The Future of Coexistence: U.S.-Soviet Relations

Nicolas Protyniak
Roanoke College, Virginia

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas

Part of the International Relations Commons

Recommended Citation
Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol35/iss2/23

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.
The Future of Coexistence: U.S.-Soviet Relations

NICOLAS PROTINYIAK *

ABSTRACT — Basic trends that may develop in American-Soviet relations in the foreseeable future may be analyzed against the background styles of the two countries which constitute a model of the main determinants in continuity and change. Such analysis seems to indicate that competition rather than cooperation will continue to mark the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, though with a gradual decrease in hostile intensity. Within a broader view, this relationship may offer to the United States not only failures and disappointments, but also a creative challenge to contribute to world peace and progress if the challenge is realized and met without the skeptic tendency and mood of international withdrawal that often typified this country's history.

In analyzing a topic as complex and broad as peaceful coexistence between the United States and the Soviet Union, it is imperative to set some guidelines or dimensions under which the subject matter is to be treated. It is important, also, to isolate some of the more crucial variables for additional attention.

Certain assumptions must be made about peaceful coexistence as the basis for further analysis. Within a broader frame, the two major assumptions may be viewed as a continuity and change in which the United States and the Soviet Union maintain their relations. The two assumptions provide, in addition, some broader questions regarding the extent as well as the limits within which politics of international relations in general and American-Soviet relations in particular operate.

The extreme difficulty of analyzing American-Soviet relations within the broad concept of continuity and change is readily apparent when Soviet foreign relations are examined within the more basic problems of internal politics and the traditional Russian patterns inherited from the tsarist regime. This difficulty is compounded, also, by the unavailability of some crucial source materials.

Yet much preliminary work on the question of continuity and change has been done by historians and social scientists, especially since World War II. The prevailing evidence seems to indicate that both the traditional Russian and the newer Marxist elements are present in the Soviet political system (Hendel, 1959). Both Marxist and tsarist Russians were expansive in action and outlook; both tended to be extreme and radical; both were overly assertive and dogmatic; both possessed messianic and mystical ideologies; and both considered their ideologies superior to all other ideologies (Lederer, 1962).

These common elements of Communism and Russian autocracy are largely due to the fact that both operated under similar conditions. It may explain why the Russians were always very difficult to deal with, and the Communists are even more so (Kennan, 1961).

Contrast of Systems

In relation to the Soviet Union, the United States stands at the opposite end of the political continuum.

United States political institutions and ideas have evolved mainly from the 18th century liberalism and within the unique conditions of the American continent. Social and political institutions have grown from the ground up, culminating finally in the federal system. Such a development has clearly favored individual initiative, endurance, self-reliance, and the ability to meet various challenges and change. Both traditional authoritarianism and modern totalitarianism are foreign to the American political system as well as to its liberal and businessman-like tradition. Though gradually, under the modern media of communication and economic as well as technological interdependence the gap of contrast is being narrowed, the crucial differences between the United States and the Soviet Union are still decisive factors in their relations.

The Communist Terminology

A major obstacle to understanding Soviet policy is the problem of establishing a true meaning in the Communist terminology. Like so many terms in Soviet politics, the phrase “peaceful coexistence” does not imply the same meaning as its western counterpart. In a sense, peaceful coexistence is a misnomer, its basic elements seeming to connote rather the opposite: political rivalry, ideological struggle, class struggle, underground activity, economic, technological, social, and scientific competition, struggle against western imperialism and colonialism, internal and external promotion of Communism, promotion of “wars of liberation,” and so on. Coexistence, therefore, does not mean a reconciliation (Spanier, 1967) between the socialist and capitalist camps. Hence, the Soviet idea of peaceful coexistence may be paraphrased as a continuation of war by other means.

The new policy, like the previous one, is a strategy and tactic designed to enable Communism to prevail over capitalism and other systems. Thus, in actual fact the concept of peaceful coexistence cannot be regarded as a genuine proposal for peace and is, perhaps, no more gen-

* Nicolas Protyniak is assistant professor of political science at Roanoke College, Virginia. He received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Roosevelt University, Chicago, Illinois, and his Ph.D. from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. He had taught previously at Northern State College, Aberdeen, South Dakota, and at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota.
Soviets have abandoned war as a means for the achievement of their ideological dogma, and this is one reason for Sino-Soviet discord. The Soviets have abandoned war as a means for the achievement of Communism because they realize, as do people elsewhere, that in a modern nuclear war, which would harm both sides, the Communists would seem to lose more since their cause was destined to prevail, and the capitalists would lose less since their cause was already doomed.

In the new communist concept of peaceful coexistence, the element of competition is strongly stressed. In 1959, Khrushchev told Nixon in Moscow:

Sportsmen have a fine tradition; winners are warmly greeted and congratulated. Why should not countries engaged in peaceful competition maintain such a tradition? We will derive profound satisfaction when we surpass in peaceful competition such a fine industrial “runner” as the United States, the most advanced capitalist country (Dept. of State, 1959).

At the June, 1963, Central Committee plenary meeting, Khrushchev gave this peaceful competition a more eloquent and Darwinist expression a la American style, saying:

The capitalists know the cruel law of competition: if one outstrips another, the stronger one swallows the weaker one. The competition of the two systems in the economic field strikes even greater fear into the hearts of imperialists. They see that the rapid growth of socialism is increasingly shaking the foundations of capitalism, bringing the end of this system, which is doomed by history (Barnett, 1965).

Peaceful coexistence, consequently, is only a partial peace (Ramundo, 1967), and a relatively small part may be safely considered as such. This was also indicated by the next Communist Party leader, Leonid Brezhnev, at the 1966 Party Congress. He stated that “there can be no peaceful coexistence where matters concern the internal process of the class and national liberation struggle in the capitalist countries or in colonies. Peaceful coexistence is not applicable to the relations between oppressors and oppressed, between colonialists and the victims of colonial oppression” (Shulman, 1967). The new Communist leadership has not altered the basic tenets of the coexistence policy which were formulated under Khrushchev. The change, if any, is rather noticeable in a more cautious and conservative application of these principles of peaceful coexistence (Brezhnev, 1966).

Whatever the changes in the Soviet leadership, one thing remains constant: the challenge to the United States and its allies in many fields of political and non-political contest. This being the case, the United States has essentially two alternatives in dealing with the Soviet Union: either to withdraw from this competitive struggle to a new position of drifting isolationism or accept the Soviet challenge and match it with a counter-challenge within the frame of its tradition. In either case, whatever America decides will affect not only the two great competing powers but also the rest of the world.

The grave American responsibility in this challenge is also indicative of the difficulties which the United States leadership is to face. The question is essentially one of able leadership which would be equal to the task. Again, whatever course this country takes, the dilemma before the American leadership is how to maintain peace and stability as well as how to provide for necessary and orderly change in a potentially explosive and revolutionary age.

Path of Least Resistance

Perhaps, no one would more welcome the American withdrawal from this global contest than the Soviet Union itself, for that would remove the only serious obstacle in the Soviet path toward realization of its communist objectives. Although the Communists are not willing to risk a war, “they will take advantage of any opening in any part of the world to expand the influence of Communism” (Harriman, 1967). And though the present Soviet leadership may be more cautious and less aggressive, it still would be tempted to fill in any possible vacuum, especially in places where it could easily move along the path of least resistance.

Since only the United States is capable of meeting the Soviet challenge, a unilateral withdrawal would entail grave consequences to the present status quo in Europe and other parts of the globe. Thus, a unilateral withdrawal poses a serious question: what would the Communists do in their counter-move? It is not too difficult to imagine why the people in America and elsewhere would not be willing to submit to the risks of such experimentation. Moreover, for those who make history, there is also historical responsibility; and no major power can abdicate its responsibility without being subject to the verdict of history. Certainly, a sense of historical responsibility is also necessary if those who make history are to be publicly responsible. Recent history of withdrawals and appeasements to totalitarian-move­ments-regimes offers instructive comments regarding possible consequences of such policies. Careful considera­tions, therefore, seem to suggest that a U.S. withdrawal in the face of the Soviet challenge cannot be an acceptable policy or a solution to the problem.

This leaves the United States only the second option: to accept the Soviet challenge with maturity and determination and to meet it on Soviet terms. Certainly, a free and developed society should be capable of meeting a challenge from its less-developed totalitarian competitor. The United States is able to meet the Soviet proposal for economic competition, disarmament and arms control, ideological contest and free exchange of ideas.
ideas, exchange of scientific and cultural data as well as personnel, economic and technical assistance to the developing countries, furthering the cause of national liberation and freedom for all subjugated peoples, promotion of universal human rights and freedom throughout the world, promotion of peace through the channels of international organization, and other such projects of mutual interest.

But whatever the competition or cooperation, the United States should make one thing unequivocally clear to the Russians: all actions and projects must be reciprocal in their character, and concessions made by one power must be followed by similar concessions from another. It should also be made clear to all concerned, however, that concessions made by one side without a reciprocal action on the part of another cannot bring desired results. And one thing that could considerably mitigate some of the harsher features of totalitarianism both at home and abroad is the application and systematic pursuance of the idea of reciprocity by a democratic power in its relations with non-democratic powers. Moreover, the idea of reciprocity could open new fields for its application as well as a great opportunity for the American leadership to work peacefully toward improvements and reforms on the world scene. This success is postulated on the assumption that the policy based on reciprocity and equality, coupled with wisdom and dignity, is more attractive and efficacious than the Soviet counterpart (Mosely, 1956).

Above all, projects of mutual interests in the Soviet-American competition and cooperation must be sufficiently defined and clarified, or set aside until conditions are ripe for such clarification. In this dangerous nuclear age, truth and candor must play a far greater role in international relations than ever before. Bluffing, evasion, misrepresentation, and other such traditional political devices are not only less applicable but more risky in this context. But a business-like and down-to-earth attitude in dealing with the Soviets poses some difficulties, for the Russian mind is less inclined than the American mind to tread the precise, legalistic, and empirical path in foreign as well as internal affairs. On the other hand, the American mind is less favorably disposed to the Soviet penchant for generalities, inflated and universalized propaganda statements (Goodman, 1960), vague and ambiguous pronouncements, inclination to secrecy and conspirative tactic (Barnett, 1965), cunning as well as duplicity (Hoover, 1958), and other such forms of the Renaissance type of diplomacy.

Moreover, the elimination of less desirable characteristics of diplomacy and clarification of possible doubts concerning such grave questions as nuclear miscalculation and misunderstanding would further improve the Soviet-American relations. Furthermore, the Soviet concept of peaceful coexistence, if it is to be at all meaningful, would have to be further specified, particularly in cases of foreign intervention by major powers. How much assistance, for instance, can a major power lend in a local war before such a war is classed as intervention or aggression? Another important problem of peaceful coexistence is the question of escalation in local conflicts. At what point, for example, would a local conflict be considered general and, thus, outside the scope of the "peaceful competition?"

A Guide to Strategy

The Soviet concept of peaceful coexistence does not provide any answers to such crucial questions, nor does it constitute any real basis for the assessment and evaluation of the Soviet behavior in international affairs. The policy seems to serve the Soviet Union rather as a guide in international strategy and tactic as well as the Soviet condition for peaceful competition to which the United States and other western countries have been challenged. Moreover, through this concept of peaceful coexistence the Soviets project a new image of the Soviet Union as a major progressive power striving for peace and social change (Lederer, 1962). In other respects, however, the concept of peaceful coexistence is perhaps no less nebulous than the old Russian idea of "Holy Alliance" which was introduced at the Congress of Vienna after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. The fact that the Soviets have failed to develop their concept into a useful method of conflict-resolution or cooperation indicates that they prefer the vogue of ritualistic and propaganda phraseology to a workable policy.

Though the ideology and diplomacy may encourage the Soviets to engage in international aggrandizement, the compelling factor which tends to dampen their appetites is far more fundamental. The first and foremost element which dictates a cautious Soviet course in foreign affairs is the danger of nuclear war. This real need to coexist stems from the awesome destructive capability and the realization that a general nuclear war would spare neither the victors nor the vanquished. The real desire to coexist, consequently, is ultimately the very threat of human survival. The instinct seems to suggest, as Professor Toynbee once observed, that men, along with animals, have a vested interest in survival. Thus, the stalemate emphasizes that there is in fact no alternative and that it is better to coexist than not to exist. The people in the Communist orbit—China excepted—are no less aware of this danger than the people in the West. Hence, it is the realization of the common danger of extermination which provides the most compelling and important reason in the desire to avoid such devastating wars.

This danger of nuclear holocaust, together with the fact that the nuclear destructive forces cannot be eliminated, presents the leadership of the major powers with the problem of working out a pattern for peaceful coexistence along with the nuclear threat. Moreover, there is no possibility to turn back the clock of history and return to more serene, peaceful, and non-nuclear times. What is at stake is not a question of whether different political systems should coexist, but rather whether men can live together without destroying each other and all that they have accomplished (Osgood, 1962).

There are some encouraging signs, however, that the situation may not necessarily be as hopeless as it seems.
One is the gradual transition from bipolarism to polycentrism. New centers of power in Asia and Europe are beginning to emerge; the old alliances are changing, and the tense cold war polarization between the Soviet Union and the United States is receding.

The nuclear proliferation has helped to undermine the global polarization of the various states of the two hostile blocs—Communist and anti-Communist—and to cause other power centers to emerge. This tendency toward polycentrism (Lerch, 1967) and power diffusion has favored the lesser powers, for it offered them a greater freedom of initiative not only in their internal politics but external as well. At the same time, however, it became in the hands of small states a method with which to check and limit the freedom of the major powers in their initiative and their choice of action (Osgood, 1962). This position favorable to the lesser powers was further exploited and expanded by the satellites in order to free themselves of political dependency. Moreover, the great powers have themselves realized the limitations in the nuclear as well as conventional armament and arms race and the fact that such an increase in military power does not necessarily bring the desired political results in corresponding measure. Thus, they have come to the awareness that the nuclear stalemate may reach a point of diminished returns.

Politically and militarily, the United States must adjust to this stage of transition which Leon Trotsky once characterized as "neither peace nor war." The U.S. should not then anticipate speedy resolution in the East-West rivalry.

The Soviet propaganda offensive is far less dangerous and may be met with less efforts or exertion than other contests. A free society is better equipped to face a totalitarian ideology than any other and should not fear losing a war of words to Communists. The Communist ideology is, therefore, not too dangerous if presented for what it is: a totalitarian means of rationalization and justification of one-party rule, buttressed by force and cunning in the pursuit of its goals.

**Economic Competition**

Of greater importance and interest in this contest between Communism and capitalism is the question of economic development and competition. In this contest the United States and other western countries have a considerable advantage over the Soviet Union and its satellites: they are more advanced technologically and possess greater industrial potential as well as productive capacity. As such, they are able to exercise a considerable attraction for the Communist countries, and in all likelihood will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Not only are the Soviet European satellites entertaining a growing interest in the West (Brzezinski, 1968), especially the Common Market countries, but the Soviet Union, itself, also is often compelled to turn to the Western countries for things unavailable in the Communist bloc.

Of no minor importance in the context of national and international politics are the dynamic forces of nationalism. The strong feeling of group and national identity as well as the collective pride in historical triumphs and accomplishments will continue to provide political dynamics for international relations in times to come.

Moral and material support of selected nationalist movements by the United States can further help to reduce the Communist threat and improve Soviet-American relations. Gradual and peaceful transition from a totalitarian to a non-totalitarian system of government in countries under the Soviet influence will perhaps be more weighty and decisive in East-West relations than any formal diplomatic proposal for cooperation or coexistence between the two large powers.

Despite the numerous favorable indications, there are real problems along the path of peaceful change for the United States. The world is full of economic, ideological, and nationalist rivalries and many actual and potential trouble spots. Moreover, many of the nation-states are simply neither strong enough nor economically viable to be able to provide for their own national defense and prosperity. This fact suggests a rather strong need for mutual cooperation between the states in their common endeavors. The United States can play a leading role in helping this development.

**Other Pressures on U.S.**

The possibility of peaceful reform offers America a serious challenge in which it can play a dominant role in this general enterprise of promoting peace, freedom, and well-being. At the same time, however, the United States will continue to face serious difficulties in foreign affairs: Communist expansion and wars of "national liberation," tribal and sectional conflicts, and nationalist struggles will continue to tax American resources and imagination. And no single, universal, or all-purpose panacea can provide answers to these diverse and complex problems. The only certain course for the United States to follow is to be resolute, firm, reasonable, and imaginative. Imperialist designs, conquests, or piecemeal penetration and expansion must be met collectively as well as contained. Communist expansion and probing must be frustrated and proven futile if the Communists are to be discouraged in their designs. A successful American foreign policy should enable the threatened countries, with some American support, to do most of their defense work by themselves.

The role of American leadership is great and challenging but not at all an impossible task. The modern political trends and conditions show some promising indications. When one considers politics as a line of continuum, with a free government system on the one side and a totalitarian one on the other, it is evident that essentially there are but these two political systems with some shades between them. Clearly, it is a political anomaly to expect about half of humanity to live under one or another totalitarian system.

Given a chance, the only way the mass of humanity can move is toward a more liberal and democratic order. Dynamic forces to achieve this are already under way,

*The Minnesota Academy of Science*
and these forces are bound to affect not only the countries involved but also the major powers. Moreover, the movement will create a greater interdependence among states as well as a greater need for international cooperation either through bilateral or multilateral arrangements.

Within this continuity and change, the question of the future of American-Soviet relations may vary considerably, but under a wise policy, need not be too gloomy. A competitive rather than peaceful coexistence will probably continue with a tough, though somewhat modified, Russian partner. With time and successive changes in leadership, the Soviet Union will be moving further and further away from its fanatical and totalitarian founders.

Before such a change can come to full fruition, however, the United States must be able to weather the storm and steer its course through more dangerous and challenging times in a period of transition and upheaval.

References


Toynbee, A. 1964. Speech delivered at Indiana University.

Learned Societies Around the World

Eastern and Central Europe

Scientific academies similar to those in the Western world existed in all Eastern and central European countries before the war. A far-reaching reorganization of these academies took place about 13 years ago. The statutes of the new academies were patterned upon those of the USSR Academy of Sciences. The academies were given the status of the “supreme scientific authority” in the countries concerned. They were made responsible for controlling and coordinating all scientific research in accordance with the requirements of the annual economic plans. These new functions resulted in a considerable increase in the number of institutions and in the personnel employed.