HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Even before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Slav question constituted an important dimension of Tsarist foreign policy. On the Slav question the Tsarist government and society were one. Ethnic affinity was one of the most essential components of Tsarist foreign policy. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet government was too preoccupied with domestic developments that despite ethnic affinity Soviet relations with Yugoslavia remained low key.

After the Second World War, there were further strains in Soviet-Yugoslav relationship. The independence of Yugoslavia and its own road to socialism was perceived by Stalin, as a threat to Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. Therefore, during the post-war period until the death of Stalin, the Soviet-Yugoslav relations remained hostile. However, the process of destalinisation reduced the gap between these two countries. Nikita Khrushchev made an attempt to renew bilateral relation despite the independence of Yugoslavia and its own way of socialism. The beginning of such renewed rapprochement was enshrined in the Declarations of Belgrade and Moscow in 1955 and 1956 respectively.

In this chapter the historical links and the potentials of Yugoslavia influencing the Soviet foreign policy will be discussed. The focus will be on the nature of relationship based on historical links between the two
countries. In most part the relationship between the two World Wars and the period of Stalin and Khrushchev will be the core analysis of this chapter.

**Geo-Strategic Importance**

Yugoslavia was perhaps the most precarious entity in Eastern Europe. It had consisted of six "Socialist Republics" (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Harzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia) and two "Autonomous Provinces" (Kosovo Metohija or Kosmet and Vojvodina). It had six different official 'nationalities' (Serbs, Croats, Moslems, Slovenes, Macedonians and Montenegrins) and two 'national minorities' with one half million or more members each (Albanians and Hungarians), as well as three different religions (Catholicism, Orthodoxy of various denominations and Islam).

In geo-strategic terms, Yugoslavia was of profound military importance within the context of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-Warsaw Pact confrontation in Europe. Bordering on such non-Warsaw Pact countries as Greece, Italy, Austria, and Albania, with a long coastline on the Adriatic Sea (which opens into the centre of the Mediterranean), Yugoslavia nestles in the heart of NATO's southern flank. Thus, should the Soviet Union acquire hegemony over the Yugoslav state, the Soviet Union could gain a high degree of influence over the evolution of Eastern Mediterranean politics, not only with regard to Southern and Central Europe, but also vis-à-vis North Africa and the Middle East (with its increasingly visible symbolic importance, as well as its objective value in
terms of important natural resources).\(^1\) Moreover, domination over Yugoslavia would offer the Soviet Union a frontier with Albania, a recalcitrant former satellite that long has proved an embarrassment to the Soviet Union.

Against this background, the Soviet Union attributed strategic interest in Yugoslavia, particularly in Serbia, to a host of stereotypes and to ethnic, religious and historical common ground. In the century the Serbs already looked to Russia as their big Slavic brother and, with Russia behind it, laid claim to a preferential position on the Balkans. The ethnic affinity and the multinational character of the Soviet Union after the October Revolution emphasized the need to defend the interests of different national groups within the Soviet Union and the Balkan states. Yugoslavia which was by then a part of the Balkan states rendered insecurity to the Soviet Union against an attack by either France or Germany. Situated between the Balkan and the Mediterranean, Yugoslavia assumed importance to the Soviet security system.

**Soviet-Yugoslav Relations Between the Wars**

The Soviet Union came into existence as a revolutionary state whose ideology was based on values and concepts fundamentally hostile to Western capitalist system. Its ultimate goal was the destruction of imperialist powers and the establishment of socialism. Hence the period aftermath of the First World War marked by the birth of world communist

\(^1\) Duncan Wilson, *Tito's Yugoslavia*, (New York, 1979), p. 191
movement and the growth of international working class. However, the movement gathered its momentum under the staunch leadership of Stalin in some parts of the world, particularly, in the Balkans. It was partly because of the ideological fight between the Soviet Union and Fascist France and Nazi Germany as well. Stalin viewed the Balkans as the right opportunity to promote communist movement. It was also partly due to the Balkans fear of imperialism and further colonization that emphasized the need of adherence to the communist movement spearheaded by the Soviet Union. Therefore, the international scenario since 1928 onwards forced the Soviet Union and the Balkans to come closure and to co-operate in order to fight imperialism.

Therefore, between the Wars there was no special kind of bilateral relationship between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. During this period, the Soviet Union pushed forward to augment the war-ravaged economy, build up collective security system and promotion of international communist movement. The focus of Soviet foreign policy was to build up communist movement in the Balkans (Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia). The major strategy adopted initially was to promote and upgrade loyal and efficient communist leaders at the regional level. Yugoslavia then followed the Soviet model of industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. There were instances of Soviet import of raw materials from Yugoslavia but evidences of the volume of such import or the nature of economic
relationship does not reflect reciprocity and bilateralism. Various authors writing on the subject put this as exploitation of raw materials to cater the needs of Soviet heavy industry.

Once again it is worth mentioning that during the inter-war period, the region played an important role in building communist movement. There was a general perception that the Balkans were important despite the fact that they form different state apparatus. Hence, regional importance was more visible than building relationship with individual states of the Balkans as Yugoslavia. At the domestic level, the Soviet Union focused more on economic development through industrialization and developed technology. The contribution of the Balkans in this regard was minimal. But at the international level, Soviet Union's objective of building collective security system and the communist movement, much depended on friendly relationship with the Balkans.

During the inter-war period the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was reorganized under the leadership of the Soviet trained communist Marshall Tito. By the spring of 1934 the ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia signaled a sort of insecurity in the Soviet Union. Therefore, Stalin stressed the need of Yugoslavia unity and the right to self-determination was played down, though it was assumed that national rights would be safeguarded in any multinational state, once the socialist revolution occurred. But it was the

---

2. E. Figurnov, “USSR’s Growing Economic Might As the Basis of It Effective Foreign Policy” International Affairs (11), (Moscow, Nov. 1985), p. 63

irony of Stalinist party purges in 1937 that created a situation of terror in Yugoslavia. As a result, further development of friendly relationship remained a low key till the out break of the Second World War.

After the Second World War in the mid forties Soviet-Yugoslav relations remained frozen mainly because of Stalin’s obduracy on ideological question. The Soviet Union was not prepared to accept any ideological deviation or independence in matters relating to implementing socialism.

Soviet-Yugoslav Split

The beginning of cold war represented the sharpening of pre-war conflicts by the struggle for mastery over Europe and ultimately the world. However, Stalin hoped to maintain elements of wartime coalition and therefore, he tolerated some national autonomy in Eastern Europe. With the deterioration in East-West relations, he perceived a growing divergence between national roads and Soviet security interests. From 1948 the Stalinist model was imposed in Eastern Europe irrespective of local conditions. In Yugoslavia in mid-1948 the attempt to establish Stalinist hegemony met with resistance from Josif Broz Tito and the Yugoslav communists because they had come to power largely by their own efforts and were not dependent on the Red Army. Stalin had no model of how to conduct relations between communist countries other than by the methods he had used to consolidate his power within the Soviet Union. But such methods raised powerful emotions when applied to relations between sovereign
nation states and with the peoples who had never been part of the Russian empire.4

The break between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in 1948 at the initial stage owed nothing to ideology, and everything to the dialectics of nationalism. But later on ideology played an important role to such an extent that aroused hostility between the countries. It was the first major example of an East European state seeking to pursue its national interests within the communist framework.

The expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform (an organization of the communist parties of the six countries of eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Italy and France) startled public opinion in Yugoslavia and throughout the world when it was suddenly announced on 28 June 1948. The immediate step taken by the Stalinist regime was the abrogation of the Treaty of Friendship and Non-aggression Pact signed in 1943.5 The abrogation of such co-operation tremendously affected the economic condition of Yugoslavia. In addition, a Cominform economic blockade of Yugoslavia resulted in the stoppage of trade, credit and most serious of all, heavy industrial import from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. These included coal and coke, plant for steel mills, power stations, etc., on which depended the development of industry projected in the Five-Year Plan

Trade with Eastern Europe came to standstill by the end of 1949. The joint Yugoslav-Soviet companies were dissolved.

Soviet-Yugoslav Rapprochement

Stalin' death allowed relations to be improved with Yugoslavia. The major event of that occurrence was the rapprochement of Soviet-Yugoslav relations under the leadership of Khrushchev. Because the deterioration of their relation in 1948-49 was prejudicial to both countries and played into the hands of the imperialist. Therefore, Khrushchev personally visited Tito and invited him to Moscow. Through out the rest of the summer, he clung to Tito like a drowning man to a straw. This is in fact over emphasized by Soviet historians. But in reality it happened so that Khrushchev worked hard to bring Yugoslavia to the negotiation table.

On 26 May the Soviet delegation flew to Belgrade. The Communiqué issued at the end of the visit indicated that his (Tito) view had broadly prevailed; it was signed by himself, as President of the Federal Peoples Republic of Yugoslavia (FPRY), and on the Soviet side, not by Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU), but by Bulganin, the titular head of government.

The Belgrade Declaration, as the Communiqué came to known, marked the formal ending of seven-year rift between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The declaration, though couched in general terms which left many

---

6. E. Figurnov, n.2 p. 64
outstanding issues to be settled, it denoted important concessions to the Yugoslav claim that each country had the right to build socialism on its own way, without interference or pressure from another, and to maintain the foreign links it saw fit. The existence of military blocs (though Moscow had just formalized her relations with the satellites of Eastern Europe in the Warsaw Pact) was pronounced harmful. The declaration recognized the independence of Yugoslavia and her attitude on most current world issues was declared to have much in common with the Soviet Union. But the talks revealed important differences of emphasis.

The Soviet concept of peaceful co-existence admitted the fact that while two irreconcilable ideological blocs might do business together, would at the same time continue opposing each other by sort of war since their hostility was an expression of inevitable class struggle.

The declaration was also significant for its omission. It contained no references to Marxist-Leninist ideology or inter-party relations. No mention was made of the Cominform, from which Tito had been solemnly expelled, though he may have been given assurance that it would shortly be dissolved. Further, the origins of quarrel were tactfully passed over in silence. And there was rejoicing in Belgrade that it was not the erring son, but the father from the homeland of socialism itself, who had come, if not to confess his sins, at least to express regret that the estrangement had all

---

been a most unfortunate mistake. Therefore, the declaration of June 2, 1955 noted the concurrence of views between the two countries on a number of fundamental problems of international developments and mapped out a programme for economic, scientific, technical and cultural co-operation.

One year later, in response to pressing Soviet invitations, President Tito paid a state visit to the Soviet Union. During the visit a Declaration was signed between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

The Moscow Declaration, signed between Tito and Khrushchev on behalf of their respective Parties, reaffirmed the principles of independence and equality enshrined at the state level in the Belgrade Declaration, and pledged their Parties to closer co-operation through discussion, consultation, the exchange of views and experience, always within the context of the 'internationalist principles of Marxism-Leninism'. On the economic front, despite Soviet resentment at Yugoslavia's growing commercial links with the West, agreement was concluded for a substantial expansion of Soviet-Yugoslav trade and new offers of Soviet credit.

A Communiqué signed by Tito and Bulganin recorded progress made in the normalization for political relations and the resolve of the two governments to continue process in the economic, cultural, and political fields. These two

---

8. Stephen Clissold, n.5 p.175
9. ibid; p. 176
statements, particularly the Declaration on Inter Party Relations, were the fruit of a visit where the official and popular acclaim accorded to Tito seemed to set the seal on a new era of Soviet-Yugoslav rapprochement. As a result of these declarations and commitment the Soviet-Yugoslav relations remained friendly so long as Khrushchev ruled the Soviet Union.

The historical links between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia represent in most part the geo-strategic position of Yugoslavia and in some part the question of Slavic affinity. In addition to this the international policy implications and the struggle for spheres of influence in the Balkans (Eastern Europe) during the inter-war period remained the key to building Soviet-Yugoslav relations at the regional level. In the post-war period owing to a number of reasons, particularly, the independence of Yugoslavia and its refusal to follow the instruction of Soviet Union in building communism led to the split of 1948. This split was further intensified by Stalin's ideological concepts and believes that did not suit the local conditions of the countries of Eastern Europe, particularly, Yugoslavia. Therefore, till the death of Stalin Soviet-Yugoslav relations remained hostile to each other and often led to open polemics.

Nikitia Khrushchev prepared the ground for friendly relations with Yugoslavia. The Moscow and Belgrade Declarations provided the basis for further improvement of relations at the bilateral level. These two Declaration were held as an important land mark for Soviet-Yugoslav friendly interaction. However, till 1964 the new relationship remained an
uneasy one and the Yugoslav communist continued to follow an independent national policy which the Soviet Union had never wholly accepted.