned out to be remarkably less vigorous than the Soviets evidently expected, and most of the rest of the world feared, 20 years ago when the Russians first hurdled the containment barriers of the 1940's and early 50's and made their appearance in the Middle East, and then

in Africa, Asia, and to some degree in Latin America.

Now, it is precisely because Soviet power is uneven that there is scope and opportunity for America and the other powers around the world to influence the manner in which the Soviet Union emerges on the world scene and exerts its power and influence. The principal areas for attempting to influence the manner in which the Soviet Union conducts itself in the international scene are precisely those where Soviet power is most uneven and where Soviet incentives for contact with the reliance on the outside world are greatest. Those are the areas where our policy and the policy of other external forces can most effectively influence the Soviet Union and its behavior.

For the United States, this has meant several things. First of all, it has imposed on us an absolutely unavoidable requirement to balance Soviet physical military power. In important respects we have to do this ourselves, but there are many instances where we do this jointly with our allies. In some respects, Soviet physical power is also balanced by countries that are not necessarily allied with us through NATO or our other alliance systems. I know that to say we have to balance Soviet power is an oversimplified statement and very quickly leads to the discussion of who is number one and who is number two. I do not know that I can contribute very much to that debate. Obviously, if we are going to deal with that issue in a totally rational way, isolated from the vicissitudes of political debate, we should use the simple criterion of whether we are able to meet our military and security requirements. I know that this will create disputes over what those requirements are. But if you were to deal with this problem purely in terms of what you need to meet our requirements, you would presumably pay less attention to precise numerical force comparisons and more attention to the forces needed to do the job. In this case, it would matter little if our forces were more or less in precise arithmetic balance with the other side. However, it is obvious that so far we have been unable to set such standards for

ourselves in this country, because we evidently feel that we have a problem if we only have, let us say, 500 ICBMs which we believe can do the job, and the Soviets have a thousand. And I suppose as long as we think we have a problem, we have a problem. Therefore, we are very often driven in our military programs to go beyond what some would argue are the precise military requirements to more intangible requirements of appearance, perception, or the more subjective calculations of what the balance is. But I do not want to get into force planning; I simply want to state that requirement number one in dealing with the Soviet problem is the capacity to balance Soviet power, and a will to use this capacity if and when the need arises. That is normally described as a matter of will and resolve. But underlining the concept of will and resolve is the need for a consensus of what our interests are.

To take the recent example of Angola, the problem for us there was not a lack of capacity. Judgments differ on how much it might have taken to continue the struggle there, at least to a stalemate. It was pretty clear that the United States was not going to put its own forces into it, but I do not think there was any particular need for that. It was largely a matter of money, equipment, and back-stiffening. And that was available. The problem was that we could not get the political consensus in this country that Angola was a place where the United States had interests sufficient to require us to involve ourselves. I do not know whether the notion of lack of will or lack of resolve describes that particular problem precisely, because there were a good many people who voted against further involvement in Angola who think of themselves as embodying the national will. Unfortunately, in Angola, I do not think they demonstrated such an embodiment very persuasively.

The point about Angola that I would make is that it may well be that we had no intrinsic interest in Angola as such; one can argue it one way or the other. But I do think that once a locale, no matter how remote and unimportant for us, becomes a focal point for Soviet, and in this instance, Soviet-supported

Cuban military action, the United States acquires a derivative interest which we simply cannot avoid.

Therefore, we need the capacity to meet our requirements, the will to meet these requirements, and we need to achieve consensus to give expression to that will. It really does no good at all to preach the need for military superiority and to practice regional retreat. It will get us nowhere in the end.

Now, that point leads to the next policy requirement, and that is for vigor in the preservation of our alliance structure. Our alliances represent not only a security structure, but a value structure as well. Recent developments, however ambiguous they are and may yet be in the future, have made the value aspects of this structure more congenial; that is to say, developments in Portugal and Greece have to some extent removed the bad conscience that plagued many because we were associated with those two countries for security reasons.

It is extraordinarily important that our association with the industrial democracies of Europe and Japan is not only an association of interests, but also an association of moral values. It is our in-group. It is the part of the world to which we are drawn not solely by power considerations, but also by a sense of common heritage, of common purpose, and of common values. For Americans, it is of special importance at this moment—because of what we have gone through over Vietnam, Watergate, and the turbulence in the last ten years—that we know we belong to an association of peoples and states that is based not only on interests, but also on various intangible connections. This is not to say that we should neglect our interests vis-a-vis these associates of ours, but we should remember that the interests in this respect are broader than the simple practical interests of commerce or even of security, important though they may be.

I may say in the context of our association with Europe that the movement toward European unity—although hesitant and slower than its advocates would have liked, and often

subject to gyrations and disputes—is fundamentally in our interest, and we must continue to support it. It is, however, essentially a movement that must be carried forward by the Europeans themselves; it cannot be imposed from the outside.

The next requirement of our policy deals with our relations with the Third World. Here the contest with the Soviets is largely one of power. In other respects, we in the United States and the Western world have, by far, more relevant influence than do the Soviet Union and its friends. Therefore, we must continue as we have over the last many years to work toward order, justice, and fairness in the relationship between North and South, and between the developed and developing worlds. This is easier said than done, because perceptions differ, and manipulation and prejudice are at play. Therefore, I am limiting myself to simply stating the general proposition of how we structure our position in the world.

Finally, there are the policies that relate to our direct dealings with the Soviet Union. Using our alliance structure and our capacity and will to balance Soviet power, we want to try to draw the Soviet Union into the international arena in such a way that over an extended period of time it will perceive that it is more advantageous to act with restraint rather than with recklessness. That is what is normally called—or used to be until a couple of months ago—the policy of detente: the effort to gradually structure a proliferation of relationships and ties that highlight the benefits which flow from restraint and the penalties which flow from its absence.

As I indicated earlier, in the area of economics, it is very clear—and it is clear to the Soviet leaders as well—that if the Soviet economy is to evolve into an advanced industrialized economy comparable to those of the industrialized societies of the West, the Soviets will require contact with the outside world. This need draws the Soviet Union into economic relationships with the outside world beyond those stemming from their flawed and vulnerable agricultural system.

It is a major challenge for us in the West, for the United States and for our partners in the industrialized world, to so organize our economic relationships with the Soviet Union that they are not only commercially profitable but serve broader interests. The Soviets should be conscious of the losses and penalties they have to suffer if they choose to risk these relationships. A policy based solely on commercial considerations is perfectly laudatory from the standpoint of the needs and requirements of the free enterprise system, but we have to superimpose on these considerations the strategy of using our economic assets and their economic needs to accomplish our goal of restraining the uses of power. For we have no alternative to seeking to restrain the uses of power in the nuclear age. This then should be the purpose of our economic and technological policies: to seek to tie the Soviet Union into relationships through which it seeks to maximize assets and by which we constrain its ability to use its power.

Let me conclude by saying that I do think the Soviet problem is going to be with us for a long time. The United States will never regain the luxury that it enjoyed for the larger part of its first 200 years of picking the times and the places when we can enter the world, and then withdraw again to our own pursuits.

There is too much power in the world—military power (in the case of the Soviet Union), economic power, political power—for the United States to ignore. In this shrinking world, the power that is extant in the world today can be brought to bear on the United States' interests and values in a very damaging way if someone wants to do that. We no longer have the choice between isolation and periodic massive involvement.

In this regard, we have to understand that our international policies must now be permanent policies which have a conceptual framework and which require an unremitting rather than a sporadic effort.

We must also understand that many of the problems and challenges—and that includes most aspects of the Soviet challenge—are not soluble in a finite way in a finite time. Americans are by nature a problem-solving society. We like to invent things that solve problems, either permanently or at least for a long period of time. Many, if not most, of the problems that we face are not likely to be solved permanently. The world is not likely to be made definitively safe for democracy at least in our lifetime. Our adversaries, whoever they are—and I am speaking metaphorically now—are not likely to “surrender unconditionally” as they did at the end of the Second World War. There are also going to be very few Salk vaccines that remove the “polio problem” for most of the international issues that we face. Consequently, many of the problems we face are going to be problems that we have to manage, rather than solving them once and for all.

Now again, that is not a message of gloom. It is a message of confidence that this society, in its third century, is capable of living and dealing with problems which we cannot finally solve, of living in the world, and of preserving its very unique values and unique heritage. I think this is a very tall order as we go out into the next century, but I for one am convinced that it is an order that we can fill if we will steel ourselves, if we will conduct our debates in a rational and generous manner, and if we will remember that although the problems that were faced 200 years ago were in most respects even more massive, the United States of America mastered them.

