Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia and its Impact on NATO: Does the Leopard Change his Spots

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Many people during recent years have believed that the Soviet Union was on a fixed course toward more moderate policies, and that détente had come to stay. I have not shared this optimistic outlook. But however sanguine any of us may have been about Soviet policy, the brutal invasion of Czechoslovakia has been a sobering experience. It calls to mind a comparable act in Stalin’s time — the Kremlin takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948.

II.

In military terms, the Soviet thrust into Czechoslovakia proved what they can do. It was a vivid demonstration of Soviet capability for rapid, selective mobilization, for efficient movement of large combat and support forces over extensive distances, and for the establishment and testing of effective lines of communication in support of military operations far from the Russian homeland. The Soviet capability that was exercised so impressively in Czechoslovakia is available for employment on other tasks.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia certainly made clear that early “political warning” of a Soviet conventional move in Europe cannot any longer be taken for granted. In the Czech assault, until the moment of attack, the political signals of Soviet intentions were at best ambiguous. The lightning-like drive into Czechoslovakia took almost everybody by surprise. And it reminds us once again of the vital role of forces-in-being.

*This article was delivered before the Military Committee of the North Atlantic Assembly at Brussels, Belgium in November 1968.
**United States Senator from Washington.
1Czechoslovakia was invaded during the night of August 20–21, 1968, by armed forces of the Soviet Union and four other communist states: Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and East Germany.
NATO combat units, on the line, ready to make a determined stand, have far more deterrent value than mobilizable and deployable forces that might be moved to the scene after the action begins.

III.

Also of special significance is the ominous revision of Soviet international legal doctrine in the aftermath of the Czech invasion -- a textbook case on the "heads I win, tails you lose" attitude of the Kremlin.

You may recall that in the mid-1930's, the USSR joined the League of Nations and entered alliances with France and Czechoslovakia. At that time, Moscow acknowledged the concepts of national sovereignty and non-interference with the rights of independent states, in part to improve its credentials as a collaborator in international undertakings. Maxim Litvinov, then Soviet Foreign Minister, declared that the USSR would join agreements with other states under conditions that recognized

the extension to every state belonging to such an association of the liberty to preserve...its state personality and the economic and social system chosen by it -- in other words, reciprocal non-interference in the domestic affairs of the states therein associated...

Ironically, just a few weeks ago Litvinov's grandson, Pavel, was sentenced to exile in Siberia for defending Czechoslovakia's right to "the economic and social system chosen by it."3

Since the mid-30's the principle of "reciprocal non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states" had been a recurring concept in Soviet doctrine. As the number of countries

2NATO—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—is the institutional development from the North Atlantic Treaty which was signed on April 4, 1949, and entered into force on August 24, 1949. The original signatories were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United States. Greece and Turkey joined the alliance in 1952, and the Federal Republic of Germany in 1955.

3For Pavel Litvinov's final trial statement, see The Washington Post, October 15, 1968.
calling themselves communist increased and divisions among them became more apparent, Soviet writings had more and more tended to emphasize the "complete equality" of all socialist states and the strict observance among them of respect for independence and national sovereignty. The communique from the 1960 meeting of communist party leaders stated: "Every country in the socialist camp is insured genuinely equal rights and independence."

As late as last April, during the height of Alexander Dubcek's efforts at liberalization and reform, Kosygin declared that:

> The Soviet state...made its invariable principle in international policy the strict observance of equality, national independence, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and peoples.

Soon after, on August 20, the Soviets spearheaded the five-nation intervention in Czechoslovakia. For some weeks there was a flurry of inconsistent Soviet explanations and rationalizations. Then Pravda\(^4\) struck. In a September 25 article, by Mr. Kovalev, Pravda stated that Czechoslovakia's implementation of "self-determination" would have "caused harm to other socialist countries", and that socialist states cannot act independently when such action is contrary to the interests of the "socialist community of nations." Said Pravda:

> The sovereignty of each socialist country cannot be opposed to the interests of the world of socialism, of the world revolutionary movement.\(^7\)

Little doubt is left that Moscow intends to determine what constitutes action contrary to the interests of the "socialist community."

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4. The first explanation, namely that the intervention was at the invitation of Czech government officials, was abruptly dropped when it was learned that no such invitation was actually sent.

5. Pravda is the official newspaper of the Soviet Union's ruling Communist Party.

6. Although unsigned articles are generally regarded as more authoritative expressions of the Party leadership, the Kovalev article seems, nevertheless, to have been the chosen vehicle for the Party's declaration of policy.

Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko confirmed the new doctrine in a speech to the United Nations, he stated:

The Soviet Union and other socialist countries have on many occasions warned those who are tempted to try and roll back the socialist commonwealth, to snatch at least one link from it, that we will neither tolerate nor allow this to happen.

Moscow, in essence, is saying, to a nation with leanings toward socialism: if you think you have the right to independence and self-determination, think again! You haven't and we will make international law confirm it. You can have independence and self-determination if we consider it proper for you; you cannot have it if we consider it improper, because we have a doctrine of law that says what is yours is mine and what is mine is mine.

The leopard does not change his spots. The Pravda-Gromyko thesis is vintage Russian imperialism.

It should suprise no one that the East German Communist Party promptly praised the idea of a "socialist commonwealth" run from Moscow. For the most part, however, other communist parties have greeted the new doctrine with silence -- or with dismay and defiance. It is no wonder.

It seems to follow logically from the new doctrine that any country which in the future adopts a communist government, either by revolution or election, automatically becomes a part of the "socialist commonwealth," defined by the Soviet Union, and as such is subject to the Soviet concept of intervention—military or otherwise—even against the will of the communist party in power.

Some people have seen the point. The British Communist Party voiced strong condemnation of the new thesis in its house organ Morning Star:

It is to be hoped that Mr. Kovalev's thesis will be speedily and officially repudiated...It would do irreparable damage to the unity of the international Communist movement and relations between socialist states if it gained any further currency.

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8Speech by Gromyko at the United Nations, October 3, 1968.
9Morning Star, September 27, 1968.
Austrian Communist Party Central Committee member Heno Kostmann disavowed the new doctrine as a danger to the survival of the world communist movement:

...no norm exists or has existed anywhere giving a socialist country or a group of such countries the right to intervene in a fraternal socialist country. Incidentally, such a right of intervention is in conflict with all existing norms of relations among fraternal socialist countries and among Communist parties....On any basis other than...the basis of autonomy, a world Communist movement is not possible.\(^\text{10}\)

The Yugoslavs have gotten the message too. President Tito, who for twenty years has fought Soviet attempts to control his party and country, spoke to his countrymen and warned the Soviet bloc not to interfere in the affairs of Yugoslavia:

Comrades, as far as attempts are concerned to justify to a certain extent the case of Czechoslovakia...a theory was raised that sovereignty was not vital for small nations. Well, it did not say small nations but that is what was meant....the small nations are in danger. The small nations should act unitedly. They should agree...that nobody has the right to interfere in their internal affairs. These countries have the right to defend their sovereignty.\(^\text{11}\)

The significant point, I believe, is not so much that the Soviets have tried to provide ideological rationalization for what they did in Czechoslovakia, but that they have consciously and deliberately laid the basis for political pressures, blackmail and possible adventures elsewhere.

IV.

What can we now say of Soviet intentions?

Moscow's sharp admonition to other socialist parties and states to stay in line -- or else -- suggests a deep Soviet concern over the kind of urge toward freedom that appeared in Czechoslovakia and that could spread to adjacent regions, including the USSR itself. It suggests a concern in the Kremlin that the whole so-called

\(^{10}\)Volksstimme, October 9, 1968.

\(^{11}\)For a report on this speech and excerpts from it, see New York Times, October 21, 1968.
"socialist commonwealth" might come unglued.

Surely we cannot discount the danger that the course of repression and counteraction in East Europe will produce new crises and disturbances spilling over the frontiers of NATO. There is always the possibility that Moscow may try to restore some unity to the Warsaw Pact\textsuperscript{12} nations by creating a major crisis centered on Berlin and West Germany.

So we must see to the readiness of our immediate defenses along NATO's central front. We need to assure ourselves that we have enough high quality, ready forces in position, and prepared for sustained combat, to convince our adversaries that military action against NATO territory\textsuperscript{13} would be too hazardous for them.

And we must think hard about the implications of Soviet actions, not only for the central region, but also for NATO's vital flanks.

Looking ahead, what are Soviet intentions toward Austria?

Consider also the problem of Yugoslavia. It is evident that Yugoslavia's territory occupies a key position in relation to NATO's southeast flank. Under hostile control Yugoslavia would constitute a corridor running from Central Europe to the Mediterranean, separating Greece and Turkey from the remainder of the Alliance. What should be our response if the Kremlin seeks at any time to enforce its new doctrine against Belgrade? The understandable uneasiness in Yugoslavia today can hardly be a matter of indifference to NATO.

And what is the meaning of the far-ranging expansion of Soviet naval activity in recent times? The facts are disturbing:

- Soviet naval deployments in the Indian Ocean continue.
- Do they intend a permanent Soviet military presence there?

\textsuperscript{12}Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, signed at Warsaw May 14, 1955, and entered into force June, 6, 1955. It brought together all the East European Communist states except Yugoslavia.

\textsuperscript{13}The "NATO territory" as defined in Article 6 of the NATO Treaty includes "the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America,...the Algerian departments of France,...the occupation forces of any Party in Europe,...the islands under the jurisdiction of any Party in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer, or...any vessels or aircraft in this area of any of the Parties."
I doubt that all those ships are engaged in operations connected with the Soviet space program.

- During the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Mediterranean squadron was built up to some 50 ships, about half of which were major combatant vessels, including submarines. There is every indication that the Soviet Navy is in the Mediterranean to stay.

- There have been Soviet naval exercises on both sides of the Straits of Gibraltar.

- There has been significant Soviet naval activity, on a sustained basis, in the Norwegian Sea. Do they plan a permanent naval presence in that area also?

The USSR is a dangerous and unpredictable opponent, with a military capability whose reach is expanding. We cannot be confident that a Soviet Union that invades Czechoslovakia will not use military force to achieve its purposes on other fronts, when it thinks this can be done without running unacceptable risks.

The uncertainties we confront are compounded by the possibility of further shifts within the Kremlin's power structure, where there is already evidence of a move toward the hard-liners.

V.

So we meet today in an atmosphere of turbulence and uncertainty; but we also meet in a spirit of renewed solidarity and confidence. The governments and peoples of our Alliance are facing with a new seriousness the problems posed by Soviet actions.

There is little disagreement in America about the value of the Atlantic Alliance or the importance and firmness of the U.S. commitment to the defense of the North Atlantic area. But I and others in our Congress have had a severe problem in trying to maintain an effective American combat force in Western Europe. That problem resulted in large part from a widespread feeling in my country that so many Europeans were less concerned with the security of their homelands than we were. To many Americans it has seemed that a prosperous Western Europe was not making a reasonably proportionate contribution to the common defense effort.
Clearly, the tasks ahead call for a new determination, on both sides of the Atlantic, that will not only see us through this period of crisis but that will serve the Alliance well for the long, hard pull. The burdens of our common security will make substantial demands on us all -- for many years to come.

You can understand that I am heartened by the evidence that more of you here in Europe are recognizing that there is a direct relationship between your willingness to draw on your own resources for your own defense, and the willingness of the American people and the American Congress to provide substantial resources and forces for mutual security in NATO.

So I am encouraged by the current initiatives of some European members of the Alliance to reinvigorate NATO. For I am convinced that the future vitality of the Alliance depends in very large measure on the degree and quality of European efforts to keep NATO strong.