

Discussion

Goodbye to Detente? Sam Russell

In this article, I want to look at Soviet foreign policy in the context of the discussion in John Cox's article in the September issue of *Marxism Today*. New perspectives in the struggle for peace and international disarmament and detente have been opened up by the decisions of the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union based on the report by its General Secretary, President Leonid Brezhnev. As he pointed out, action to lessen the danger of war and curb the arms race is even more urgent today because of the rapid changes that are taking place in the development of military technology, including new weapons of mass destruction.

'These are weapons of a type that may make control over them, and therefore their agreed limitation, extremely difficult if not impossible', Leonid Brezhnev said. 'A new round of the arms race will upset international stability and greatly increase the danger of another war'.

On the limitation and reduction of strategic arms, he said the Soviet Union 'is prepared to continue the relevant negotiations that have so far been achieved in this area,' while he also put forward the suggestion that 'a moratorium should be set on the deployment in Europe of new medium range nuclear missile weapons of the NATO countries and the Soviet Union, that is to freeze the existing quantitative and qualitative level of these weapons, including the US forward based nuclear weapons in this region'. To this he added the proposal for the extension of the existing zone of confidence-building measures 'to the entire European part of the USSR, providing the Western states too extend the confidence zone accordingly'. Mr Brezhnev also said that it was 'dangerous madness' for the US and the Soviet Union 'to try and outstrip each other in the arms race or to expect to win a nuclear war.' And he called for 'an active dialogue' between the two countries, including 'meetings at summit level' and a special session of the UN Security Council 'with the participation of the top leaders of its member states in order to look for keys to improving

the international situation and preventing war.'

In his closing speech to Congress, Mr Brezhnev said that the main aim of Soviet foreign policy was the safeguarding of peace, adding: 'Our foreign policy programme is a programme of continuing and deepening detente, a programme of stopping the arms race.' However, there appears to be a growing gap in this foreign policy programme between the potential arising from the socialist character of Soviet society and the implementation of the programme in decisions which could really halt the arms race, particularly in the nuclear field.

As can be seen from the record since 1964, when the present top leadership came to power, Soviet foreign policy has many achievements to its credit, among them the *de jure* recognition by the West of the states and frontiers of Eastern and Central Europe, the beginning of an understanding with the US on limiting the nuclear arms race, effective help to Vietnam (against US and then Chinese aggression), Cuba and Angola long term cooperative relations with India and large scale economic exchange between socialist and capitalist Europe. At the same time, on the evidence of the last five years or so, the gap between what the interests of the Soviet Union require and the position taken by its leaders has tended in certain important respects to grow wider. We are not in the zone of almost fatal miscalculation, epitomised by the SovietGerman pact of 1939, but the consequences of this widening gap are already fairly serious.

Irrespective of whether one is critical or not of Soviet foreign policy, it is fairly evident that during these five years or so the situation, looked at from the point of view of the interests of the Soviet Union, has changed for the worse. The most obvious sign of this is that the element of conflict in Soviet relations with all four of the other main centres of power, the US, Western Europe, Japan and China, has increased. There has also taken place a certain erosion of Soviet authority and prestige in the hearts and minds of thinking people everywhere in the capitalist world and

to a lesser extent in the Third World too. While the underlying long term social and political tendencies within the capitalist and former colonial worlds are predominantly favourable to the interests of the Soviet Union and to socialism generally, it would seem that those responsible for top level Soviet foreign policy decisions have to an increasing extent in recent years misjudged the global dynamics of international relations, failed to see the consequences of their own actions and, in certain cases, have lost ground which appeared already to have been gained.

The role of the armed forces

The feature of contemporary Soviet foreign policy which, contrary to the intentions and expectations of its authors, does most damage to the interests of the Soviet Union is an undialectical one sided conception of the role in world politics of the country's armed forces, an inability to establish in this field the right proportions and priorities in order to obtain the desired result, namely the security and well being of Soviet society and world peace. The leadership is sincere in saying, as it frequently does, that it desires a progressive limitation of the nuclear arms race, a lowering of the level of armed forces and weapons in Central Europe, the development of constructive peaceful co-existence in the Western Pacific. But for several years it has by its own policy in practice made the attainment of such aims more difficult.

What appears to have happened in the last five or six years is that at certain crucial turning points in policy making, the views of the military authorities with their professional interest in maximalising the country's armed strength, have prevailed over the views of those who are called upon to assess the overall influence of Soviet military policy on the country's international interests.

Nuclear arms race

The most critical, but by no means the only problem to which this applies is the problem of the nuclear arms race. Nobody in their senses would question the necessity of maintaining the means of inflicting unacceptable damage on the US, China or any other state responsible for launching a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union or its allies. But the nuclear arms race has developed in such a way that not only the US, but also the Soviet Union now maintains and renews a gigantic surplus of nuclear striking power, which could not in any circumstances be essential for the purpose named. Moreover, the Soviet Union, as if it were hypnotised by the size and variety of US

nuclear forces, is continually adding to its own overkill capacity, not only with no advantage to itself, but with seriously harmful consequences.

The latest instance of this is the introduction, now well advanced, of a new generation of nuclear rockets targeted on Western Europe and its adjacent seas and territories. The Soviet leadership evidently believed that the introduction of the SS-20 rockets would not compel West Germany, Britain and some other states of Western Europe to accept upon their territories a new generation of US weapons of roughly comparable capacity, but in fact it has. The net result is, or shortly will be unless there is a change in Soviet policy, a rise in the level of nuclear confrontation in Europe with no compensating advantage to the Soviet Union, indeed quite the reverse. The whole operation would only have made sense if the Soviet Union had no other certain means of inflicting unacceptable damage on a US or European nuclear aggressor, which is far from being the case. As it is, there seems to be an absence of a valid conception of what forces are sufficient for this purpose and also of the ability correctly to foresee the reaction of West European governments.

The position of the Carter and now of the Reagan government and their monopoly capital masters is easy to understand. The reproduction of capital in the US has for decades depended to a considerable extent on large state expenditures on arms, which can within rather wide limits be increased without serious damage to the civilian economy.

This is not, however, the case with the Soviet Union. In terms of the stability of their capitalist society it costs the Americans far less than it costs the Soviet Union to maintain a high military share of GDP. Thus, apart from the direct financial interests of the US military-industrial complex, the US ruling class has a long term political interest in forcing the Soviet Union, if it can, into a spiral of rising military expenditure, capable of hampering the development of its socialist economy and that of its East European allies. In this connection it has to be understood that the interests of the Soviet Union and the US are not symmetrical. The real level of Soviet sufficiency in arms, even counting the China factor, that is the need to maintain forces along the frontier with China, is lower than that of the US. Small as they are, even the British or French strategic nuclear forces are 'sufficient' in the sense that they are an assured means of inflicting damage on an aggressor on a scale unacceptable to any sane person.

Restraining centrifugal tendencies

Furthermore, from Washington's point of

view, the drift during the last two or three years towards a rise in the level of confrontation of Euro-strategic weapons has had the advantage that it has increased the dependence of the West European powers on the US and to some extent slowed down the long term centrifugal tendencies within the US-Western relationship as a whole and within NATO in particular. Washington's policy of stationing new nuclear systems in Europe is directed against the USSR, but it also is intended to strengthen, and has already strengthened the position of the US in relation to its allies. As shown by the 20 years experience of Gaullist tendencies in the policy of the West European powers, such a turn of events is not to the advantage of the Soviet Union, far from it. The objective and very solid basis for the specific, and for the Soviet Union very favourable character of the 'Eastern' policies of France, West Germany, Italy and other capitalist states of Western Europe has not, of course, been destroyed, but the installation of the SS-20s by the Soviet Union has hampered, to put it mildly, the constructive development of those policies.

A failure to establish the correct military priorities required to ensure the security of the Soviet Union is also to be observed in Soviet policy around the problem of lowering the level of conventional weapons and forces confronting each other in Europe. The Soviet Union has a sizeable advantage over the Western powers in this field and, by agreeing to a disproportionately large reduction of its own forces, could have both preserved a sufficient deterrent force against Western aggression and secured substantial political and economic gains for itself, as well as gaining support among public opinion in general in the West by agreeing to such reductions. Instead, during eight years of fruitless negotiations in Vienna, the Soviet side has given the impression that it attaches a very low priority to a mutual reduction of conventional forces and weapons.

Other areas

To some extent, this Soviet attitude seems to be determined by the same inability as in the nuclear field to establish a valid concept of what military forces are sufficient or insufficient for the purpose of maintaining a lower and stable East-West conventional balance in Europe. But in this case, a more rational approach is complicated, if not precluded by another factor, namely by the belief that large conventional Soviet military forces are required in or near Eastern Europe for the purpose of preventing by force, as in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the growth of what is regarded as anti-socialist tendencies in the

other socialist states. Many Communist parties, including our own, have made it clear that they regarded and still regard the use of military force in Czechoslovakia, or against any other country seeking its own road to socialism, as damaging not only to the interests of their parties and the progressive forces generally, but as damaging to the Soviet Union itself.

Another area in which Soviet interests and the interests of the peace forces have been damaged by a failure to find a correct balance between political and military values, has been in the Far East and the Western Pacific. During the last 20 years it has become increasingly clear that Japan, while basing its foreign policy on its alliance with the US, was interested in stabilising its political relations with both the Soviet Union and China, not least as a means of opening the road to large scale trade and economic exchanges. It also became clear in the 1970s that China was moving towards a rapprochement with Japan, partly as a means of isolating the Soviet Union in accordance with the dictates of its anti-Soviet strategy. Parallel moves by the Soviet Union towards Japan and vice versa made considerable progress, but the achievement of a stable rapprochement, came to depend to a large extent on whether or not the Soviet Union was willing to return to Japan the southern Kurile islands, occupied since the end of World War II.

Faced with the attempts of the Chinese to build a common front with Japan and other imperialist powers against the Soviet Union and also against Vietnam, and bearing in mind the desirability on other grounds as well as that of a normalisation of Soviet-Japanese relations, political logic pointed clearly towards restitution of the islands as a small price to pay for a much larger gain. The islands may have a potential military value of some sort, but none comparable with the political value of reaching agreement with Japan. It should also be remembered that the Japanese Communist Party has consistently called for restitution of the islands, while strenuously opposing all plans to drag Japan in the wake of US imperialism.

While recognising the basic peace elements in Soviet foreign policy, a critical appraisal is necessary not only of Soviet actions in Afghanistan for example, but also in areas of Africa, such as Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, where it is difficult to see how military action can either ensure legitimate Soviet interests in the area, or secure a stabilisation of a highly unstable situation, or a settlement on a socialist basis of antagonisms between rival political groups and liberation movements.

But the key factor in the situation, the

central imperative of international relations today is the absolute necessity, above all in the Soviet Union's own interests, to secure a lowering of the level of military confrontation in the Euro-Atlantic region, of securing a turn round in the rapidly rocketing spiral of nuclear confrontation. This cannot be done unless there are changes not only in Western policy, but in Soviet policy also. The new perspectives for peace certainly exist, but greater flexibility and understanding of the dialectics of the situation is required if these perspectives are to be translated into reality.

Goodbye to Detente?

Ian Davison

My general argument in this response to the discussion on 'Goodbye to Detente?' will be (1) that popular feeling is the bedrock on which we build campaigns in practice, and (2) that popular perceptions can be nearer the core truth than the analyses of the intellectual leaders of the disarmament movement. This general approach is regarded with suspicion by Marxists, as being unprincipled. The very word 'opportunist' is regarded as a term of abuse. Likewise the description 'populist'. But the key Marxist function for theory is to *effect* successful practice, *learning* in turn from practice.

Arms control

The question of 'arms control' or 'arms limitation', as opposed to real disarmament, is one case in point. Like the distinction between unilateralism and multilateralism, the distinction between 'arms control' and disarmament poses dangers to us. We can certainly argue that little progress has been made in multilateral disarmament negotiations, and the evidence is clearly there. But we cannot argue that 'arms control' has made no contribution to peace (and 'detente'). To reject arms control is to allow a wedge to be driven between us and the 'moderate' but universal aspirations for 'peace' in a vague sense. The desire for 'peace', in this rather unformed, millennial sense, is not the property merely of apologists for all Soviet foreign policy. It is a commonsense feeling, and we must build on it.

The fact that the establishment and the militarists have to claim to want 'peace' is not merely an acknowledgement of the strength

of the socialist bloc and of the power of nuclear weapons. It is also a recognition of the *popular* demand for peace. And we can exploit this concession, by concentrating on the contradictions of not following the logic of arms control, through 'arms limitation', and into real measures of disarmament. This in turn leads to revelations of the hypocrisy of those who will not proceed to unilateralist assumptions *where necessary*.

It can certainly be shown that much of the *actual* arms limitation which has gone on has been a charade, out of democratic control, and not matching meaningful popular aspirations. But we cannot argue that genuine arms control demands would not be worth implementing, given the limitless present horizons of the continuing arms race. Where popular feeling is centred on 'arms control', we should be stressing the *levels* of armament: the future destructiveness and present waste. We should stress the arbitrary nature of 'levels' of armament; the need for very low levels of military 'balance' or imbalance.

In short, we could *use* arms control better in the peace movement, sounding positive, raising existing popular demands towards real disarmament, and bringing out the contradictions in the claim that 'peace is our profession' in the military-industrial complex. It was not the arms control manoeuvring of the late 1960s and early 1970s which lulled the public's anxiety. It was the *whole* climate of co-existence and detente (and the peace movement's successes in the early 1960s).

How 'bad' is the Soviet Union?

This question is a difficult one. It is even harder if it is formulated (so often) as a comparison between two (or more) countries, in terms of arms expenditure or overall military strengths or 'aggressive stances'. It is not a question with which people in general concern themselves in detail. Most people are either very prejudiced against the Soviet Union, or they trust it no more than the US, or any other foreign state. They also know, or see easily, that a direct invasion of Britain by the Soviet Union is not a likely event. They have in the past accepted the slightly more sophisticated idea of forward defence, against both military pressure and political protection rackets, in the NATO alliance.

For what it's worth, I'm not convinced by Paul Nicholls' (April issue) apparent failure to understand Dan Smith's (in February issue) point about the Soviet Union responding unfortunately 'in kind' with weapons systems. The point is that to condemn neutron bombs, then say you will deploy them if the other side does, cannot make much sense. And the answer to tanks is

not necessarily your own tanks, but perhaps anti-tank missiles. NATO has understood this well, and turned it to good advantage in propaganda about tank and personnel imbalances. The Soviet Union is failing by comparison to capitalise on NATO tactical nuclear superiority (1) by starting to deploy fair numbers of tacticals itself, and (2) allowing NATO to invent the new 'theatre nuclear weapons' category, to fit SS-20s etc, where NATO is typically weaker. But is all this important for our popular campaigns?

I reiterate: the niceties of the 'balance' are not the chief concern of our people. Nor are the motivation and intentions of the Soviet leaders. If this were so, Afghanistan (as presented in the Western press especially) would have nipped the peace movement resurgence in the bud. What exercises people's fears just now is the increasing realisation that we need to be saved from our 'friends' as well as our 'enemies'. The US of Ronald Reagan is a frightening place, even to many of those people who thought Britain would be none the worse for a short, sharp radical Tory shock. The opportunity is clearly there for us to switch the debate, from estimates of how 'bad' the Soviet Union is, to an assessment of how bad the US is, has been, and could become. People don't want to 'die for Reagan'. The 'theatre nuclear war' concept has rebounded, as the people of Britain realise *they* are expendable, just like the West Germans, in the eyes of the US.

Our task is to build on the *type* of concern which has already developed, to spell out the reactionary record of the US, NATO, and our own professional armed forces: their lack of consistent concern for the quality of life lived by the ordinary people in any country, their lack of respect for human life itself. 'Protection' is a racket, not a social service.

People sense the full crisis

From a campaigning point of view, I don't think John Cox's (September issue) failure to stress the recent 'developments in military technology and strategy' is crucial. It is true that the Cruise missile for Britain acted as a vital geographical *focus* for a lot of new campaigning. But it was not the *cause* of the general resurgence, which has taken place also in areas remote from the Cruise missile sites and among people who barely know of this weapon system. In fact, it could be argued that the first awareness of the *neutron bomb* several years before was a deeper rooted growth and typically, the British peace movement was slow to act on this, because (1) the Soviet Union wanted us to act fast, (2) it was seen as 'just another example of a destabilising *tactical* nuclear weapon', and (3) we failed to respect the *popular* objection to the

neutron bomb: that it kills people, but leaves property intact (another stimulus which has been effective is the news of nuclear false alerts).

But more influential than any weapons system, has been the revival of *civil defence* thinking, talking and preparations. This actually started again under a Labour government, but was accelerated by a right wing Tory lobby, along with other forms of Thatcherism. People sense only too easily the contradictions of civil defence: especially in a crowded, small island, packed with military installations, hosts to American forces, crucial to American nuclear and other plans, integrated fully into NATO command, and led by a belligerently anti-Soviet government. The wheel is coming full circle, and the 'deterrent' seems no longer a deterrent, not so much because people are studying new weapons and strategies, but simply because you don't need 'civil defence' if the deterrent is supposed to work.

I would go further, and suggest that there is a deep, vague, commonsense awareness of the Marxist insight that war is at least partly, and sometimes principally, the result of political — economic rivalries, internal or external or both. People see the worsening of international relations before their eyes, they see the deepening economic recession, and they sense a connection. They recognise, however inarticulately, the vicious circle of militarism — economic weakness — poverty — unrest — militarism and repression. They know that money spent on frightening Russians can't be used to protect social services or create new jobs. People can see that the pretentiousness of your defences ought to be tempered by proportion to your economic health, and to the fragility of the liberties and quality of life you are supposed to be defending.

This is not to deny that there is a danger to us from the very impetus of the arms race, from the arms lobby, and fear itself; nor to discount the added risk of particular strategies or weapons developments; nor again to undervalue the effect of knowledgeable and articulate second level argument about the arms race and disarmament. But for mass campaigning, as distinct from lobbying of a more rarified kind, we need to build on the awareness that is already there, based on moral emotions and commonsense.

So, SALT 2 should have been signed by the Americans, we won't die for Reagan, we don't want civil defence, and we want jobs not bombs — for a start. But that *means* also that we don't want Cruise, Trident, Polaris or NATO. The logic is inescapable, but initial assumptions have to be reinforced and clarified, then developed. •