1 Introduction: South Asia in the USSR’s Third World policy

When Nikita Khrushchev plunged the Soviet Union into the Third World, two of the countries he chose to visit on his well publicized 1955 trip to the Third World were Afghanistan and India. Since that time, South Asia (which for the purposes of this study includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) remained a critical area for the USSR’s security interests and objectives in the Third World. The region was the site of political, military, and economic competition between the Soviet Union, the United States, and China; two countries of the region (Afghanistan and India again) were among the USSR’s top ten non-communist Third World trade partners; the region was second only to the Middle East in Soviet arms transfers and received large amounts of Soviet development assistance. Even with the end of the Cold War, geography still made South Asia, an economically underdeveloped, politically unstable region, a concern to an economically weary and politically unstable Soviet Union. Relations between the regional hegemon India, and Pakistan stabilized after the 1971 war, but the competition between the two remained; secessionist movements in many countries threatened the precarious regional stability; success in economic development was uneven at best; and most critical for the USSR and its successor states, the crisis in Afghanistan continued despite the pull-out of Soviet troops and the US–Soviet agreement to end military aid to the contending sides.

The purpose of this study is to examine the development of Soviet policies towards and views of South Asia since 1970. Like many other areas of the Third World, South Asia changed rapidly in its post-colonial period; in the 1970s important transformations continued but the regional military balance of power was established. The 1971 war positioned India as the dominant power on the subcontinent, cemented the close ties between the Soviet Union and that country,
and effectively ended prospects for a warm Soviet-Pakistani relationship. By the end of the 1970s, the USSR had consolidated its position in South Asia, having invaded Afghanistan, become India’s number one arms supplier, established a joint economic planning commission with India, and extended economic aid to virtually every country of the region. The regional correlation of forces in the early 1970s seemed propitious for the Soviet Union.

And yet, by the mid-1980s, the war in Afghanistan still was not won and as a result of it, Pakistan had received vast quantities of military aid from the United States; India had started diversifying arms suppliers and had lost faith in the ability of the state sector to spur economic development, as had virtually every other country of the region. The Soviet Union seemed bankrupt of ideas to address the critical issues facing South Asia; nonetheless, relations with countries of the region remained relatively stable until the late 1980s. The consistency and the changes in Soviet policy in the region can be explained in part by evolving Soviet views of the international and regional environment, in part by the USSR’s assessment of the political and economic potential of the countries of the region (an assessment which supported India’s dominant position) and of its own capabilities in the region, and in part by the policies and interests of the South Asian countries. Explaining the relative consistency in Soviet policy in South Asia over the 1970s and 1980s and the remarkable shifts that occurred in the Gorbachev era is the goal of this study. It seeks to understand the evolution of Soviet policy from 1970, the regional constraints and opportunities which influenced the policy process in Moscow, and the development of Soviet perceptions of the international and regional environments and policy objectives. Finally, based on the history of Soviet views and policy in South Asia, it makes some observations about the future of relations with South Asia in the face of the dissolution of the Soviet empire.

South Asia and the Third World prior to 1970

In one sense, patterns of Soviet involvement in South Asia began to evolve long before the break-up of the British colonial empire on the subcontinent. Through the international communist movement, the USSR had relations with communists in several of the countries of the region. The debates between Vladimir Ilich Lenin and the Indian communist, Manabendra Nath Roy, concerning the proper role of the communist party in the Third World national liberation
movement were understandably followed closely by communist parties in South Asia. The Leninist position which advocated pursuit of a United Front in the independence struggle was not automatically accepted in all countries. In India, for example, the Communist Party rejected a national front during the Second World War in order to support the allies (including Britain) against the Nazis.¹ The Sri Lankan communists waged a bitter campaign against the bourgeois United National Party in 1947 and managed to maintain a vibrant, hostile opposition in parliament until 1955. (In 1956, however, they agreed to collaborate with the newly elected and more left-leaning Sri Lanka Freedom Party.)

The decade following independence witnessed no clear move towards socialism and brought repeated questioning of whether the Leninist solution was correct for South Asia. These tactical questions combined with the Maoist alternative offered to the Third World by China led some parties to break with Moscow.² Nonetheless, the USSR managed to consolidate ties with some important local communist parties (e.g. the Communist Party of India (CPI), The Sri Lankan Communist Party, the Parcham in Afghanistan). These parties often accepted Moscow’s lead, especially on issues of foreign affairs, but also on questions of domestic strategy: where the bourgeois democratic option existed, they opted for a position of collaboration with principled opposition. Sometimes local communists were reluctant to accept the USSR’s preferences, as in the case of India where the Communist Party continued into the 1950s to criticize Nehru and bourgeois democracy.

Party-to-party relations, of course, are only a small part of the story. With the dissolution of the British Empire in the post-Second World War period the USSR moved to open diplomatic relations with the new states of South Asia. (Diplomatic relations with Afghanistan had been established by the RSFSR in 1919.) Despite its preoccupation with Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union exchanged ambassadors with India in 1947 and with Pakistan in 1948. Diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka were not established until 1956, mainly due to a strong anti-communist independence leadership in Sri Lanka. Formal relations with Nepal were not opened until 1956 because the monarchy pursued a largely isolationist foreign policy; thereafter, Moscow conducted its ties with Nepal through its ambassador in Delhi until 1959 when Nepal and the Soviet Union exchanged ambassadors and established embassies.³ Although diplomatic relations, in the cases of Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan, were established by the late 1940s, it was not until the
4 Soviet policy towards South Asia since 1970

1950s and particularly under Khrushchev, that any real economic or military assistance was offered by the Soviet Union. Although Pakistan did receive some economic aid from the USSR, its close ties to the imperialist United States and later, to China, precluded the development of a close relationship with the USSR. The vast majority of Soviet assistance, including military assistance, therefore, went to Afghanistan and India. From the Soviet perspective then, balance of power (or correlation of forces) considerations were critical in the development of relations and decisions to extend aid.

Personalities were also important in the early years of relations, in part due to the fact that embassies and diplomatic channels were new and not well developed, but more importantly to the high degree of personal control of foreign policy in the leaders of both the USSR (i.e., Khrushchev), and the South Asian countries (e.g., Nehru and Krishna Menon in India; Senanayake in Ceylon; Zulfiquar Mirza, and Iqra-mullah in Pakistan). In the debate with the Chinese over the nature of the new Indian regime, Khrushchev observed in his memoirs that

[Nehru] may be a bourgeois politician, but he's the most progressive leader in India outside the Communist Party. His politics have been steadfastly neutralist and anti-imperialist ... If Nehru should be overthrown, you can be sure more reactionary forces would take power. Therefore, what's the point of alienating Nehru or in weakening his position in his own country. 4

Khrushchev’s appraisal of Nehru, which was quite different from Stalin’s essentially suspicious assessment of the Indian leader, reflected not only the Soviet estimation of India’s prospects for progress towards socialism but also Khrushchev’s personal opinion of Nehru as a man of conscience, as a great leader of the independence movement in the Third World. This evaluation was helped by the fact that Jawaharlal Nehru had a rather positive view of the USSR and socialism.

Nehru had visited the Soviet Union in 1927, commenting on the accomplishments of socialism there and its potential worldwide. Despite the initially chilly reception given Nehru’s doctrine of neutralism, the USSR began to rely on Nehru for his nationalistic and often anti-Western outlook. Like his Soviet counterparts, Nehru was very much interested in limiting Western influence in South Asia. With the Avadi Resolution of 1955, Nehru urged Indian state planners to develop a “socialist pattern of society.” Moscow, and Khrushchev in particular, reacted favorably, yet cautiously, to Nehru’s proclamation, recognizing that while the Indian leadership probably did not have in
mind a Soviet-style workers’ state, it was moving away from the capitalist West. In Soviet eyes, the Indian leadership, and particularly Nehru himself, had demonstrated “progressive” tendencies, allowing for a more rapid evolution of the relationship than might have been possible had Nehru been less favorably disposed towards “socialism.”

Substantial Soviet economic aid was awarded to India, the leader of the non-aligned movement, primarily for development of its industrial and state sectors. Afghanistan, too, was the recipient of economic assistance, mainly in the northern part of the country, where assistance was used for road construction and industrial development, among other things. Although economic relations with Pakistan continued to develop, Pakistan’s links to the West limited Soviet contacts. By 1961, the USSR had extended to India a licensing agreement for the MiG-21, a license that had been denied to fellow socialists in China (with whom they had been having difficulties), and the following year, they failed to support China in its border war with India. Competition with the capitalist West, and later on, with China, then, was a key component in the Soviet foreign policy calculus in the 1950s and early 1960s, but there could be no doubt of the significance of South Asia, and particularly India, to the USSR’s Third World policy.

In many ways then, the successful Soviet mediation of the 1966 Tashkent Conference, which resulted from the 1965 India–Pakistan War, was a clear indication of the USSR’s interest and stature in the region. The United States and Britain were considered suspect by India and Pakistan because of their own interests in the region: the USSR’s prior neutrality in Indo-Pakistani border disputes had given them the necessary standing to act as intermediary between the two countries. The USSR then was the only superpower capable of intervening in the conflict and bringing about a peaceful settlement which would have been all but impossible if left to the devices of the Indians and Pakistanis themselves. The UN Security Council had worked out a ceasefire to the bitter border war, which had really begun with fighting in the Rann of Kutch in April of 1965. Through Soviet good offices and at the invitation of Premier Alexei Kosygin, India and Pakistan were brought together in the capital of the Republic of Uzbekistan to negotiate a settlement and end of hostilities. Tashkent was a personal triumph for Kosygin; the “spirit of Tashkent” temporarily served to warm Soviet–Pakistani relations; and it signaled the Soviet Union as a major player in South Asia. The USSR’s expanding political, military, and particularly economic ties and growing influence in South Asia presaged the promotion of progressive political tendencies and an
accelerated transition to socialism by the countries of the region; however by the 1970s, no country in the region was any closer to making that transition to socialism.

These failed revolutionary capabilities and stalled national liberation movements in South Asia and the rest of the Third World coincided with a realization that the Soviet economy could not afford to finance the Third World’s transition to socialism. In the case of South Asia, aid to build the state sector and encourage central planning had not led to a diminution of the private sector (nor, by Soviet accounts, of feudal and semi-feudal elements in the economy); moreover, the state sector was recognized by many Soviet analysts as being inefficient. Even if the Soviet Union had been successful in geopolitical terms in South Asia and elsewhere in the Third World, it was forced to recognize that its capabilities might not allow its economic objectives to be implemented in the region. And where issues of economic underdevelopment in South Asia were considered to be crucial to population survivability, let alone regime stability, this inadequacy cost the Soviet Union.

The 1970s, therefore, of necessity witnessed a retraction of the indiscriminate use of economic aid as a policy tool. At the same time, however, many Western analysts saw a new trend towards Soviet activism in the Third World. Although the USSR had suffered setbacks in Egypt and Somalia, it continued a selectively aggressive policy in countries like Angola, South Yemen, Ethiopia, and of course, Afghanistan. In addition, military advisors were sent to many countries; military training of Third World officers in the USSR became widespread; and the direct projection of Soviet military power in the support of local clients was not an infrequent part of many regional conflicts, and was especially notable in South Asia with Soviet military assistance to India. Moreover, arms transfers (particularly to oil rich states) were used widely not only to gain influence in the developing countries but also as a source of hard currency earnings for a beleagured Soviet economy.

With few exceptions (e.g., Egypt, Somalia), there were no major realignments in relations with the Third World countries generally or with countries of South Asia in particular, until the Gorbachev era. Rapidly changing circumstances in the Third World in the 1970s, however, forced Soviet scholars and policymakers alike to reevaluate their images of the developing countries, as well as the place of these countries in international relations. Although the policy effects of that reevaluation would not be evidenced until the Gorbachev era, these
years are nonetheless important for understanding the evolution of Soviet foreign policy in South Asia as elements of Gorbachev’s new approach to foreign policy can be traced to this period.

New Thinking, Old Thinking, and Soviet policy

After Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev ascended to power in 1985, he introduced the concept of New Thinking (novoe myshlenie) into Soviet foreign policy. Its significance for domestic and foreign policy cannot be overstated, for New Thinking was an essential part of the reform of the Soviet Union: if perestroika allowed for a reform of Soviet foreign policy, then too, New Thinking helped advance domestic reform in the USSR. The relationship between glasnost, perestroika, and New Thinking may be thought of as the “symbiotic link in Gorbachev’s vision between Soviet foreign policy and domestic politics.”

The New Thinking represented a shift away from traditional Soviet foreign policy analyses which had relied on realpolitik and correlation of forces to one emphasizing interdependence, complexity, and diversity in the international community. Obviously, the potential consequences of such a reformulation for domestic restructuring were startling: more intertwining with the world economy, greater toleration for variations among and within social systems, a recognition of the complex relations and problems connecting people.

Gorbachev argued for international collaboration to promote negotiated ends to regional conflict in the Third World, advocated reducing arms supplies to the Third World, and talked about finding new bases for North–South cooperation. As a result of the New Thinking, the USSR began to reorient its foreign policy, and although Gorbachev’s regime put East–West relations at center stage, the changes in Soviet policy in the Third World, and particularly in South Asia, were equally dramatic. In effect, Soviet reliance on the military as an instrument of foreign policy would be abrogated and replaced by a new emphasis on political and economic means under Gorbachev. Thus, the USSR withdrew all its troops from Afghanistan and admitted that their decade-long intervention to protect the fledgling communist government in Kabul had been a mistake, and announced it would require its long-time ally, India, to pay for arms shipments in hard currency. It appeared that objectives and instruments of Soviet foreign policy were undergoing dramatic changes. While the withdrawal from Afghanistan may be seen as an implicit recognition of the ill-fated correlation
of forces in Afghanistan, taken in the regional context of the loosening of military ties with India, it also signaled an end to a foreign policy based solely on considerations of correlation of forces and regional balance of power, and it signaled a more sophisticated and complex view of the domestic and foreign policy circumstances of the Soviet Union itself and of the countries of South Asia and the Third World.

Those views, as articulated on a general level in the New Thinking, were not suddenly formulated in 1985. Indeed, the precursors of this less dogmatic, more nuanced view of the Third World can be seen in the debates in the Soviet literature in the 1970s and particularly in the early 1980s. These debates reflected the delicate position of the USSR in South Asia and the Third World even under Brezhnev. For although they are often portrayed as decades of Soviet activism in the Third World, in many ways, the 1970s and early 1980s were difficult decades for the USSR. Against a backdrop of domestic political and economic stagnation and on and off détente with the West, the Soviet Union pursued a Third World policy that was alternately cautious and aggressive. On the one hand, the Brezhnev regime targeted military and economic assistance at countries ruled by Marxist-Leninist vanguard parties (e.g., Angola, Ethiopia, post-1978 Afghanistan) and at selected countries of geostrategic significance (e.g., India). On the other hand, Brezhnev had rationalized a diminution of Soviet economic assistance to the Third World, declaring that the USSR’s first duty was the building of socialism at home. Soviet views of international relations reflected their belief that the international correlation of forces was moving in favor of the socialist system, but at the same time there was a growing realization of the limitations of Soviet capabilities and of the complexities of development in the Third World.

That policy and those views were in marked contrast to Soviet policy in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the USSR had tried to compete with the West in the Third World on all fronts – political, military, and even economic. Soviet views of the Third World were remarkably simplistic and consistent: the Third World was a potential bastion of anti-imperialism, class analysis of these newly independent countries indicated the success of the national liberation movements in the Third World and the coming transition to socialism. The policy position mandated by such views was both extensive and expensive. Beginning under Khrushchev, there was an explicit policy to encourage national liberation movements to struggle for political and economic independence. The newly free countries became key to
realignment of the correlation of forces globally, and the USSR undertook to assist these countries in pursuing a non-capitalist path of development. Afghanistan and India were among the first countries targeted by Khrushchev, and they received considerable attention from Soviet policymakers and academics and financial assistance to aid economic development. As Pakistan became more involved with the United States, the stakes for the regional and global competition between capitalism and socialism grew. South Asia early on became central to the USSR’s Third World policy. Under Khrushchev, there was an expectation that an active policy in South Asia specifically and the Third World more generally would result in increased political and economic ties with the newly free countries, and correspondingly, more of these countries would opt for a socialist development path.

Khrushchev’s simplistic, expensive, and incorrect assessment of the situation in the Third World necessitated a rethinking of Soviet policy under Brezhnev. Brezhnev’s corrective was to rely on Soviet military power to achieve Soviet foreign policy goals; however, there was evidence of a more fundamental reassessment of the Third World and the prospects for socialist transformations in the literature of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The policy consequences of that reassessment, however, would not come to fruition until the Gorbachev era. Gorbachev’s New Thinking built on many of the themes introduced in that earlier literature and directly confronted the implications of the most radical of the literature for Soviet policy in the Third World, and as the process of restructuring and democratizing evolved in the Soviet Union, Soviet perceptions about the world and international relations also advanced. The failure of the August 1991 coup seemed to have consolidated the new approach to international relations and foreign policy behavior.

Organization of the study

This study tries to evaluate the development of Soviet policy towards South Asia since 1970 in two ways: first, through an analysis of evolving Soviet views of international relations, the Third World and Soviet, and continuity and changes in Soviet policy objectives and instruments in the region; and second, through investigation of the actual implementation of the policy in the countries of the region.

The most extensive dimension of the study is the examination of Soviet behavior in South Asia, and to some extent, the consequences of Soviet actions in the region since 1970. The study endeavors to show
how Soviet reliance on India (and by the late 1970s, Afghanistan) advanced and constrained Soviet policy in the region at large, to explore how policy objectives, instruments, and capabilities changed or remained the same, and to evaluate to what extent rethinking about the international and regional environments affected Soviet policy, particularly in the Gorbachev era. It argues that in order to appreciate fully the origins and evolution of the transformation in Soviet attitude and policy that occurred under Gorbachev, it is necessary to overview Soviet thinking about the international environment, especially the Third World and South Asia, and to understand the continuity and changes in policy objectives over time.

The study then is organized according to the following format: chapter 2 will focus on Soviet assessments of the external environment, the Third World, and South Asia. Chapter 3 will assess Soviet policymaking for South Asia by examining the development of Soviet objectives and instruments of policy. Chapters 4 and 5, covering the periods 1970–78 and 1978–85 respectively, attempt to ascertain how that policy was implemented in South Asia: what were the regional constraints and opportunities the USSR faced? Chapter 6 examines Soviet policy in the Gorbachev era and attempts to ascertain how the New Thinking affected changes in Soviet policy in the region. Chapter 7 concludes the study and makes some projections about the future of relations with the countries of South Asia.