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The Challenges of *Glasnost* for Western Intelligence

ROBERT H. RIEMANN

Contrary to current widespread usage in the West, *glasnost* does not mean “openness.” Its most proximate English definition in standard Russian usage would be “publicity,” i.e. making public or making known. Appreciating this difference is critical to better understanding the original intent of *glasnost* in terms of its domestic political context. It is also critical to better assessing the implications of *glasnost* for us in the West. In particular, it is vital to a better understanding of the challenges and wider implications of this concept for Western intelligence communities.

Glasnost represents an attempt by President Mikhail Gorbachev to motivate the generally impassive Soviet public to help carry out his restructuring (*perestroika*) of Soviet society.¹ It was meant to be used to point out deficiencies in the system, and does not represent an end in itself. Although *glasnost* as intermittent Russian policy dates back to tsarist times, Gorbachev makes one to understand that he takes his cue instead from Lenin:

Lenin said: More light! Let the Party know everything! . . . *glasnost* . . . makes it possible for people to understand better . . . what is taking place now, what we are striving for, and what our plans are, and on the basis of this understanding to participate in the restructuring effort consciously. . . . Social and economic changes are gaining momentum largely thanks to the development of *glasnost*.²

Glasnost was also intended to serve Gorbachev's purposes by putting additional pressure on officials reluctant to follow his lead. It remains one of his weapons for breaking bureaucratic resistance while trying to mobilize broader support for his agenda.³ Gorbachev is honest in his aims: “Not everyone . . . likes the new style. This is especially true of those who are not used to . . . working in the conditions of *glasnost* and broad criticism.”⁴

Elsewhere, he tells us that “broader publicity is a matter of principle to us. Without publicity there is not . . . political creativity of the citizens and participation by the citizens in administration and management.”⁵ Above all, *glasnost* shares with *perestroika* the aim of strengthening Soviet society by making it more efficient: “*Glasnost* is aimed at strengthening our society. Criticism is a bitter medicine, but the ills that plague society make it a necessity.”⁶

Gorbachev’s *glasnost* is a peculiarly Russian phenomenon, as it is part of an attempt to impose reform from above. It is also to some extent an effort to equip an undemocratic government with a semblance of public accountability. But this is a matter of style more than of substance. Gorbachev has sought to assuage his more cautious colleagues by urging that *glasnost* can serve as a means of mass control as well.⁷ Nonetheless, the Soviet leaders themselves do have a use for *glasnost*. It helps them to know better what is happening in the domestic economy and it exposes problems within the lower echelons of the bureaucracy.⁸ However, the situation has gone well beyond the original intent, as evidenced by the nationalist unrest in various republics, especially Lithuania and more recently the Ukraine.

Glasnost serves Gorbachev another purpose traditionally valued by Russian leaders. It helps him to discredit some of his predecessors—especially Leonid Brezhnev—and, in turn, the functionaries and institutions that Gorbachev has inherited from him.⁹ Gorbachev is enabled to blame the ills of Soviet society on bankrupt leaders and policies of the past. He can also purge the elites left over from earlier times by indicting them as incompetent, corrupt, or both.¹⁰ This process thus puts pressure on the Soviet establishment from both above and below.

Gorbachev appears to be facing demands and hopes not unlike those that faced Nikita Khrushchev a generation before, during the post-Stalin thaw. But Gorbachev wants to avoid Khrushchev’s mistakes.¹¹ One tactic to accomplish this is to use *glasnost* in an effort to build domestic public pressure to his own advantage. Another is to use *glasnost* to improve the Soviet image in the West. Improved political relations can then be used to pursue more advantageous economic relations and thereby help the badly ailing Soviet economy through an infusion of desperately needed technology, capital, and know-how from the West. This is yet another traditional Russian stratagem employed repeatedly over the centuries to Moscow’s advantage. Not only

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would this approach, if successful, serve to bolster Gorbachev's own political standing at home, it would help make the Soviet Union economically more resilient and thereby bolster the Soviet regime's hold on power. However, this intent has not been realized.

The Impact of Glasnost in the West

Whatever his domestic standing, Gorbachev is enjoying a public relations coup in the West. In this regard, *glasnost* could hold tremendous consequences for overall Western defense efforts, including intelligence. By exploiting the atmosphere engendered by *glasnost*, Gorbachev is projecting a vastly more benign image of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev and other Kremlin leaders are indeed depriving the West of a threat perception upon which to focus its defense efforts. They are now doing this at an almost frenetic pace. Recent events elsewhere in the Warsaw Pact are dramatically intensifying this process of diminishing the threat as well.

Gorbachev's liberalization has provided the cornerstone of an extremely successful effort to appeal directly over the heads of Western leaders to intellectual elites and mass opinion.¹² Because the Western approach toward the East is so complex and multifaceted, it is readily undermined in the public eye by patently simplistic and short-term ploys. It is in the field of arms control and disarmament that Gorbachev has been most adept at such maneuvering. One of his principal goals is to convince the West that it no longer needs to keep up its guard, even while Moscow yields relatively little.¹³ But this process also seems to be assuming a powerful dynamic of its own.

In such an environment, the potential adverse impact on Western defense efforts overall, including intelligence, becomes worrisome. The diminished threat perception is undercutting public support for defense. This in turn is decreasing support for defense spending by legislators. This in its turn will hasten and exacerbate cuts in national defense efforts among the Western allies because of budgetary pressures. Whatever is undone in this manner will not be remedied so quickly should the perceived threat ever change again for the worse. Ironically, it may take a threat from an entirely different quarter—e.g. the current Iraqi-fomented crisis in the Middle East—to forestall the defense complacency induced by Gorbymania.

What Historical Precedent Tells Us

The haste engendered by public euphoria in the West raises concern in the light of historical experience. First, there is Russian and Soviet history. An old adage has it that everything in Russia has happened before, Moscow's centuries-old tradition of flirtatious openings to the West being a prime example.¹⁴ These episodes were cleverly exploited by leaders who initiated such contacts to gain some clear material advantage—usually to strengthen their own power position. Among the earlier practitioners were Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, both of whom used Western technical advances to strengthen military capabilities and cement central governmental control—and then employed these enhancements to Moscow's advantage. This tactic has survived through Lenin's time down to our own era.

Another area of concern is the manner in which democratic societies have assessed the threat posed by totalitarian societies. Generally, it seems difficult for people of one society to realistically assess its adversary, especially if that adversary possesses an alien political culture. Such ethnocentrism seems to be a severe handicap for Western democracies when confronted by totalitarian rivals.

A sobering example is provided by the erratic British intelligence assessment of Nazi Germany during the 1930s. Despite an initial appraisal of Germany as Britain's ultimate threat in Europe, London's perception of where the real danger lay underwent a succession of wild swings. These were driven by a variety of competing interest groups within the British government. Such drastic vacillations contributed to the disastrous policies followed by Britain before World War II. The British intelligence effort of the 1930s was hobbled in large measure by the following factors:

- The government's lack of emphasis on the intelligence effort.
- A penchant for mirror-imaging and wishful thinking, such as imputing benign democratic values to the Nazis.
- Acceptance of Nazi propaganda and official pronouncements at face value when lacking pertinent information from other sources.
- Information overload, much of it conflicting, at critical decision junctures.

The result of the factors above was that bad policy was matched by a grave misreading of the threat.¹⁵ Indeed, the biases and preconceptions of London's policymakers were so strong as to render the British receptive to much of the faulty intelligence they received.¹⁶

Great Britain's effort to assess Nazi Germany went through several phases of alternating optimism and despair. This progression included a honeymoon period in the mid-1930s. That interlude was marked by protracted efforts on the part of London to attain arms limitation agreements with Berlin. These years even witnessed visits by service attachés to German bases,

maneuver sites, and production facilities—albeit on carefully controlled itineraries—as well as cordial officer exchanges.¹⁷ The immediate parallels to recent, well-publicized US-Soviet interactions appear rather striking.

Although there was much overt collection at this time, British intelligence officials persisted in their failure to present a consistent and even-handed assessment of Nazi Germany's strengths and weakness.¹⁸ Worse yet, the British were unable to fathom the ideology and mentality behind Nazi policies. As a result, the perceptions and biases of the political leadership in London—selectively reinforced by the erratic intelligence it received—exerted enormous influence on the final, flawed assessments of Nazi Germany.¹⁹ London thus reacted to a Germany perceived variously as more awesome or more benign than in reality it was.

The Challenges of Glasnost for Western Intelligence

If British intelligence in the 1930s underwent drastic vacillations, US-led Western allied efforts to assess the Soviet threat since the late 1940s have tended consistently toward pessimistic scenarios. Moscow's penchant for secrecy, coupled with the ambiguous appearance of much Soviet activity, forced Western allied officials to assume the worst. This process was compounded by the political atmosphere that prevailed over the Cold War era.²⁰

Now Washington and its allies are faced with a situation that brings into question the interpretations of Soviet intentions as understood over the past 40-odd years. Moscow appears to be undergoing an ostensibly extreme discontinuity in its historical pattern of behavior. Many of the Western public and political elites have been quick to accept this phenomenon at face value. Promising events elsewhere in Eastern Europe have intensified their hopeful expectations. Western governments that have consistently taken pessimistic views in the past are now being greeted with criticism and skepticism, even when simply trying to take a prudent, long-term, and balanced approach.

Glasnost poses an array of challenges for Western intelligence over the coming years. Many of these challenges will broadly parallel the problems that plagued the British intelligence effort of the 1930s. One persistent obstacle of long standing is the traditional Russian penchant for secrecy. This conspiratorial mentality remains difficult for Westerners to fathom fully, rooted as it is in Russian and Soviet history. It will leave Moscow as enigmatic to foreigners as ever. Gorbachev himself has subscribed to the continued need for it:

In the context of the growing subversive activity by imperialist special services against the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, greater responsibility devolves upon the state security bodies. We are convinced that Soviet security forces . . . will always . . . display vigilance, self-control, and tenacity in the struggle against any encroachment on our political and social system.²¹

Accordingly, *glasnost* does not apply equally to more sensitive areas such as defense and industrial production. Nor does it apply equally to the secret police or to the current party elite.

Those occasions during which Western media have access to Soviet officials or sensitive activities or installations remain tightly controlled.²² *Glasnost* has been more shallow when applied to the Soviet military, though this appears to be gradually changing. If anything, *glasnost* generates concern among Soviet military officers for its potentially disruptive effect on military morale and unit effectiveness.²³ Nonetheless, top military leaders have become selectively vocal on topical and newsworthy issues, even if these occasional forays are intended largely for Western consumption.²⁴

Another major challenge will be to sift the wheat from the chaff. The limits and the rules of the game regarding *glasnost* are still not always clear. Different Soviet officials seem to be applying diverse interpretations.²⁵ There is also the lingering concern that the Soviets at any given instance could be engaged in their traditional ploy of disinformation.

Ironically, the attendant confusion on the part of Western observers seems only to help encourage unrealistic and speculative readings in the West regarding Soviet intentions. For example, the recent stir of interest among Western observers created by open discussion of defense policy in Moscow has its basis in the willingness of prominent Soviet officials to publicly challenge the party line. But such dissenting views, despite the prominence of those who voice them, should not be taken as a new official line embraced by the Soviet government.²⁶

Nevertheless, the domain of public discussion has expanded dramatically. As a result, a wide range of topics concerning the ills of Soviet society, including data once deemed compromising, is now being made public. These range from the unflattering realities of contemporary Soviet life, such as the poor state of health care or the status of women, to sordid episodes from the past, such as the brutal excesses of the Stalin era. The result has been an unprecedentedly frank disclosure about certain facets of life in the Soviet Union.²⁷ This has allowed analysts, historians, and other specialists in the West to make comparisons of their previous estimates with the newly released information. But, at the same time, this proliferation of data demands careful sorting.²⁸ Validating and exploiting this inundation of material still requires discriminating and in many cases excruciating detective work. In the more critical and sensitive areas, it will still remain necessary to read between the lines and look for hidden messages in official statements.²⁹

One sensitive area that does appear to offer some promise of progress over the near term is arms control. This process is being pushed by Gorbachev out of dire economic—above all, fiscal—necessity and the challenges posed

by Western technological superiority. Particularly helpful in this respect is Gorbachev's unprecedented acceptance of on-site verification. He has stated:

In today's international situation, with its deficit of mutual trust, verification measures are indispensable. Whether it is verification using national monitoring facilities or international verification procedures, it should necessarily mean control over compliance with concrete agreements.³⁰

The first actual opening in this regard has been Gorbachev's acceptance of intrusive verification procedures for the Intermediate-range Nuclear Force treaty. It remains to be seen how far this precedent with INF will be extended to arms control regimes more urgent to Soviet interests and perceived security needs.

The arms control process will present a challenge as well as an opportunity. The challenge over the longer term will be to help maintain a steady vigilance on the part of the West despite popular optimism. It will take years to draw conclusions with any certainty regarding the dynamic processes now under way. Particularly critical will be the need to support prudent allied efforts in arms control negotiations, and to help maintain public support in pursuing Western security interests in those negotiations.

A very different challenge for intelligence will come from Western electorates and their political leaderships, especially in Western Europe. This challenge will entail coping with swings in mood and the impact these swings could have upon government priorities and budgetary support for intelligence efforts. The problem will be to maintain a steady policy course in the face of the public suspicion generated by the consistently pessimistic intelligence reportage over the past 40 years.

These problems will be confronting Western intelligence communities precisely at a juncture when accurate data will be especially vital to verifying or disputing Soviet claims in the arms control arena and elsewhere. In such a setting, the role of intelligence will be particularly critical in assessing the direction of Soviet policy and all of the implications it will hold for US—as well as allied—policies and plans.

The increasing involvement of Congress in foreign affairs is causing intelligence information to take on larger significance in domestic politics. The temptation for politicians to use privileged intelligence information when appealing to voting publics or legislatures is particularly strong in democratic societies.³¹ (Indeed, in recent times unauthorized leaks of information have become a recurrent plague for administrations of whatever party.) Gorbachev himself appears to appreciate this phenomenon and seems to be gauging his public performance accordingly.

Swings in public and leadership moods—ranging from euphoric optimism to panic or alarm—could provide an uncertain and ambiguous domestic political setting for Western intelligence communities. There will

In the arms control process, the challenge will be to help maintain a steady vigilance on the part of the West despite popular optimism.

be considerable political pressure and temptation for elected leaders and their appointees to conform the interpretation of intelligence information to their own evolving views of the world, as happened in Britain in the 1930s. Intelligence could then become increasingly a pawn of politics as some Western leaders try to react to or even seek to shape events in the East. They may well exploit intelligence in efforts to support their particular views or agendas in domestic and interallied debates over how to deal with Moscow.

The very ambiguity of the evolving environment will likely be further complicated by the mixed signals to be expected from the East. Such a state of affairs will leave the intelligence process even further vulnerable to manipulation or exploitation by political leaders to suit their respective political expediencies, again a situation not unlike that in Britain in the 1930s. That in turn would present a particularly dangerous state of affairs if the leadership in Moscow continues to play so masterfully to Western hopes and fears as it does at present.

Related to the question of avoiding excessive swings in political mood is the question of old-versus-new paradigms, as well as paradigms traditionally favored respectively by liberals and conservatives. The debate over how to deal with the Soviet Union has been going on in some form since 1917. All too often, Westerners of whatever political persuasion have been able to see in the Soviet Union whatever they wanted to see.³² In turn, the present controversy over what is transpiring in the Soviet Union will in the end actually be a debate over American and allied policy direction toward Moscow.³³

In dealing with political leaders, Western intelligence agencies could be caught in another dilemma. They could face either a leadership that is so dogmatically caught up in old paradigms that it is not receptive to new information, or a leadership so receptive to new paradigms that it changes opinions frequently and fails to provide steady political direction.³⁴ Either excess would present a difficult working environment for the intelligence communities. This can be compounded by the regular and frequent changes of governments in the West that result in a discontinuity or shift—or even drift—in policy.

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge facing Western intelligence agencies will be working on a long-term process in the face of short-term

demands in an environment characterized by the most profound uncertainty and change since the start of the Cold War. Only careful analysis over time will produce tangibly verifiable intelligence results. In the meantime, events can take unexpected or alarming turns. The profundity, drama, speed, and scope of change may be as great or even greater than that which confronted the British before World War II.

A particularly painful duty for the intelligence community could become that of serving as "Persian messenger," delivering unwanted bad news that contradicts popular expectations. This task would be critical to keep the West alert to the worst possible cases of Soviet behavior. Yet it is often a reluctance by the intelligence community's political masters to believe the bad news that forms the weakest link in the intelligence process, thus allowing unpleasant surprises.³⁵ (The agonizing dilemmas that were involved in assessing the progress of the Vietnam War come readily to mind in this respect.) It is this role as Persian messenger, then, that could prove to be the most thankless for the leaders of the intelligence agencies and put their moral courage to the severest test.

The Impact on Western Intelligence and Its Implications

Barring significant changes in prevailing circumstances, *glasnost* will continue to serve as Gorbachev's apple of discord to be used to divide the West. (Indeed, interpreting the very nature, extent, and motive of his agenda has provided the basis for considerable debate and dispute among Western experts since the start of the Gorbachev era.) *Glasnost* will help foster controversy within allied intelligence communities and the government leaderships which they serve. Intense debate elsewhere—in the press, in academic forums, and in think tanks—will further compound the confusion. The paradigms of more than 40 years appear to lie shattered without any clearly defined substitutes as yet in sight to help the West manage historic change.

During this period of flux, it will remain extraordinarily difficult for the intelligence community to do well all that it must do: assess overall developments in the East; support allied arms control negotiations with the Soviets; and prepare threat estimates to support the force planning of their respective governments in the face of budget cuts and diminishing resources.

The impact of discord over how to deal with the East will be felt increasingly not only within individual allied intelligence services and governments, but even more so collectively among alliance intelligence services and governments. NATO solidarity could be severely eroded as the United States and other allies find it hard to agree in their assessments of the Soviet threat, its likely future evolution, and the appropriate responses to developments in the East. These divergent assessments and interpretations will likely be symptomatic of wider defense and foreign policy schisms which, if not

properly addressed in a timely manner, could presage the ultimate unraveling of NATO efforts to manage security change in Europe.

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