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# THE SOVIET-BULGARIAN ALLIANCE: FROM SUBSERVIENCE TO PARTNERSHIP

by

MICHAEL BOLL

Relations among few postwar nations have inspired the charges of dependence and subservience assigned by Western observers as a result of the numerous treaties and agreements linking the People's Republic of Bulgaria to the Soviet Union. From the moment Soviet troops invaded this hapless state in September 1944, through the inevitable "democratic" revolution aided by the occupying Russian army, to the present, Bulgaria has been conceptualized as but a cipher in the complex Soviet plans for East European defense and the eventual extension of socialism throughout the globe. Rarely has Bulgaria made waves within either the Warsaw Pact or the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), the two multinational organizations most effective in promoting Soviet regional dominance. There has been no Hungarian-type uprising, no Prague Spring, no Gdansk Agreement in Sofia, and aside from an abortive military coup in the mid-1960s requiring no external "fraternal" assistance, Bulgaria has remained the model for relations among socialist states.

Given this close and enduring friendship between Moscow and Sofia, the contemporary analyst must wonder as to reasons for its apparent permanence. Bulgaria, aside from East Germany, is the sole Warsaw Pact member without a common land frontier with its Soviet ally, and the only state other than Romania devoid of Soviet troops. Certainly it

is not a direct threat of invasion from Moscow through renegade Romania that inspires continuing bonds of friendship. And the few Soviet soldiers on leave which a visitor to Bulgaria encounters now and then in provincial cities such as Burgas pose little danger. What then might account for this surprisingly close comradeship which has survived the ups and downs of nearly 40 years of postwar diplomatic change? Surely it is not the result of the often-proclaimed Bulgarian love for Russians, since such feelings did not prevent Bulgaria from being on the German side in both world wars. Certainly it is not a bond of "honor" and brotherhood among fellow communists nor an everlasting gratitude by the lesser-developed nation for economic services rendered; the Sino-Soviet split casts the lie to such assumed logical connections. Rather, the reason for the close Bulgarian-Soviet relations must be sought in a much more conventional explanation. Contrary to current Western belief, Bulgaria's relationship with the USSR is less one of dependence and more one of partnership. Within the Warsaw Pact and CMEA, the cooperation of these two states so dissimilar in size and potential provides needed system maintenance and combined efforts to expand the socialist system worldwide. Naturally this does not imply that Bulgaria, a nation of less than ten million, is equal to her Soviet ally in any given endeavor in which Moscow has chosen to participate fully. It does seem,

however, that the unique closeness of Soviet-Bulgarian relations results from the mutually beneficial role each plays in maximizing the values both perceive as fundamental to preserving and expanding the socialist commonwealth. While many examples of this symbiotic relationship could be cited, constraints of space suggest concentration upon but four: two reveal Bulgaria as the beneficiary of Soviet assistance, although in both cases Bulgaria assists her larger neighbor, and two are policy areas where Bulgaria plays a main role in advancing Pact and Soviet objectives in a fashion unavailable to the Soviets themselves. It is this dynamic interplay of gain and contribution which renews the Soviet-Bulgarian friendship on such a stable basis.

**T**he area in which Bulgaria clearly has gained from her Soviet connection lies in the rapid economic development and modernization which characterized the past three decades. As party chief Todor Zhivkov indicated to a group of foreign delegates, the contrast between prewar Bulgaria and the present is stark.<sup>1</sup> According to a recent study, the 1939 ratio of output between agriculture and industry was 3:1. At present, it is 1:5, with the volume of industrial production currently 71 times the prewar figure. Machine tools account for half of all exports, and in the production of autos and electricity, Bulgaria ranks first in the Balkans on a per capita basis. The source for this startling change is freely admitted by Bulgarian economists. Ninety-five percent of current metallurgical production, 80 percent of oil refinement and petro-chemical production, and 70 percent of electrical output result from plants built with Soviet assistance.<sup>2</sup>

In the past decade and a half, Soviet efforts to modernize Bulgaria have begun to realize reciprocal benefits in unexpected areas. Given the much smaller dimensions of the Bulgarian economy, Moscow has viewed Bulgarian efforts as somewhat of an economic testing ground. The late 1983 Soviet decision to sanction the brigade form of labor organization as a part of the so-called Andropov reforms owes much to

extensive Bulgarian experience following the 1967 adoption of the Bulgarian Collective Farm Statute. The Soviet agro-industrial complexes, which assumed increasing importance in the Andropov period, were foreshadowed by the 1970 Bulgarian decision to introduce "the agricultural-industrial complexes as the most important form for the development of agriculture on an industrial basis."<sup>3</sup> Presently, Moscow is reported to be closely watching the ongoing Bulgarian industrial reform introduced by Sofia in 1979 to provide greater incentive for local decision-making within a decentralized framework of economic investment.<sup>4</sup>

In Bulgarian thinking, the relationship between economic assistance and military preparedness is direct. As the Bulgarian Minister of Defense, Dobri Dzhurov, recently wrote: "The economic foundation of the indestructible union between the states . . . of the Warsaw Pact and their armies is the domination of the socialist principle of production."<sup>5</sup> And judging from recent studies, the Bulgarian military, like the Bulgarian economy, has profited from extensive connections with the USSR.

The Bulgarian army consists of 120,000 officers and men arranged into eight motorized rifle divisions and five tank brigades. Bulgaria's military budget, in terms of gross national product, is proportionally half again as large as that of Hungary or Romania, and the Bulgarian armed forces are 50 percent larger than those of Hungary in absolute terms despite Bulgaria's possessing

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but 80 percent of the Hungarian population base. With one-third the population of Romania, Bulgaria has only 20 percent fewer men under arms.<sup>6</sup> As Ivan Volgyes recently noted, "The Bulgarian army would be, most likely, the only main front-line force with which NATO members would have to contend in the southern flank as a unified national front and, consequently, the data regarding the Bulgarian People's Army should be carefully examined." Bulgarian units possess a high degree of mobility and more armor than comparable NATO divisions.<sup>7</sup> With about three quarters of a million men in reserve, the Bulgarian military is a regional force of significance.

The importance of the Bulgarian army to the Warsaw Pact is obvious from the figures cited. Especially in a decade in which US strategists debate the relative merits of attrition or mobility, as well as the possibilities of horizontal escalation, a strong Bulgarian defense of the "soft underbelly" of Pact territory assumes central importance. Valuable for Pact cohesion is the presence of a Bulgarian officer corps patterned upon its Soviet mentor. It has become a "tradition," a joint Soviet-Bulgarian study states, to hold yearly meetings among Pact army leaders at which tactics are reviewed. Numerous high-ranking Bulgarian officers of diverse specialties have studied in Soviet military schools, acquiring a common set of military values in addition to specific instruction. Currently, 83 percent of the officer corps are members of the Communist Party.<sup>8</sup>

Close ties between the Bulgarian and Soviet militaries began shortly after the conclusion of World War II. Petar Panchevski, the Bulgarian Defense Minister from 1950 to 1958, fled to Russia in the mid-1920s, graduated from a Soviet military academy, and functioned as a staff member of the Soviet Third Ukrainian Army during the war. His successor, Ivan Mikhailov, graduated from Derzhenski Military Academy in Leningrad, later serving with Soviet forces. The present Defense Minister, Dobri Dzhurov, while possessing native credentials as the leader of perhaps the best-known Bulgarian resistance group of World War II, Chavdar, later attended Frunze Institute and

the Academy of the Soviet General Staff. To assist these Soviet-trained leaders, Communist Party units were established throughout the army, designed to promote a pro-Soviet viewpoint through extensive reeducation mandated for officers and men alike.<sup>9</sup> Even the civilian sector was mobilized behind the military indoctrination drive, and by the early 1950s the various "sports groups" had merged into the Voluntary Organization for Defense Assistance (DOSO) constructed along the lines of the Soviet Voluntary Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Fleet (DOSAAF). A decade later, DOSO claimed one and a quarter million members organized in 13,000 primary groups. Between 1950 and 1963, nearly one million were trained in marksmanship, 700,000 were trained in various technological skills, and 150,000 were instructed in the use of motorcycles.<sup>10</sup> The current successor of DOSO, the Organization for Cooperation in Defense, has as its declared aim "to coordinate communist education with military-technical training among the broadest [possible] group of the population [with special emphasis upon] youth."<sup>11</sup>

**I**n view of recent Western speculation as to the role of the Warsaw Pact in precluding the formation of national defense plans among its members, a thesis formulated by Christopher Jones, evidence from Bulgaria suggests an interesting exception. While joint construction of an overall defense plan for the socialist commonwealth is acknowledged, Bulgarian military writers argue that this in no way precludes either national military "peculiarities" or individual national defense policy. Colonel Ivan Filchev maintains:

The contemporary internationalist character of military defense by no means signifies one ought ignore national military thought. On the contrary, while being guided by the common principles of collective defense, the military-scientific cadres of the fraternal armies work out important problems related both to the national defense of the state as well as the collective defense of the socialist community.<sup>12</sup>

Such national planning, Filchev states, occurs in the national military academies. The fact that the Bulgarian military considers tasks and techniques peculiar to itself is stressed by Defense Minister Dzhurov. Assessing Bulgaria's contribution to the general defense of its socialist neighbors, Dzhurov noted: "This however does not mean the mechanical application of the experience of one state in the practice of military construction in another. Every state has its own experiences and provides its own contribution to military science and the practice of military construction."<sup>13</sup> A possible confirmation of this suggested independence of Bulgarian military planning for national defense was compiled by Ivan Volgyes in a recent study of reliability in the Pact's southern tier. Having noted that Bulgaria has engaged in the smallest number of combined Pact exercises (14 in the period 1961-79), Volgyes reached the startling conclusion that in only one exercise did the Bulgarian army fully participate. In all others, only a small Bulgarian force took part. Large-scale Bulgarian military activities remained confined to more conventional maneuvers within national boundaries, including a semiannual exercise of the "traditional army-oriented type."<sup>14</sup>

While the argument as to Bulgaria's preparation for national defense remains inconclusive due to lack of evidence, there is no question as to her ability to anchor the southern flank of the Warsaw Pact. A recipient of considerable Soviet training and treasure in the past four decades, Bulgaria's army has emerged as a reliable force, pledged to defend socialist gains against all foes. And not content to quietly await a possible assault through the Balkans, Bulgaria has devoted the past decade to neutralizing the potential threat posed by NATO's Balkan members. In this endeavor, Bulgaria has functioned as a valued surrogate for the USSR since direct Soviet pressure upon Turkey and Greece would bring an immediate NATO-wide response. In her efforts to improve relations with her southern neighbors, Bulgaria has been aided immeasurably by the ongoing Cyprus conflict, which pits NATO's eastern members at each other's throat.

In 1981, the year that socialist Andreas Papandreou was elected Prime Minister of Greece, Bulgarian party chief Zhivkov became a firm supporter of a plan designed to turn the Balkans into a nuclear-free zone. That prospect was first broached in 1957 as part of a Warsaw Pact approach to the issue of European security, but Romania remained its main supporter well into the 1970s. In the fall of 1981, however, shortly after the victory of Papandreou on a platform promising to remove American nuclear weapons from Greece, Zhivkov picked up the issue. As suspected, the initial meeting between the new Greek Premier and Zhivkov marked a new stage in the ongoing Bulgarian attempt to cement relations. Both leaders remarked "with satisfaction that relations of good neighborliness, understanding and cooperation between Bulgaria and Greece are rooted on a stable basis . . . and represent an important factor for strengthening the peace and mutually profitable cooperation in the Balkans." The two men affirmed the need to diminish world tensions and to resolve existing disputes "according to the established norms of international law and the charter of the United Nations." Both Zhivkov and Papandreou expressed satisfaction that in their review of contemporary international problems, "the number of issues on which the opinion of the two states coincides or is similar is broad." Included in this category of coincidence was condemnation of Israel for the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, complete with the standard demand for Israeli withdrawal from all lands occupied in the 1967 war.<sup>15</sup> And yet it was with respect to Zhivkov's recent sponsorship of a nuclear-free zone that the greatest Bulgarian gain was scored. Speaking at an open press conference in the Bulgarian city of Varna, Papandreou announced:

The most important question . . . is the question of nuclear disarmament. On this issue, the position of the Bulgarian and Greek governments is identical. We, within the limits of possibility, will do all possible to convert the Balkans into a non-nuclear zone. I hope these efforts will lead to results in the near future.<sup>16</sup>

A meeting of the Bulgarian and Greek foreign ministers the following year reconfirmed the priority of the nuclear issue.<sup>17</sup>

In the spring of 1983, Greek Prime Minister Papandreou, consistent with his pledge to Zhivkov to do all possible to achieve the common aim, circulated a letter to his fellow Balkan prime ministers proposing a series of multilateral meetings designed to achieve a nuclear-free region. The first such convocation was suggested for Athens in early 1984.<sup>18</sup> As expected, Bulgaria returned an immediate positive response, followed by similar acceptance by Yugoslavia and Romania. But Papandreou's rash action, taken before preliminary consultation with Greece's main Balkan enemy, Turkey, produced a less-than-positive response from Ankara. As the Turkish Foreign Minister Iler Turkmen told a press conference two days after Papandreou's letter was announced, "Turkey views the security of the Balkans in the same way as the security of Europe, and [believes] that the security of the Balkans does not have a meaning on its own in the absence of a serious disarmament process in Europe."<sup>19</sup> Yet while this Turkish answer indicated deep reservations, it did not preclude Turkish participation in the exploratory meeting subsequently scheduled for Athens in January 1984. At that gathering of Balkan experts, agreement was reached on a Turkish proposal to postpone consideration of the nuclear-free zone until sometime in the future.<sup>20</sup>

The Turkish objection hardly dismayed the Bulgarian government, given the sharp distinctions between the socialist Greek administration and the military regime in Ankara. The fact that Papandreou had made his proposal served well the Bulgarian goal of precluding any future combined NATO threat in the region. And the fact that Turkey remains outside the growing Balkan consensus on the nuclear issue only inspires Bulgaria to redouble efforts to expand upon the many areas in which Turkey and Bulgaria increasingly find themselves in accord. In February 1982, Turkish President Kenan Evrem visited Sofia and acknowledged "that efforts to strengthen the atmosphere of trust

in the region represent a contribution for durable peace and for constructive cooperation in Europe."<sup>21</sup> One year later, the Turkish Foreign Minister informed his visiting Bulgarian counterpart: "Relations with Bulgaria occupy a special place in our foreign relations. We have as our aim to develop the relationship on [the basis of] mutual trust, respect for independence, non-interference in internal affairs, and refusal from the use or the threat of the use of force in resolving disputed issues."<sup>22</sup> While such Turkish pledges fall short of a promise to withdraw American nuclear weapons from Turkish soil, they do suggest that only the most serious global crisis might induce Turkey to forego nearly a decade of improved relations with her communist neighbor. Given the persistence of the Cyprus dispute, now intensified by the declaration of an independent Turkish federated state on the island, and in view of Bulgaria's evident military capability, the likelihood of any Turkish support for a NATO incursion into the Balkans seems remote indeed.

**W**hile Bulgarian efforts to protect the exposed southern flank of the Warsaw Pact through defense preparedness and focused diplomatic activity constitutes an important contribution to socialist security, it by no means exhausts Bulgarian endeavors. Since the 1950s, the USSR and her allies have waged a determined campaign to replace Western influence throughout the third world. Naturally it is the highly visible deployment of armed force, whether by the USSR in Afghanistan or by Cuba in Angola and Ethiopia, which attracts the most attention. But such activities are but the tip of the iceberg, the easily perceived results of a far more complex and all-embracing strategy designed first to neutralize and then to replace existing bonds between the developing world and the capitalist nations. In this campaign the various Soviet allies play a crucial role.

Bulgaria's mission within the overall strategy of undermining Western ties to developing states involves four distinct but related tasks: projecting the merits of

socialist economic development as the preferred means of rapid modernization; dispatching trained Bulgarian specialists to assist development of state-managed enterprises in third world states; expanding and strengthening the so-called "denial" clauses in the many bilateral security agreements now linking various third world states to the socialist bloc; and educating, advising, and training third world cadres in the proper method of social, economic, political, and party development. The second and third of these tasks are shared with other East European states, although Bulgaria has taken the lead in certain African countries. The first and fourth tasks are the most important assignments given Sofia. While precise figures are difficult to obtain, the presence of nearly 10,000 Bulgarian experts and advisers in Libya in 1978, about a third of the total number of Soviet and East bloc personnel in all of North Africa, provides some insight into the magnitude of the Bulgarian contribution.<sup>23</sup>

Bulgaria's importance as a showcase for socialistic modernization arises both from the pace of her recent economic development and from the fact that like many third world states, Bulgaria too experienced centuries of foreign occupation by a country, Turkey, which held values alien to those of the colonized population. While the thought that Bulgaria could show the future to anyone in the area of economic development might strike the Western reader as doubtful at best, one must remember that to many lesser-developed states, Bulgaria is indeed an example of industrialization. As an African intellectual confided to this author in Sofia: "To achieve the levels of West Germany in the near future is beyond our wildest dreams. But to do what Bulgaria has done—ah, that is a different matter." The Bulgarian press is replete with admiring statements from numerous third world heads of state following their carefully planned tours of Bulgarian installations—an indication that the Bulgarian strategy is making some progress. Among the more interesting was the assertion by the President of Mexico during his 1979 visit to Bulgaria: "This is one of the

models which will be useful for us because . . . you have decided one of the most important problems confronting us at the moment: ownership."<sup>24</sup>

As a part of its economic efforts, Bulgaria since 1976 has formed joint economic and technological committees with numerous African and middle Eastern states, including Angola, the People's Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Libya, Mozambique, South Yemen, Tanzania, and Zambia. While the nature and number of agreements varies by country, the understandings with Angola provide indication of their scope. At present, Bulgarian-Angolan accords include a treaty of scientific and technological cooperation, Bulgarian construction of various production facilities, exchanges of documentation, cooperation in land reclamation, and the exchange of specialists and teachers. A separate trade agreement provides for most-favored-nation status and identifies the diverse goods to be exchanged. By the end of the 1970s, over 500 Bulgarians were advising Angola on economic development, and model rural cooperatives had been established, complete with Bulgarian specialists. While not given prominent place in the Bulgarian press, military ties also bind the two states, with the most recent exchange of views taking place during Angolan Defense Minister Tone's visit to Sofia this past spring.<sup>25</sup> Ties with Mozambique are equally impressive. Since 1975, Bulgaria has negotiated agreements for scientific and technological assistance, economic cooperation, trade, and mutual assistance in the fields of agriculture and food-processing. At the suggestion of the Bulgarian advisers, Mozambique in 1977 drafted a comprehensive plan for the rational use of water resources in the crucial Limpopo River Basin, a plan designed to run until the turn of the century. Similar extensive economic and developmental ties bind Bulgaria to Libya, Ethiopia, and South Yemen.<sup>26</sup>

A quick glance at Bulgarian economic aid to the third world might lead one to conclude that altruistic motives were in evidence. But a closer analysis suggests that

such aid is part and parcel of a more complex, selfish objective. To both Bulgarian and Soviet theorists, the way of achieving socialism in third world states is through the promotion of the state economic sector in its competition with private sector rivals. As expected, Bulgaria's assistance is precisely in this domain. As explained by a leading Soviet expert on Africa and Director of the Institute of Africa at the USSR Academy of Sciences, successful socialist construction demands "consolidation and expanding of the public sector . . . on an anti-capitalistic basis, subordinating the various types of economic activity to the development of the leading one, that of a socialist nature, and creating the social and economic conditions for it to prevail."<sup>27</sup> Bulgarian aid is geared to this goal.

In conjunction with efforts to assist the public sector in developing states, Bulgaria also attempts to negotiate agreements prohibiting her partners from ever returning to the capitalist camp. The first such "denial" clause was contained in a 1976 Soviet agreement with Angola. It stated: "Both of the contracting states testify that they will not enter into alliances or accept participation in any grouping of states . . . directed against the other high contracting party."<sup>28</sup> Two years later, Bulgaria signed such an agreement with both Angola and Mozambique. In 1980 a similar clause was included in the Bulgarian-Ethiopian friendship accord, and in 1983 Bulgaria became the first Warsaw Pact state to negotiate such an understanding with Libya.<sup>29</sup> The Bulgarian-Mozambican and Bulgarian-Ethiopian agreements call for cooperation in military matters, but information on what this entails is scarce.

In addition to the above, one of Bulgaria's main responsibilities in dealing with the third world concerns training the revolutionary cadre in the emerging socialist states. In this area Bulgaria can function much more efficiently than the USSR since the presence of Russian nationals has produced a significant backlash in smaller and still suspicious African states—witness the problems in Egypt and Somalia. As

representatives of a nation of less than ten million, Bulgarian advisers attract less attention and less fear. Thus it is the very sensitive area of cadre development which Bulgaria targets as its main responsibility. The extent of its efforts is best illustrated by the numerous intra-party accords signed between the Bulgarian Communist Party and Frelimo, the ruling party of Mozambique. As identified in the Bulgarian daily *Rabotnichesko delo*:

The two parties will exchange working groups to study their experiences in party work in organizational areas, preparation of cadres and mass organizations. They will study party work in the socialistic reconstruction of industry and agriculture, and party leadership in socioeconomic activities, and in propaganda and ideological work. The two will bring about cooperation between socio-political organizations, will exchange informational documents and publications on internal and external policies, and will facilitate cooperation between central press organs. The two parties will exchange delegations at congresses, national conferences and other important celebrations. The Central Committee of the Bulgarian party will reserve stipends for training cadre in the academies of social science and for social administrators, and will send lecturers in the fields of party construction, party leadership, economics, education and culture.<sup>30</sup>

Similar agreements and exchanges now exist with Angola, Yemen, Benin, Ethiopia, Libya, and Zambia, with the most recent accord being signed in October 1983 with the Revolutionary Party of Tanzania.<sup>31</sup>

The significance of these inter-party ties in which Bulgaria plays a leading role cannot be overestimated. If it is the predominance of the state sector over the private which signifies the transition to socialism in the third world, it is the determination and steadfastness of the respective national liberation front or revolutionary movement which governs the possibilities and bounds of such transitions. As the Bulgarian theorist



Khristo Mashkov noted, "The success of further revolutionary reorganization in those states with a progressive orientation depends upon the presence of a revolutionary organization which perceives the construction of socialism as its final goal."<sup>32</sup> "History shows," a recent Soviet study on Africa concludes, "that any kind of isolation of developing countries from other streams of the world revolutionary process handicaps the struggle and sometimes leads to defeat."<sup>33</sup> Bulgaria is concentrating her efforts to insure that such "isolation" will not occur.

After nearly four decades of close Soviet-Bulgarian friendship, the younger, weaker state has begun finally to come of age. Dependent once upon Soviet assistance in everything from economic aid to protection against foes domestic and foreign, Bulgaria today stands on a more equitable footing with her giant ally. Yet the effects and potentials of this shifting relation have evoked little study in the West. Like devotees of abnormal behavior, we consider as significant only those East European changes which appear to deviate from the assumed Soviet model of development. Hungary is closely watched because of her liberal and unique economic reforms; Romania, because of her innovative foreign policy. The evolution of Soviet-Bulgarian ties toward partnership calls forth little concern although this development holds potential for far-reaching change.

More confident after 35 years of socialistic rule, modernization of a backward agrarian society, and creation of a ruling stratum benefiting from current domestic policy, Bulgaria may soon demonstrate increased attention to her own national objectives even when they conflict with those of her Soviet partner. The drive to secure good relations with NATO's Balkan members, while consistent with Soviet goals, may also be rooted in a desire to shift scarce resources toward further economic growth. The renewed dispute with Yugoslavia as to the past and future of Macedonia expresses Bulgarian territorial aspirations which were born long before the socialist age.

Thus, while the transition from subservience to partnership undoubtedly strikes Soviet leaders as a trip well taken, it ought to be perceived in the West as a journey not necessarily completed. Subservience, partnership, and then self-assertion is not a historic pattern devoid of precedent.

#### NOTES

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