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By Edward Rowny
Negotiating With the Soviet Union: The Diplomatic Dimension?

By Ambassador Edward Rowny

Longtime students of the Soviet Union find that certain developments there, taken at face value, are quite remarkable -- to mention only a few:

US. Air Force C-5A cargo planes land at a Soviet nuclear test site to deliver equipment used in a joint verification experiment; US representatives walk and ski around the perimeter of a Soviet missile assembly plant in Siberia preparatory to the installation of a portal monitoring facility for U.S. personnel (required to implement the INF Treaty); Soviet representatives visit a similar US facility in Magna, Utah; Soviet leaders sign an agreement in Geneva to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan and implement it; the terms glasnost' and perestroika no longer require translation or explanation in the Western press; ideological differences between so-called "conservatives" and "reformers" in the Politburo are played out on the pages of Soviet newspapers; Ligachev's future is discussed in Western journals: is he in or out? Mass ethnic unrest occurs in the Baltic Republics and Central Asia, as well as demonstrations and riots in Armenia, and pogroms in Azerbaijan.

There is a sense in the West that while the tiger, perhaps, is not changing his stripes, he is at least donning a new fur coat. Given the current state of affairs, is the Soviet Union, as Churchill said, "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma"? Are fundamental changes with unknown consequences occurring in the Soviet Union? The answer is that, while there is still much secrecy in the Soviet Union, there should be no mystery in the West over Soviet longer-term goals, motivations, strategy and tactics. If we are surprised by Soviet actions, it is because we have chosen unwisely to ignore the heritage of the past.
Several 19th century works indicated certain constants in the governance of Russia -- Tsarist or Soviet. Thus, Peter Chaadayev, a Russian intellectual, wrote "talking about Russia one always imagines that one is talking about a country like the others; in reality, this is not so at all. Russia is a whole separate world, submissive to the will, caprice, fantasy of a single man, whether his name be Peter or Ivan, no matter -- in all instances the common element is the embodiment of arbitrariness.... [a consequence is] her own enslavement and the enslavement of all the neighboring peoples...."

"We are one of those nations....which exists only to provide some great lesson for the world." As a result of the publication of his ideas in the 1830's, Chaadayev was declared insane and put under arrest. He was not permitted to publish and his papers were confiscated. Considering the modern Soviet use of psychiatric "hospitalization" as an instrument of political control, indeed the past is prologue.

A Frenchman, the Marquis de Custine, in his book Journey for Our Times, wrote: "I don't blame the Russians for being what they are, I blame them for pretending to be what we in the West are."

The threads of history are evident in contemporary publications by authors who experienced the Soviet system from within, including Roy Medvedev, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Arkady Shevchenko. Even a more recent Soviet author with a best-selling work (in the West) -- Mikhail Gorbachev, in his Perestroika, with all his concern for public relations, could not conceal occasional glimpses of longer-term Soviet goals.

A paradoxical pattern of Russian national and cultural characteristics emerges from a study of such writings: conservative, yet revolutionary; anti-intellectual, but ideologically driven; insecure, yet aggressive and expansionist. It is a nation with rulers who claim to derive their power from the masses, yet they have established a central authority as strong and ruthless as any found under the Tsars. It is a nation that historically has bought, imported (and occasionally stolen) technology, whole industries, military equipment,
administrators, even certain aspects of religion and the arts, yet which boasts about its indigenous accomplishments.

For seven years I was on the SALT II delegation as the representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Subsequently, I served two years as President Reagan's chief START negotiator. For the following four years, I served as Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State for Arms Control Matters. I have found that, if you take the time to study Russia's past, and do not ignore the evidence, it is possible to understand Soviet behavior and even to predict what Soviet leaders may do next. While there will always be secrets, there need be no mystery.

I have found that, predictably, there is a great difference between what Soviet leaders say in public and what they permit to happen at the negotiating table. For public consumption, they profess that they are flexible. They have a special talent for recycling their more shopworn offers and reintroducing them as if they constituted new and substantive concessions. The theory is that they will compromise because they say they will. In practice, however, we can only reach a deal with the USSR when we have something significant to give up. Protected by the confidentiality of the conference room, Soviet negotiators adhere to their positions with the stubbornness of an army mule. At the table, they are anything but flexible.

The reason for this tendency is clear. Guided by the Hegelian Dialectic and a Clausewitzian and Leninist penchant for tactics, Soviet leaders discern "contradictions" within the "camp of the adversary" and try to exploit them. Where the Soviet leaders see divergence in American or allied public sentiment on arms control issues, they jump at the possibility of exploiting it to their benefit. If the U.S. Congress can cause the Administration to concede key aspects of its negotiating position, then why should they (the Soviet leaders reason), expend any of their own precious negotiating capital to achieve their ends? The USSR does not deal in "bargaining chips." It does not make concessions in the spirit of "give-and-take" or as a "sign of good will." Rather, it considers unilateral
concessions to be the mark of weakness, and weakness is not to be respected. Soviet leaders do, however, understand the need to appeal to Western notions of "good will" and "reciprocity" through our press, radio, and TV. They know that, through our media, they can strike in us a responsive chord.

In the same vein, Soviet negotiators readily accept whatever concessions we offer, but see no cause to feel that they are obliged to reciprocate. Our unilateral concessions do not make Soviet representatives any more tractable. They assume that we had to make these concessions and, if anything, they dig their heels in deeper, insisting that we take their views "into account" on other issues. The Soviet negotiating strategy is, to put it simply, one of persistence (or obstinance). "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is negotiable" is more than a saying for Soviet representatives; it describes their negotiating style. Moreover, they truly believe -- as George Orwell wrote -- that to be equal they must be "more equal."

The USSR simply does not approach negotiations as an exercise in "problem-solving." Those of us who have negotiated with the USSR do not expect it to take this approach. We have come to understand that, whereas we would like to "work out solutions," the Soviet side believes that it must compete in order to "win." Americans without the benefit of direct negotiating with the USSR tend to believe that the sheer weight of logic will lead both us and the other side toward mutually beneficial agreements. This tendency is understandable; it is part of our heritage. However, it only complicates the formidable tasks confronting the American negotiator. Soviet negotiators study our democratic system; they come to know its strengths and weaknesses and how to exploit them. Because they recognize the strength of commitment we have to our ideals, they know too well that our pluralistic society is susceptible to influence -- and sometimes outright manipulation -- to the advantage of the USSR.

After seven years of hard negotiations we have signed an INF Treaty. I support it, because it is verifiable and in our security interest. Nonetheless, under Gorbachev's
leadership, the ups and downs of the INF negotiations contained classic examples of Soviet negotiating behavior. Even in "the end game" Soviet representatives would walk away from publicly announced positions, flip flop on issues, and stall to press for US concessions. In other words, it was business as usual.

Since Soviet negotiating goals and tactics are elusive, but can be deduced from long practice, how should the United States respond? Based on my study of "the other side" and my personal experience in negotiating with Soviet representatives, I have developed what I call my "Ten Commandments for negotiating with the Soviet Union":

1. Above all, remember the objective. The Soviet leaders have better defined, more clear-cut, longer-range strategic objectives than we do. They tend to think in terms of longer periods -- many years, if not decades; their tactics are to divert the other side from its primary goal and we are easily distracted and tend to lose sight of our main objective. These differences, which usually work to our disadvantage in negotiations, can be minimized if we refuse to be diverted and keep our main goal steadfastly in sight.

2. Be patient. Moscow places arms control in a wider context than we do. Soviet representatives are prepared to wait for shifts in (what they call) the "correlation of forces" that serve their political ends. Americans are not patient. The Russians play chess; we play video games. If the other side does not agree swiftly to a US proposal, we assume that it must be faulty and that we must come up with a new offer.

3. Keep secrets that concern negotiations. By tradition, history, and type of government, Soviet society is closed and secretive. The United States is an open society. In negotiations, the Russians play their cards close to the chest; we mostly place ours face up on the table. Most relevant data concerning our moves can be found in the public domain; it is infinitely more difficult for us to discover equivalent facts on the other side.
4. Bear in mind the differences in the two political systems. It is obvious—but the obvious is often overlooked—that American and Soviet political structures are fundamentally asymmetrical. In matters of foreign policy and negotiations, these differences are critical. The Russians have a centralized authority, with nothing comparable to our press, our independent legislature or our ratification process.

5. Beware of "[Russians] bearing gifts." Soviet representatives grudgingly acknowledge the necessity of making trades, but view compromise as a weakness. They may make cosmetic offers to extract substantive concessions.

6. Remember that to the Soviet side form is substance. It believes that the size of the negotiating table and having a greater number of representatives present are matters of importance. Setting the agenda may preclude an outcome desired by the other side. It is an error to dismiss issues viewed as "merely procedural."

7. The concept that Soviet leaders have "paranoid fear of being invaded" is a Western myth. It is true that, from an early age, Soviet children are habituated to fear being invaded and are imbued with the country's need for large military forces, making military production a national priority. However, the Russian state did not become a superpower with a vast empire from the Elbe to the Pacific by fighting only defensive actions.

8. Beware of negotiating at the 11th hour. Soviet diplomats are masters of 11th hour negotiations. They wait until the very end, hoping to put pressure on the other side to make concessions simply to complete an agreement, since, to an open society, lack of agreement spells "failure."

9. Pay great attention to semantics, since Soviet representatives try to habituate the other side to employing Soviet terminology. Years of dialogue
with Soviet negotiators have taught me that, like Humpty Dumpty, words mean what the Russians want them to mean. They are masters of semantic infiltration.

10. Don't misinterpret the human element. While Soviet negotiators can be pleasant and appear conciliatory, in the end they are always tough bargainers and quite unsentimental. An apparent meeting of minds one day is often repudiated by the next. Warm words outside the negotiation chamber are unrelated to actions inside.

With the arrival of Gorbachev my "10th commandment" -- don't misinterpret the human element -- has become even more important. Gromyko himself best described the USSR's leader: He has a nice smile but iron teeth. At the negotiating table we see the teeth -- on television the world sees the smile. He is a very smooth operator who has surrounded himself with advisors who are experts on the United States, on public relations and the media. Consequently, he and his entourage have become much more adept at using the media to sell their image abroad. However, remember that, from their perspective, glasnost' is a tool, not a matter of human rights. Gorbachev's foremost concern has to be his economic and social problems. However, he will not solve them, if, indeed, they are given to solution, at the expense of the one factor that secures the position of the party elite as creators of the Soviet Union's status as a superpower: nuclear and conventional military might. Gorbachev is to be respected, but not necessarily trusted.

Unless one has negotiated with the Soviets as I have for 15 years, it would stretch one's credulity to reconcile the vigorous Soviet strategic defense program with Soviet rhetoric on SDI. The Soviets have charged that SDI is a US attempt to gain strategic superiority, to generate a new round in "the arms race," to "militarize space" and to undermine the basis for offensive arms reductions. However, in Geneva, the Soviets have shown themselves so far unwilling to engage in constructive discussion of key issues. No
state is so strong a proponent of strategic defense in practice as the Soviet Union, yet none is more strongly opposed to SDI in public.

Years ago when I was a negotiator in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, my Soviet counterpart told me: "We Soviets are neither pacifists nor philanthropists." It is through recognizing the truth and candor in this Soviet observation and responding with strength and patience that we have made progress in arms control. During the negotiations on intermediate-range nuclear forces, the Soviets repeatedly attempted to get us to make concessions that were contrary to our security interests. Many times they put forward "non-negotiable" demands in attempts to keep unfair advantages. But our patience won out and produced an accord that enhances our security through the elimination of a whole class of nuclear missiles.

In conclusion, let me say that if we learn from the Soviet past, we should not be surprised in the future. Our systems, culture, history, national experiences and goals are very different. Tension and competition between us are the norm -- not the exception. Where there is secrecy in the Soviet Union we have often found that the Soviet leaders have something to hide. Our responses should be based on Soviet actions, not their words. Our approach to the USSR should continue to look first to our security interests as we attempt to make progress in all four areas of our complex relationship: arms control, human rights, bilateral issues and regional issues. By following such a realistic and measured course, our security will continue to be well served.