

Quelle

Datum

Moscow Helps Us Look Good

By Josef Joffe *A23*

WASHINGTON — Consider what may be an iron law of East-West relations: the dummy factor differential. No matter how dumb, how insensitive, short-sighted and clumsy Western policy may be, the Russians will always do "better" — that is, worse.

Today, the Russians behave as if they had flunked "Introductory Diplomacy." Far from acting as cool manipulators who place interest over passion and ideology, the heirs of Lenin have maneuvered themselves into a corner and are shaking their fists at each of their four main opponents simultaneously. They have managed to sour their relations not only with the United States but also with Western Europe, China and Japan.

Basic diplomacy offers a simple rule: Don't confront all your enemies at the same time, even if you are a mighty superpower. Pick your primary rival and then court the other players, positioning them to your maximum advantage. Instead, Moscow has isolated itself. After President Reagan's trip to Peking, for example, when Chinese television censored his more offensive anti-Soviet asides, the Kremlin might have explored that signal by sending its own representative to Peking. Instead, it canceled a long-scheduled trip.

Josef Joffe is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The Western Europeans were also given the back of the hand. They were eager for the tiniest hint of détente after last year's nasty battle over the deployment of Euromissiles. Yet the Russians walked out of the Geneva talks about the limitation of intermediate-range nuclear weapons and then proceeded to make good on their threat to erect a "palisade of missiles" — a new generation of shorter-

range rockets. Hardly a day goes by without another stick being brandished.

Thanks to the Russians, the Western Europeans are now closer to the United States than they have been in a decade — and this despite the ideological differences that might have divided the socialist Governments of France and Italy from the conservative Governments of West Germany and Britain. Even the Japanese have

lately begun to invest more money in defense because of a growing Soviet threat in the Pacific.

And the United States? Courtesy of the Kremlin, Ronald Reagan has reaped a handsome windfall profit that reflects neither effort nor skillful diplomacy. It does not matter that the President will face the electorate without a single foreign policy credit to his name. What matters is the dummy factor differential, which dramatizes Soviet clumsiness rather than American failures.

Compare Mr. Reagan's position with Jimmy Carter's four years ago. The Camp David accord, the second strategic arms limitation accord and the Panama Canal treaties — historic achievements all — were simply forgotten. Instead, people remembered that Mr. Carter had promised "world order" and given them Afghanistan

and Iran. Dismissed by the Russians, he was ridiculed by allies who were more eager to do business with Moscow than to support Washington in its many calamities around the world.

Today, the Russians display not contempt but growing respect. In Europe, they have hopelessly overplayed their hand, and the Europeans worry more about Soviet power than American high-handedness. "Reagan the statesman" has replaced the "Reagan the cowboy" in the European press. Why? Not just because Mr. Reagan is a "Teflon President," invulnerable to criticism. The Administration may be fond of hoary rhetoric, but in the crunch — say, in Lebanon — it has been ready to let discretion prevail over muscle-bound valor.

Mr. Reagan looks good because the Russians look worse. Like Germany before World War I, the men in the Politburo have acted as their own worst enemies. They have provoked all of their potential partners, and their only friends are their dependents.

They might deserve sympathy if it were not for a fearful flaw in the very logic of Soviet foreign policy. The Russians want absolute security for themselves, and they do not seem to understand that their compulsive quest for ever more military strength must end up making everybody else feel insecure. Global nuclear parity was not good enough: The Russians had to have regional superiority in Europe and Asia, too. That is why they lost the Euromissile battle and why they now have to contend not only with Mr. Reagan but also with his colleagues in Europe, China and Japan.

Mr. Reagan should not reward the Russians for their imperial hauteur with sweet concessions. Still, sunny constellations do not last forever, and if the Russians are willing to come out of their corner, he might show them that there is more to diplomacy than upraised fists. *A23*