

SOVIET INFLUENCE LIMITED

Reviewed by
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THE LIMITS OF SOVIET POWER: THE KREMLIN'S FOREIGN POLICY — BREZHNEV TO CHER— NENKO by Jonathan Steele. Penguin, 1984. Paperback, 289 pages, \$8.95.

Is the Soviet Union as much to blame as the United States for the nuclear arms race? Why are Soviet troops still fighting the war in Afghanistan with no solution in sight? Is the Soviet Union a force for progress in the Third World? These, and other questions are subjected to a sober analysis in Jonathan Steele's *The Limits of Soviet Power*. It is a book free from the alarmism of the "Soviet threat" propagandists, but also of the apologetics of those who see Soviet foreign policy as based on the principles of "peace and socialism".

Steele's conclusion, which is in sharp contrast to the commonly accepted thesis of a global Soviet "expansionism", is that Soviet influence has *declined* over the past twenty years. Despite Soviet rhetoric to the effect that the "socialist world system" is becoming ever more powerful, Steele argues, the Soviet Union is, if anything, less influential as a political, ideological and economic model in the world today than in the early 1960s.

Brezhnev presided over a rapid build-up of military power, but this did not correspond to a growing global influence of Soviet-style socialism. The Soviet leaders suffered a number of serious foreign policy setbacks during Brezhnev's eighteen-year reign. In particular, the

breakdown of "detente" in the late '70s had very negative effects on the Soviet Union.

In the early '60s, the emergence of China as an independent power weakened Soviet strategic security as well as its credibility as the leading country of socialism. Though Sino-Soviet relations have improved since the early '80s, Steele agrees with most other writers on the subject that the Soviet Union will continue to plan for a "worst case" scenario in its dealing with China. The possibility of a two-front war will remain as a constant element of Soviet strategic planning.

Viet Nam, on the other hand — in the language of most Western observers — is a Soviet "gain". Steele shows, however, that the Vietnamese leadership, which has a long history of independence, today has far more autonomy vis-a-vis Moscow than the East European countries. From the Soviet point of view, there are political and military advantages in its close links with Viet Nam, but in economic terms, it is an enormously costly friendship.

Events in a number of countries in the '60s and '70s, discussed by Steele, show that the Soviet Union has had very limited success in its attempts to establish a lasting influence even in states which at one stage were close to Moscow. The military might of the Soviet Union has not been easily translated into political, economic or cultural and ideological influence. Though Soviet diplomatic and political support is acknowledged by many countries striving for independence from the West, and Moscow is a major

alternative supplier of arms, the Soviet form of socialism today has little attraction to Third World countries.

On the positive side, a number of countries of "socialist orientation" (Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, South Yemen, and others) emerged in the 1970s and have established close links with the Soviet Union. However, these nations are exceedingly poor, and have had little choice but to continue to depend on the capitalist world for most of their trade. The Soviet Union has not been able to provide large-scale economic assistance. Despite their highly publicised adherence to the "scientific socialism" of the Soviet variety, the countries of "socialist orientation" have not significantly contributed to an increase in Soviet prestige or influence in the developing countries generally. Soviet writers also acknowledge that most of their new Third World allies are in such deep crisis that their further advance towards socialism is by no means assured.

Cuba, Viet Nam and Mongolia belong to a different category. As full members of the CMEA (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), they are part of the "world socialist system". Contrary to the notion of "expansionism", it is important to note that the Soviet Union has not been keen to add to the membership of the CMEA. Most of the countries of "socialist orientation" have friendship treaties with Moscow, but have not been offered full membership of the CMEA. Angola and Mozambique, though considered by Soviet theoreticians as having advanced beyond "socialist orientation" towards the building of



"people's democracy" and socialism, have not even been guaranteed security against South African aggression and have had to enter into humiliating agreements with their enemy.

The rise of Islam has further complicated Soviet policy in the areas adjacent to its southern border. The revolution in Iran resulted in the emergence of an anti-communist regime. In the Middle East, the Soviet Union has been largely excluded from exerting any influence on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Soviet relations with Syria, Iraq and Libya, countries often portrayed in the Western media as closely aligned with Moscow, are strained and Soviet influence minimal. In the whole of this region, only South Yemen is a close ally of the Soviet Union.

Far from having pursued an expansionist and adventurous foreign policy, Steele argues that the Soviet leaders have generally been cautious and conservative. In cases such as Ethiopia and Angola,

where Soviet involvement has been portrayed by sections of the Western media as aggressive, the Soviet leaders had little to do with the original unfolding of events and only became involved following requests for assistance from internationally recognised regimes. The invasion of Afghanistan is an exception to this pattern but, in Steele's analysis, fits into the picture of a foreign policy based on the overriding objective of national security.

In Steele's view, there is no evidence for the existence of an expansionist dynamic to Soviet policy. Though striving for increased influence, this is something most major powers have in common, and Soviet initiatives are a priori no less legitimate than those of any other nation. There are examples of policies which seem to conform with the ideology of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but there are also innumerable cases of unprincipled dealings with repressive regimes (Uganda, Turkey, Libya, and so on).

Steele's book covers many other aspects of Soviet policy as well as those referred to here. It is a thorough survey of Soviet policies in all major parts of the world. It's a readable book, devoid of abstractions and academic language. The reader might object to its empirical, matter-of-fact approach to international politics, which tends to underestimate those features of the Soviet system which set Soviet politics apart from those of other big powers. In particular, the importance of marxist-leninist ideology hardly figures at all in Steele's analysis. Nevertheless, *The Limits of Soviet Power* complements Fred Halliday's more analytical *The Coming of the Second Cold War* very well for an understanding of the global politics of the present time.

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Review of "In the Tracks of Historical Materialism" continued.

In place of the moral and strategic vacuity of structuralism (not the only example of the retreat of socialist culture, but probably the most influential), Anderson proposes a new path for marxist discourse. He sees the possibility for a relevant, renewed marxism in a discourse which accommodates elements of both a restored marxist utopianism (a tradition extending from William Morris and Saint-Simon to Herbert Marcuse and E.P. Thompson) and practical social analysis (represented by Raymond Williams). A continuing dialectic between these two streams will yield a strategy of promise and "practical hopes". The result will be closer to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School of Habermas, Marcuse, et al., whose critique evolved primarily at the philosophical level, as such failing to describe the strategic processes Anderson calls for. A key element of Anderson's prescription for marxist renewal lies in the description of a feasible socialist model which is faithful to all hopes for the liberation of society from advanced capitalism, and hence is not confused with Russian or Chinese models. For Anderson, the economic considerations of the new society are paramount, and he refers to Alec Nove's *Economics of a Feasible Socialism* as a basis for developing a functional economic strategy.

Anderson's appeal seeks to unite the causes which challenge advanced capitalism (the feminist and peace movements are crucial), under the common banner of the one hope for a new society: the path of historical materialism. It is a persuasive appeal to which those who feel the need for change should respond enthusiastically. It's a small book, but it may be that the program for fundamental social progress proposed by Anderson recaptures the brightest hope for our time.

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