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RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION

A Brief for the Debate on
Relations with the Soviet Union

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The Prime Minister visited Moscow on 13th and 14th February 1984 to attend the funeral of President Andropov and had talks with the new Soviet leader Mr Constantine Chernenko. At the beginning of the month she paid an official visit to Hungary. These talks were the latest steps in moves by the Government to lay the foundations for an improvement in relations between East and West. In a statement in Moscow on 14th February, the Prime Minister explained the background to the current contacts:

'It was plain to me and the Foreign Secretary last summer that the time had come for a serious review of relations with the East. The build-up of arms - the increasing number of SS20s and the West's need to respond with Cruise and Pershing had created disquiet. The various arms control negotiations were getting nowhere and contacts between East and West were so limited that the risk of misunderstanding was grave'.

Mrs Thatcher emphasised that the Government's policy does not in any way mean a weakening in its commitment to the defence of the Western way of life. She said that:

'I believe as strongly as ever in basic Western freedoms - and I make it plain to all in the East privately and publicly that I will defend them anywhere any time. But we must avoid the terrible dangers that could flow from misunderstandings'.

The Soviet Record. 1983 was a particularly bad year for East-West relations. The Russians did not negotiate seriously in the various disarmament negotiations and in November unjustifiably walked out of the Geneva talks on Intermediate Nuclear Forces. They maintained their oppression in Afghanistan, where over 100,000 Soviet troops still fight to prop up the puppet Karmal regime in the face of fierce popular resistance. They continued to ensure that all vestiges of freedom in Poland were crushed. The international situation became particularly strained in the days following 31st August, when the Soviet Air Force shot down a civilian South Korean airliner, which had strayed into Soviet airspace killing all 269 passengers and crew.

The Madrid Agreement. A modest step towards better East-West relations came on 9th September 1983, with the formal signing by 35 foreign ministers of a document concluding the Madrid review meeting on the implementation of the Helsinki Agreement. The participants undertook once more to implement its provisions, which have all too often been flouted by the Soviet Union and its allies, particularly in the field of human rights and contacts. As the Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, commented in his speech at Madrid on 7th September:

'Liberty does not consist in mere general declarations of the rights of men. It consists in the translation of these declarations into definite actions'.

Examples of Soviet Violations of Human Rights. Mr Malcom Rifkind, Minister of State at the Foreign Office, gave details of Soviet violations of the human rights provisions of the Helsinki agreement in a written answer on 30th January 1984:

'Human rights activists continue to be persecuted and the resentencing of political prisoners who are nearing the end of their term of imprisonment has become a common practice. A new law, which came into force in October 1983, permits inmates of penal institutions to be punished for periods of up to 5 years' additional confinement for "maliciously disobeying" the administrations of such institutions.

'Among those sentenced during the period under review were Sergei Grigoryants, sentenced (in October) to two years in prison, five in a strict regime camp and three in internal exile for his part in producing an official bulletin

detailing repression; the Lithuanian priest Father S Tamkevicius, sentenced (in December) to six years in the camps and four in internal exile and Mikhail Rivkin, a member of a group of official Marxists sentenced (in July) to seven years' imprisonment plus five years' internal exile. Academician Andrei Sakharov continued to be attacked in the press and his sanity has been called into question by Soviet officials. Anatoly Shcharansky has finally been allowed a visit from his mother although communication with him by mail remains uncertain. Yuri Orlov continues to be harshly treated in the labour camp at Perm. The refusnik Iosif Begun was finally brought to trial in October and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment and five years' internal exile...The Soviet performance in the field of human contacts continues to deteriorate, Jewish, ethnic German and Armenian emigration continues to decline. the final figure for Jewish emigration in 1983 is likely to be less than half of the 1982 figure, which was 2,700. An anti-Zionist committee with local branches was created among other things to discourage would-be emigrants who have reported increasing administrative difficulties and harrassment including dismissal from work, difficulties for children at school and over university admission and premature call-up for military service...' (Hansard, Col. 90-91).

The Stockholm Conference. Various further meetings were arranged for the next few years at the end of the Madrid Conference. The most important of these opened at Stockholm on 16th January 1984. This is now considering military confidence and security building measures, such as observation and inspection of military activities, prior notification of manoeuvres and steps designed to reduce the risk of surprise attack. Although the Conference is concentrating on such specific and detailed questions, its opening provided an opportunity for fresh attempts to improve East-West relations on a wider front. This was particularly important in view of the recent suspension of both the Strategic Arms talks (START) and the Intermediate Nuclear Force talks (INF) at Geneva as well as the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction talks (MBFR) at Vienna.

In his speech at the conference on 20th January 1984, Sir Geoffrey Howe said that:

'We meet against a background of events which are probably less favourable, less positive than at any time since the CSCE process began. There has been no significant progress in negotiated arms control for the last five years. We must try to draw the right conclusions from this. One is that arms control negotiations alone cannot and should not have to bear the full weight of East-West relations. The dialogue between East and West must be widened and given more substance. We all exist in one world. We have to live together for good or ill and, to achieve that, we need to know and understand each other better. The British Government, for its part, will do all it can to that end'.

At the same time, President Reagan made clear that the United States' 'commitment to dialogue is firm and unshakeable. But we insist that our negotiations deal with real problems, not atmospherics' (Washington, 16th January 1984).

The Deployment of Cruise Missiles. The Soviet Union alleges that a prime reason for the poor state of East-West relations is the first deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles in Western Europe in accordance with NATO policy, including the first 16 Cruise missiles at Greenham Common. It cannot be repeated too often that this deployment is a response to the massive Soviet deployment of SS20 missiles. 378 of these missiles, each with three warheads, of which two-thirds are aimed at Western Europe, have been deployed since 1977. It is vital that the Soviet Union soon returns to the various arms control talks and negotiates seriously on multilateral

and balanced disarmament. As the Prime Minister said in Budapest on 3rd February:

'This is no time for empty chairs in Geneva. This is the time to talk. The time to negotiate. The time to succeed'.

Present Situation on Arms Control Negotiations. The Soviet Union walked out of the negotiations on Intermediate Nuclear Forces in November and there appears to be no early prospect of a resumption. The Russians left the START negotiations on strategic weapons not long after, declining to set a date for their resumption and leaving it uncertain whether they intended to return to the negotiating table. They followed the same course of action with regard to the MBFR negotiations at Vienna. However, following discussions on the matter at the opening of the Stockholm Conference, it was agreed that the MBFR talks would resume on 16th March.

The only area where negotiations have been proceeding are the Geneva negotiations on Chemical Weapons. On 14th February Mr Richard Luce put forward new proposals in the vital area of verification of a ban on such weapons, whereby any country, which believed that the ban was being broken could challenge the suspect nation to allow a prompt inspection of the area, where the violation was alleged to be taking place. Although the Soviet delegate did not accept the British proposals as they stood, he was quoted as saying at a press conference that 'we are not far from the British' (Guardian, 22nd February 1984). He also announced that the Soviet Union was willing to accept in principle the permanent presence of inspectors at special establishments for destroying chemical stocks. As the Foreign Secretary has said:

'This is an area where it should be possible to make progress and we hope that the Soviet delegation will adopt a forthcoming approach on all aspects of the negotiations along the lines that we have already discussed' (Hansard, 22nd February 1984, Col. 809).

Political Will and Mutual Respect. Mrs Thatcher outlined in her Budapest speech on 3rd February how disarmament negotiations should be handled in general:

'We shall need political will as well as mutual respect. Political will - because arms control agreements do not make themselves. Mutual respect - for it is useless to suppose that East or West will agree to dismantle weapons unless at every stage we are left with a balance which preserves our security'.

'We must both be ready to adopt practicable measures. We must both be ready to have them verified. We must each recognise the other's need for security. If all accept this approach, there could be fewer nuclear weapons, fewer conventional weapons, and for a start perhaps chemical weapons could be abolished altogether, as Britain has already done'.

The Prime Minister has emphasised that it would be unrealistic to imagine that there will be a rapid breakthrough in East-West negotiations. As she said in Moscow on 14th February:

'It will be at best a long slow task...But I am absolutely sure that all Western leaders are prepared to work for this goal. I am not looking for instant and ephemeral success but steady and sustainable progress'.

The Contrast with Labour. The contrast between the Prime Minister's and Mr Kinnock's recent activities in international affairs could hardly be more marked. While the Prime Minister was engaged in realistic moves to improve East-West relations, the Labour leader was visiting Washington explaining to baffled listeners his support

for total, one-sided nuclear disarmament for Britain and the unconditional removal of all American nuclear bases. Such policies would be profoundly destabilising and would be liable gravely to disturb East-West relations. It should be recalled that last year, when asked whether he considered the Soviet Union a greater threat to world peace than the United States or Britain, Mr Kinnock replied: 'There is an almost miserable equality of threat' (The Times, 29th August 1983).

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