CHAPTER V

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOVIET POLICY TOWARDS

CZECHOSLOVAKIA (1968) AND POLAND (1981-84)

The Soviet Union followed very consistent policy towards Eastern Europe since the installation of communist regimes after the Second World War. Crisis in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland prepared the ground for national uprising to demand for the democratization of society. On the other hand, any reforms activities for the transformation of society would not be taken easily by the Soviet Union because that would pose serious challenge not only to the Soviet concept of socialism but also to the Soviet hegemony in the entire East European region. These were the occasions which tempted the Soviet Union for military intervention in the region since the Second World War.

The Soviet Union conducted military intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 because the latter tried to carry on democratic reform movement which was taken by the former as going against the principle of socialism. The Soviet Union openly expressed its opinion against such reform movement and conducted full scale military intervention in Czechoslovakia in order to suppress the movement.

Similarly in early 1980s there was a strong movement for reform in Poland too. Here the Soviet Union adopted an altogether different policy; it refrained from undertaking any military intervention in Poland and, instead, preferred a political solution to the crisis. It is legitimate to ask why the Soviet Union pursued two different policies towards Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1981-84! Both the countries were important strategic allies of the Soviet Union, members of Warsaw
Pact and Comecon and made substantial contribution to the realization of Soviet goals in international politics.

In order to understand the shift in the Soviet policy between the two cases it would be relevant to highlight various issues, factors and reasons responsible for Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and conciliatory approach towards Poland in 1981-84. The Second World War was quickly followed by cold war with the American-Soviet confrontation over political development in the global arena. Both the Soviet Union and the United States were racing ahead to create their own bloc systems to counter each other in the event of any military confrontation. As a result of cold war and a mutual fear of war both sides spent enormous amount of money on their defence which obviously led to the race for armaments.¹

Stalin apprehended that the Western powers would try to prevent the rise of socialism in East Europe. The developments like American intervention in Europe through such instrumentalities as the "Truman doctrine" and the "Marshall Plan" which were aimed at subjugating East European countries, economically and politically to the interests of the US monopolies.² Czechoslovakia was one of the East European countries which responded positively to the Marshal Plan which created apprehension on the part of the Soviet leadership about the inclination of many other East European countries going the capitalist way. Surely, the Soviet Union was not in a mood to allow such developments to take place in East Europe with all their potentials of weaning these countries away from the Soviet fold.


Taking different factors into consideration, one can argue that the Soviet policy was based mainly on the geo-political concept. It is obvious that the security consideration had been one of the guiding objectives of the Soviet policy in East Europe in general and Czechoslovakia in particular.³

The Soviet interests in Czechoslovakia was consistent with the general strategy they had envisioned for all of East Europe.⁴ Nonetheless, the differences of perception and historical experience continued to be reflected in somewhat greater importance than Moscow appeared to attach to its Czechoslovakian ally. Czechoslovakia formed one of the central pillars of security cordon sanatoria (Warsaw Treaty Organisation), along the USSR’s western flank. It was Czechoslovakia, on the West German boundary, that provided a buffer between the USSR and NATO. Czechoslovakia was a member of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and contributed a good deal to the realization of Soviet economic goals in the third world. It was again Czechoslovakia, one of the highly developed countries of the bloc which was equally vital for the economic division of labour and for the military and political cohesion of the alliance.⁵ Accordingly, a major effort had long been made by the Soviet Union to establish especially close ties with Czechoslovakia.⁶


6 ibid, p.136.
The Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprisings in 1956 provided an important lesson about the real nature of the Warsaw Pact. It demonstrated that Moscow, following its own interpretation of the Warsaw Treaty, had no intention of respecting the right of its allied states to freedom and self-determination. What happened in Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968 only reconfirmed the spurious nature of Soviet assurances and guarantees to its East European neighbours.7

In order to understand the significance of the Czechoslovak events as the most serious symptom thus far of the crisis of Soviet hegemony in East Europe, it would be well to take a backward look. When, on 14 May 1955, the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, commonly called the Warsaw Pact, with representatives of the People's Republics of East Europe, its primary aim was to make official a de facto situation, to give legal form to its control over armed forces and territories of East European Countries. In effect, the Warsaw Pact - a multilateral arrangement replaced the bilateral accords imposed by Stalin on his satellite states. The structure of the pact was modelled after that of NATO, the opposing force.8 Slightly more than a year after its signing, the pact underwent its first test as a result of the events in Poland and Hungary. The Hungarian attempt to withdraw from the camp and to seek a neutral status similar to that acquired by Austria in 1955 was thwarted by the Soviet intervention which was permissible under the terms of treaty.9

8 Ibid., p.31.
Beginning in 1962, the edifice of the Warsaw Pact which had been strengthened after the Hungarian incident, suffered from after effects of a decline in Soviet prestige caused by a whole series of factors: the retreat in Cuba, the Moscow-Peking conflict, the relative passivity of the USSR in the face of the Vietnamese conflict. The Rumanians were the first to take advantage of the USSR's difficulties in the Far East and Latin America and of the East-West detente. Bucharest expressed first in economic field and then in foreign affairs - a clear desire to disengage itself from the lock step policies of the bloc.\(^{10}\) The Kremlin, on the other hand, aware of its sagging prestige and the ensuing growth of centrifugal forces within its sphere of influence was at pains to reconsolidate the bloc and especially the Warsaw Pact. In an address given on 14 September 1965 in the presence of his good friend Novotny, Brezhnev spoke the key word: "The Warsaw Pact must be improved."\(^{11}\)

Rumanian party secretary - Niccolae Ceaucescu, denounced the anachronism of military blocs and particularly military bases maintained abroad. In the Spring of 1966, carefully and consistently advancing along that path, the Rumanians countered a Soviet plan to impose a permanent directorate on the Warsaw pact by proposing an end to the maintenance of Soviet troops in third countries, periodic rotation in the supreme command of the bloc's military forces.\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Fejto, n.7, p.32.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p.33.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p.35.
The Warsaw Pact consultative conference, held in Bucharest in July 1966, was a defeat for the more hawkish members of the alliance. It confirmed the status quo, that is, it took no new decision towards strengthening the organization.\textsuperscript{13}

On 31 January 1967 the Rumanians disregarding Soviet and other East European countries objections - established diplomatic relations with the new coalition government in Bonn. Thus, a first breach was opened in the insurmountable barrier that the Soviet Union and East European partners had wished to maintain against the intrigues of the imperialist forces of aggression and revanchism.\textsuperscript{14}

It was Rumania’s rebelliousness that aroused fears that socialist alliance was disintegrating. This was further heightened in 1968 during Czechoslovakian crisis and became one of the reasons for the Soviet led Warsaw Pact powers’ intervention in Czechoslovakia.

Even prior to the Rumanian episode, the Soviet Union had to face tough opposition from Yugoslavia - it had permanently moved away from the socialist alliance. This was a severe jolt to Soviet security concept in East Europe. Similarly, Hungary in 1956 crisis expressed its desire to withdraw from the camp and to seek neutral status. In order to uphold the alliance and to prevent further rebellious tendencies among bloc countries, particularly in Czechoslovakia because it was one of the important strategic partners of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union decided to go for military intervention in Czechoslovakia.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{itemize}
\item [\textsuperscript{13}] Ibid., p.37.
\item [\textsuperscript{14}] Ibid., p.40.
\item [\textsuperscript{15}] Jiri Valenta, "The Bureaucratic Politics Paradigm and Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia", \textit{Political Science Quarterly}, vol.94, no.1, Spring 1979, p.63.
\end{itemize}
Unlike the Hungarian upheaval of 1956, which was dealt with by the Soviet Union single handedly, the Czechoslovak crisis became a problem for the Warsaw Pact. This pact reflected not only a change in the Soviet political strategy within the framework of bloc relations that had evolved since 1956, it also reflected the anxieties generated among some of the block leaderships, especially those of East Germany and Poland, by the popular ferment in Czechoslovakia.

The leaders of the East European countries, particularly East German leader Walter Wulbricht and Polish leader Gomulka considered Czechoslovak reformism a threat to their bureaucratic positions and saw intervention as an opportunity to improve their domestic as well as intra-bloc postures. In March 1968 student demonstration in Warsaw and the ongoing faction struggle in Poland, presumably influenced by prague reformism, Wulbricht feared the effects of the ‘cancer’ of Dubcekism in his own country and, therefore, favoured military solution.\(^\text{16}\)

The relationship between the Soviet Union and the communist countries of Eastern Europe was officially based on the principle of equality and mutual non-interference, nevertheless there were three rules that cancelled this principle long before the Brezhnev Doctrine was enunciated.\(^\text{17}\) Moscow insisted that the communist parties within the so-called socialist commonwealth had to maintain: (a) the primacy of the party; (b) the preservation of the socialist system and (c) adherence to the precept of proletarian internationalism (a euphemism for allegiance

16 ibid., p.64.
17 Ibid., p.65.
to Moscow). The Soviet intervention to Czechoslovakia was a typical preventive intervention, for the country did not violate any of the above rules.

Undoubtedly, the Soviet leaders were unanimous in their aversion to the reforms in Czechoslovakia. However, for a long time they were reluctant to invade, viewing force as the last alternative to be used only in an emergency, such as establishment of a genuinely pluralistic system. Dubcek withdrawal from the WTO, or Civil War. It was in May 1968 that the Soviet politburo began to contemplate invasion as a viable option. Over a long period of time and with utmost restraint and patience, the fraternal communist parties of the socialist countries took political measures to help the Czechoslovak people to halt the anti-socialist forces offensive in Czechoslovakia.

It was only after exhausting all such peaceful measures that the "fraternal countries" undertook military intervention in the name of what came to be known as the "Brezhnev doctrine". This doctrine was enunciated not by Brezhnev personally but by a scholar of the history of materialism, Professor S. Kovalev, in a major article in the pages of Pravda. Although he did not use the term "limited sovereignty" often ascribed to his theory in the West, Kovalev advance a novel interpretation of sovereignty often ascribed to his theory in the West denying that the invasion had "contradicted the principle of Sovereignty and the right of nations to self-determination" and rejecting "the abstract and non-class approach" to these


questions. Each socialist country and its party had the freedom to determine its own path of development, he wrote, but not in such a way as to "damage socialism in their own country, nor the fundamental interests of other socialist countries, nor the worldwide workers’ movement." Self-determination in the form of "neutrality" would lead to the dismemberment of the socialist commonwealth and would infringe on the vital interests of the other member countries. The defense of the world socialist system was therefore "the common cause of all communists". the actions taken by the five countries were "aimed at defending the fundamental interests of the socialist commonwealth and primarily at defending Czechoslovakia’s independence and sovereignty as a socialist state..."20

In connection with the events in Czechoslovakia, question of the relationship and interconnection between socialist countries' national interests and their international obligations had assumed particular urgency and sharpness. The measures taken jointly by the Soviet Union and other socialist countries to defend the socialist gains of the Czechoslovak people were claimed to be of enormous significance for strengthening the socialist commonwealth, which was the main achievement of the international working class.21 To sum up, the highest stage of Soviet communism ironically had became imperialism. But the decay of communist system could not be halted by an imperial policy. The Czechoslovak Communist party’s search for a new role heralded a humanistic reformation which would


eventually have swept over the Soviet orbit of influence. In the sense of protecting Soviet despotism, the Soviet invasion was a rational decision. For the time being the battle for reform had been lost in Czechoslovakia. But the next struggle for reforming the communist system was to take place in any part of East Europe, including Moscow.

As far as Soviet response towards Poland was concerned, Moscow favoured conciliatory approach for a variety of reasons. During the 70s the Soviet Union had involved herself in regional conflicts in the Third World countries, which caused a veritable drain on its energy and economy. The Soviet Union's own economic difficulties further compounded the problem and made it reluctant to play vital role in the countries faced with crisis, including its close allies.

It would be logical here to briefly discuss the nature of the Soviet Union's policy towards the Third World in order to understand the role it played in the Third World conflicts, particularly in Angola, Ethiopia and Afghanistan during 1970s.

The post-Second World War international politics was characterized by bipolarity and ideological antipathy between the two super powers, the USSR and the US. During the same period the Third World had emerged as the major area of active East-West competition. This shift was the outcome of two major developments in international politics. First, the evolution of Soviet military power, which by the early 1970s provided her with a global reach comparable to that of the United States; and second, the political and military stabilization of inter-bloc relations in Europe, which facilitated the Soviet Union's involvement in the Third World.

The evolution of Soviet policy towards the Third World since World War II can be divided into three phases. The first phase lasted from 1945 to 1953 which was basically a period of Soviet inactivity. Because of its preoccupation with more pressing tasks in East Europe and ideological myopia, the USSR played a limited role in the developing areas. The principal Soviet preoccupation in foreign policy was not with remote areas but with East Europe. The Soviet foreign policy in this phase was marked by 'Eurocentrism' in essence. By comparison, the developing areas seemed remote and foreign; events there appeared far removed from truly pressing needs of security and reconstruction.23

During the second phase, which lasted from 1954 to 1969, quietism was replaced by activism. The Soviet foreign policy aspirations became more global, and the USSR broke out of its Eurasian confines in an active effort to win friends and influence in the Third World. The architect of this new approach was Nikita Khrushchev. They were much less optimistic about the prospects of socialism in developing countries. Indeed, the lessons they learned from the overthrow of Ahmed Bena Bella (Algeria), Achmed Sukarno (Indonesia) and Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), during 1965-68 was that the combination of economic backwardness and political instability could rapidly undermine progressive regimes. In response, during the last five years of the second phase, the Soviet policy was broadened by wooing pro-western regimes in the Third World countries.24

The third phase of Soviet policy towards the Third World began in 1970. Its most striking feature had been the increasing salience of military power in Soviet conduct in the developing area. The middle Brezhnev years (1969-75) saw the United States withdrawing from Indochina and the Portuguese empire disintegrate. Socialism was spreading in Indochina and in the former Portuguese colonies in Africa. In Africa, specially in Ethiopia and Somalia progressive regimes came to power. The Soviet objective in during 1970s was to spread socialism in the Third World through revolution. The Brezhnev leadership was now more willing to take steps to ensure the spread and consolidation of socialism in new areas. Sending of arms and military advisers to the Third World had now become the instruments for the promotion of this policy. As a matter of fact, the Soviets took advantage of western difficulties in southeast Asia and Africa to promote socialist forces into power. However, the Soviet Union itself was not directly involved in actual conflict anywhere except in the case of Afghanistan since 1979.\footnote{ibid, p.89.} Its role was largely restricted to assist the local progressive forces to succeed militarily. If socialism was to be maintained in the Third World, a long-term military commitment on the part of Soviet Union was required.

During the Third Phase, there had been a notable expansion of the military aspects of the Soviet policy in the Third World. The export of arms had risen dramatically. For example, during 1979-1980 the Soviet arms transfer to the Third World amounted to more than $30 billion. Though short of direct military intervention like Afghanistan, the USSR also began to involve itself more energetically in regional conflicts. Its military involvement figured as a prominent aspect in the 1969-70 "War
of attrition" between Egypt and Israel, the 1975-76 civil war in Angola, the 1977-78 Somali-Ethiopian conflict and 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.26 The nature of Soviet involvement in these regions may be briefly explained here.

During Nasser’s 1969-70 "war of attrition", thousands of Soviet personnel, operating air defense missiles, as well as several pilots were brought in to protect Egypt against Israel’s air strikes. This represented the first instance when the Soviet forces were sent en masse into the thick of a war in the Third World.27 Never before had the USSR tried on so vast a scale to supply a Third World client in the midst of war.

In the later half of the 1970s, a military partnership between the USSR and Cuba decided the outcome of two conflicts in Africa. During 1975-76 Angolan civil war, the participation of thousands of Cuban soldiers and the supply of Soviet arms worth $60-80 million enabled the popular movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) to defeat its rivals, backed principally by South Africa, China and the United States and to assume state power. This participation in so remote a region, demonstrated graphically the growth of Cuba’s confidence and the expanding reach of its military power, though, of course, in tandem with the Soviet Union.28 In 1977-78, the Cuban soldiers and Soviet arms enabled Ethiopia’s radical military regime to

27 Menon, n.24, p.9.
repel the invasion of Ogaden province mounted by irredentist Somalia and to blunt the offensive of secessionist guerrillas in the northern province of Eritrea.\textsuperscript{29}

A different pattern of Soviet behaviour was witnessed in Afghanistan. Unlike in Angola and Ethiopia, Moscow resorted to full-fledged invasion of Afghanistan in December in 1979, after nineteen months of political upheaval in that country. Afghanistan was a distinctive case in the list of Soviet interventions in the Third World, because it was the first time when the Soviet troops were used to replace one pro-Soviet faction with another in order to institutionalise ultimate Soviet authority.\textsuperscript{30}

The Afghan intervention was one of the gravest mistakes committed by the Soviet Union in recent history. Though, ostensibly, the intervention seemed to have been decided upon amidst supreme confidence and over-sensitivity of the Soviet leadership, it was, in reality, the result of gross miscalculation and shortsightedness. Thus, the whole imbroglio, in which the Soviet Union remained entangled for nearly a decade, proved itself a costly experience of enormous magnitude, militarily, economically and politically. The Afghan experience exhausted the Soviet Union beyond any possibility of an immediate recovery. Besides, the mounting international criticism was another factor restraining the Soviet Union from launching itself into another spell of activism in any part of the world, including East Europe.

By far the most severe criticism as usual was articulated by the United States which condemned the Soviet invasion and terminated the SALT II agreement, thereby giving a severe blow to peace initiative. The US also imposed economic sanction on

\textsuperscript{29} ibid, pp.41-42.

the Soviet Union, the most significant of which the suspension of wheat exports to
the latter. Further, the United States led many countries to boycott the 1980
Moscow summer Olympic games was a step that almost certainly came as a rude
shock to the USSR.\(^{31}\) Even a good number of the Third World countries condemned
the Soviet action in Afghanistan. The Afghan invasion set in motion a grounds well
of anti-Soviet public outcry at the global level. Soviet Union continued to receive
regular reprimands from the United Nations and other international fora for its invasion
and occupation of Afghanistan.

Apart from the world-wide criticism, the lethargic Soviet economy made it
difficult for the Soviet leaders to resort regular military intervention in the Third World.
The essence of the problems suffered by the Soviet economy could be conveyed
through a few statistics that might be the basic indicators of the health of any
economy. The rate of growth of the Soviet GNP had fallen steadily, indicating that
the underlying causes were more permanent than a temporary business cycle at
work.\(^{32}\)

During 1966-70 the average yearly rate of growth was 5.3 percent which in
1971-75 fell to 3.7 percent to 2.7 percent in 1976-80 and 2.1 percent in 1981-82.
The per-capita consumption as an indicator of trends in the standard of living had also
exhibited a steadily falling rate of growth. During 1966-70 it grew annually at the
rate of 4.1 percent. But the average annual rate for 1971-75 was down at 2.8
percent, while during 1976-81 it was further lower at 2.2 percent. In 1982, for the

\(^{31}\) David Holloway, *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race* (New Haven: Yale

\(^{32}\) Menon, n.24, p.154.
first time since 1966, it declined in absolute terms by 0.7 percent. These data show that the Soviet economy was plagued by major problems which were not temporary.\textsuperscript{33}

On the other hand, Moscow's gains in international polity were not without setbacks and costs. Much of Moscow's energy and economy during the 1980s was devoted to maintaining positions in Angola, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. Many of its clients were an ongoing source of concern, and her client states were a drain on the Soviet resources. The total costs of Moscow's international commitment rose from an Estimated $13-12 billion in 1971 to an estimated $36-47 billion in 1980 this further kept rising.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus, the Soviet Union's subsequent inability to quell the insurgency and establish the authority of the government within Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia and in the international community was symbolic of the general sluggishness of her performance in regional conflicts during the 1970s and 1980s.\textsuperscript{35}

Ironically, the invasion of Afghanistan marked the end of Moscow's era of greatest expansion. Moscow's military intervention in Afghanistan coincided with the Poland crisis during 1980s, one of the fellow member-states of the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet Union could not adventure into military action in Poland because some of the Warsaw Pact countries expressed concern on the Soviet policy towards Polish problem.

\textsuperscript{34} ibid, p.41.
\textsuperscript{35} ibid, p.48.
Before the end of 1980, Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu had argued strenuously with the Russians against any such move. In October Ceausescu had insisted that Poland could solve its own problems without outside interference. The opposition of Romania, in particular, was important to the Soviets because of Romania's membership in the Warsaw Pact. Yugoslavia also opposed a military intervention in Poland for ostensibly the same reasons as Romania.\(^{36}\) They blamed the turmoil in Poland not only on food shortages but also, and more significantly, on so-called systemic flaws of Polish socialism, notably its highly centralised economic planning and management and its administrative ineptitude, all of which, according to the Yugoslavs, had made the Poles skeptical of their government. The Yugoslavs thus were indicting the Soviet model of socialism prevalent throughout most of Eastern Europe as a cause of Poland's current turmoil.\(^{37}\) The Italian Communist Party (PCI), the largest of the non-ruling communist parties in Europe and one which also had maintained an independence of the Kremlin on a wide range of issues, had opposed an external intervention as early as 27 August 1980 when L'Unita, the PCT daily, spoke of the risks of a Soviet intervention and urged the Warsaw Government to make concessions to the workers.\(^{38}\)

Thus, the Soviet activism in the 1980s had been substantially slowed down because of its own domestic and international problems.\(^{39}\) Among the domestic


38 Ibid, p.351.

39 Menon, n.24, p.5.
preoccupations, the problems were primarily related to the bad economic conditions. The Soviet Union was in economic shambles. There was a frequent shortage of basic goods, gradual decline in the agricultural productions and public dissatisfaction over the quality of the consumer products. The economic dissatisfaction was apt to increase apathy and destroy the incentive to work harder. The Soviet leadership must have been aware of the implications. On the international front the Soviet Union as earlier pointed out faced a lot of criticism because of its involvement in the regional conflicts of Angola, Ethiopia, Somalia, Ogaden during 1970-78 and subsequent intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. It was due to these compulsions the Soviet Union decided to go in for peaceful political solution in Poland. On the other hand, Moscow confidently hoped that the martial law regime would be able to control the Polish crisis on its own.

Conclusion

The situation in Czechoslovakia was completely different from that of Poland. The so called ‘threat to socialist stability’ in Czechoslovakia in 1968 came from the party leadership headed by Alexander Dubcek. The Dubcek leadership had begun to initiate a practical step towards political, economic and social reforms. A programme adopted in 1968 set the guidelines for a modern, humanistic, socialist democracy that would guarantee a genuine pluralistic system. This internal reform, programme, however, created great concern to the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries. The Soviet Union was apprehensive that this programme would make profound impact on other East European countries and pose a threat to the socialist principal’s in the

40 ibid, p.7.
entire region. Thus, the Soviet Union and Warsaw pact countries conducted military intervention in Czechoslovakia. The purpose of this move was to retain the model of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, as it had been established and sustained by the Soviet Union.

As far as Poland was concerned, it was completely different from that of Czechoslovakia. In Poland major threat to Polish socialism in the fall of 1980 was the political opposition of workers, intellectuals and the Catholic church. Among a variety of factors responsible for the unrest the economic crisis facing the country was the most decisive leading to the Polish upheaval of 1980s. The workers under the banner of Solidarity initiated a movement which demanded major changes in Poland’s Soviet Style socialist system. As far as the Soviet response to the Polish crisis was concerned it did consider the crisis as a threat to its security and the threat of using force was always present in its dealings with the Polish leadership. However, the Soviet Union preferred a conciliatory approach because the changed domestic and international as outlined in the preceding pages.