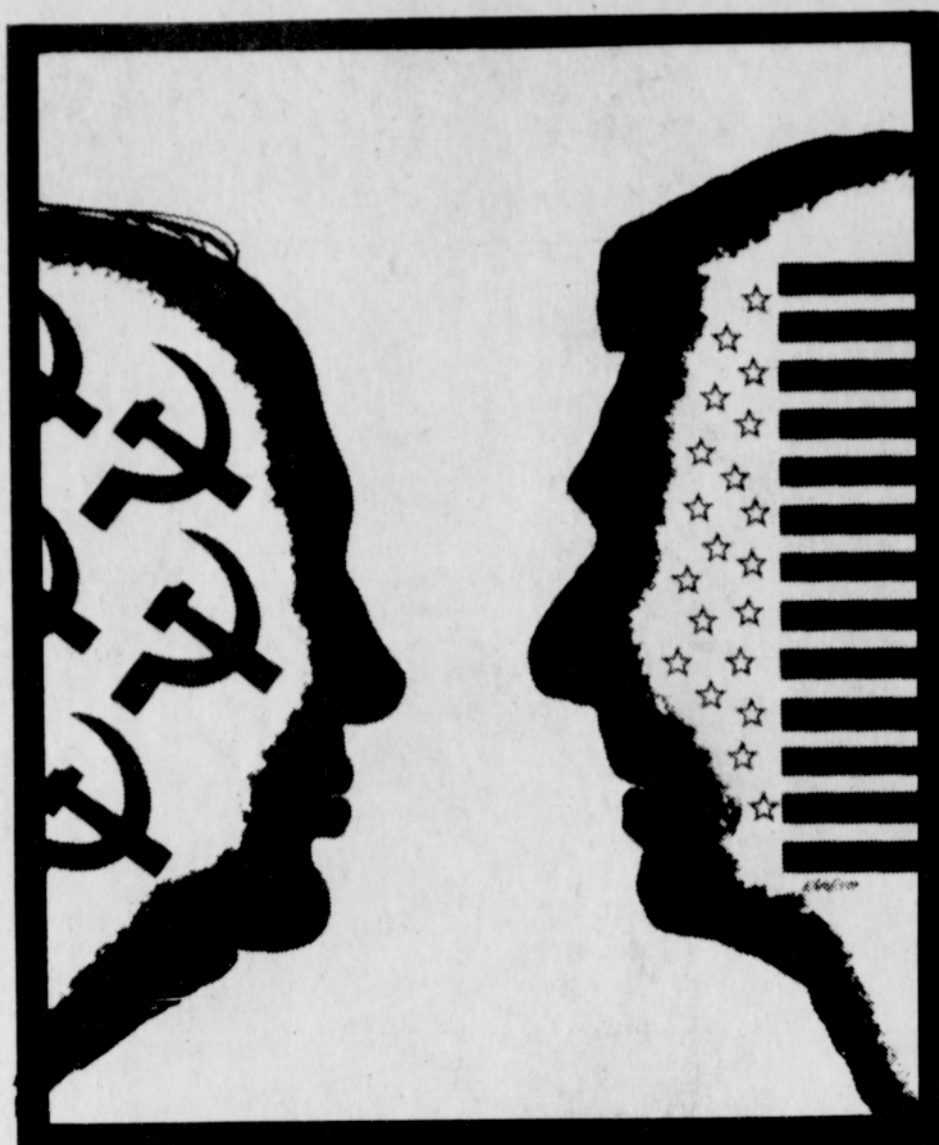


GORBACHEV'S



NEXT MOVE

Mikhail Gorbachev's persistent search for a U.S.-Soviet arms control compromise suggests that such an accord remains an important part of his approach to the Soviet Union's economic and security problems. His optimal solution would probably include a comprehensive U.S.-Soviet settlement along the lines he originally proposed in January 1986 and pursued at the Reykjavik summit: halting the arms race in space in exchange for substantial reductions in nuclear and conventional weapons. Despite the major concessions the Soviets have offered, however, the Reagan Administration has offered very little in return. With Reagan standing firm on Star Wars, it seems that any major agreement will have to be on his terms. The Administration, and many U.S. observers, reasoning that the Soviet Union needs an agreement more than the United States does, seem confident that Gorbachev must eventually accept Star Wars. But that thinking is based on a mistaken understanding of the relationship between Gorbachev's economic and security needs. Signing a Reagan-style agreement is only one of his options, and it would do little to solve the domestic problems that have inspired his disarmament diplomacy.

The current impasse leaves Gorbachev with three basic options in the realm of security. He could abandon negotiations with Washington as futile, yield to Soviet hawks, and engage in an unbridled arms race at the expense of economic modernization. This option would yield the Soviets little benefit. Although in principle Gorbachev could justify putting aside his ambitious economic plans because of U.S. intransigence and an increased military threat in practice the costs to his personal prestige, to the Soviet economy, and to the Soviet people would be intolerably high.

As a second security option, Gorbachev could accept the arms deal that Reagan continues to offer. But as Geneva and Reykjavik have shown, Gorbachev does not accept Reagan's definition of a good arms control agreement: namely, lower ceilings on offensive forces in exchange for legitimizing the development of strategic defenses, thereby channeling the arms race into space. Signing such an accord would be plausible for Gorbachev only if he were under intense internal pressure to cut a deal with the Americans. In fact, a Reagan-style agreement would probably be most useful to Gorbachev's opponents as a way to justify a military buildup, especially in defensive weapons.

In the end, Gorbachev is unlikely to sign such an accord because it would only exacerbate Soviet economic difficulties. This is something that Reagan Administration officials seem to get backward: They commonly argue that the Soviets' economic troubles will drive them to make the kind of arms control agreement the White House wants. In fact, such an agreement could impose great costs on the Soviet economy. In contrast to Gorbachev's disarmament initiative, which would reduce nuclear and conventional forces and prevent an arms race in space, the current American proposals would encourage the Soviets to match Star Wars, continue nuclear testing, deploy sea-launched cruise missiles, pursue further modernization of tactical nuclear forces, and invest in advanced-technology conventional weapons. The U.S. proposals are not arms control, and certainly would not save the Soviets any money. The way for the Soviet Union to revitalize its economy is not to endorse continued military competition through this kind of arms control but to reduce defense expenditures and seek outside sources of technology and trade.

This is the objective that seems to drive Gorbachev's disarmament diplomacy, and it helps explain why his focus is far broader than

by Matthew Evangelista

the negotiating table at Geneva or Reykjavik. In a September 1986 interview with the Czech newspaper "Rude Pravo", Gorbachev addressed the impact of military spending on the economy. Referring to possible "attempts to undermine the USSR economically by means of an arms race," he stated that the Soviets would do everything possible to prevent this, acting on the diplomatic, military, political, propaganda, and, "above all, the economic" level. If we are weak economically, Gorbachev argued, "the pressure from the enemies of socialism intensifies." But if "we become stronger, more solid economically, the interest of the capitalist world in normal relations with us will grow." These are not the words of a person willing to abandon his plans for economic revival in order to engage in an all-out arms race with the United States.

As a third option, then, Gorbachev could refuse to follow what he calls "the absurd American logic of armaments" and pursue multilateral security agreements in Europe and Asia, relying on unilateral restraint and improved trade relations to create a strong domestic economy. This option could also include continuing formal negotiations with the Reagan Administration, so as not to alienate U.S. and European public opinion, even if there is little hope of an agreement.

This is not to say that unilateral restraint would be an easy option for Gorbachev to adopt. Yet there is evidence to suggest that he might, evidence that can be found not only in the policy writings of Soviet academics but also in the statements of senior military officers. Marshal Ogarkov, for example, the former chief of the general staff, has argued that the two superpowers have "created a surplus of military and especially nuclear capabilities." The logical implication of such a statement is that the Soviets need not be so concerned about maintaining an exact numerical parity with the United States in nuclear weapons, but rather could afford to risk unilateral reductions. The unilateral test ban Gorbachev has maintained since August 1985 and his proposal to dismantle Soviet SS-20s without compensatory cuts in British and French nuclear forces may reflect the influence of this kind of thinking.

This more sophisticated approach also seems to be guiding the Soviets' ideas about how to respond to Star Wars. Evidently, some of Gorbachev's top advisers have explained to him what is quite obvious to many American experts: It will be much cheaper to defeat a Star Wars system than to build one. As Gorbachev pointed out at the Geneva summit in 1985, "Our answer (to Star Wars) will be effective, less costly, and can be carried out in a shorter time." And the Soviets could undertake these inexpensive countermeasures to SDI without sacrificing their domestic economic objectives.

If Gorbachev means what he says, he may focus Soviet resources directly on economic reform in the civilian sector at the expense of the military programs — regardless of what the United States does. Rebuilding a civilian technological base would in turn strengthen Moscow's future military potential. Gorbachev

may also be taking into account the likelihood of increased conflict within NATO over Star Wars if the Soviets reject the "logic" of the arms race and refuse to build a space-based defense of their own.

Thus, even in the absence of a "grand compromise" agreement with the United States — major reductions in Soviet land-based missiles in return for the abandonment of Star Wars — Gorbachev could be willing to pursue many of his disarmament initiatives in the expectation that they would yield substantial political and economic dividends. This consideration makes Gorbachev's conciliatory overtures toward Western Europe and the Pacific all the more central to his security policy and his plans for economic revival. Improved relations with China, for example, may permit large reductions in Soviet military forces along the Sino-Soviet border. Gorbachev would also like to stanch the "bleeding wound," as he has characterized Afghanistan. Moreover, he is eager to decrease the perception of a Soviet threat in Western Europe, hoping that an easing of tensions there could allow for some reduction in the Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe.

The economic component of Gorbachev's strategy appears to focus on newly industrialized countries — specifically large, moderate ones in the Third World such as India, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. Moscow may hope to improve relations with these countries in order to open up their markets to Soviet goods, the ultimate goal being to use the competitive pressures of the export market to modernize its industry. This might hurt the Soviet consumer in the short run but over the long run could be highly beneficial to the economy, bringing it into the third industrial revolution. While courting moderate Third World countries, the Soviets have simultaneously toned down their rhetorical support of revolutionary states and movements. Thus the Soviets appear to be coordinating their economic and military policies, pointing them both in a new direction.

The new Soviet approach to security offers a major opportunity for the United States to achieve its longterm arms control objectives: significant reductions in nuclear and conventional weapons, a ban on nuclear testing, and the chance to alleviate the deficit by reducing military spending. Unfortunately, these goals no longer seem to be on the United States' agenda. President Reagan evidently prefers to pass up the chance to secure unprecedented cuts in Soviet military power in favor of pursuing the chimera of Star Wars.

For the moment, then, limits on weaponry appear to hinge on tacit cooperation between Moscow and the U.S. Congress. The latter's efforts to limit U.S. testing and to maintain American compliance with the SALT II and ABM treaties seem to have encouraged similar restraint on Gorbachev's part, as exemplified by his decision to extend the Soviets' unilateral test ban. Congress may be willing to continue reigning in U.S. military programs by tightening the purse strings, as long as Moscow shows comparable restraint. This is an unusual and perhaps risky approach to arms control. But in the face of the unwillingness and inability of the Reagan Administration to produce a meaningful arms accord, tacit cooperation remains the most effective barrier to an unconstrained arms race.

Matthew Evangelista teaches Soviet and world politics at the University of Michigan. A longer version of his article was published in the Fall 1986 issue of World Policy Journal under the title "The New Soviet Approach to Security."