

The development of Soviet policy (1953)

Caption: Confidential Note dated 3 September 1953 from the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs analysing the development of the USSR's international policy since the death of Stalin.

Source: DE VOS, Luc; ROOMS, Etienne; DELOGE, Pascal; STERKENDRIES, Jean-Michel (sous la dir.). Documents diplomatiques belges 1941-1960, De l'indépendance à l'interdépendance. Tome II: Défense 1941-1960. Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique, 1998. 582 p. ISBN 90-6569-670-9. p. 419-421.

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(3 September 1953)

Top Secret

Changes in Soviet policy, particularly since the death of Stalin.

The core aims of Soviet policy

1. Underlying premise

Despite a certain number of reassuring gestures made at international level by the new Government of the Soviet Union, there is currently no reason to believe that the ultimate aims of Soviet policy have changed in the least.

Its objectives remain:

- to consolidate established positions and protect the Soviet sphere of influence;
- to create a global system of Communist states led by the Soviets ...

9. Conclusions

It is impossible, with any degree of certainty, to attribute the changes in Soviet foreign policy to any one of the reasons given above and to consider it to be decisive reason. The Soviet leaders were probably influenced by all these factors at the same time.

However, we have to admit that the Kremlin's new conduct appears to be very effective: it provides Malenkov with the time needed to establish his power, consolidate the domestic situation in the Soviet Union and finalise military preparations. It also has the advantage of delaying the effective implementation of Western defence measures.

10. Repercussions in the military sphere

There has been no let up in the war effort within the Soviet bloc over recent months; quite the reverse. Malenkov and Bulganin have, on a number of occasions recently, again stated that the Government intended to increase its armed forces.

The defence budget in 1953 stands at 110 200 million roubles. Taking account, however, of price cuts made in April and of the considerable increase in the 'investment' and 'non-specified expenditure' budget lines, there is reason to believe that, once again this year, military funding will be well above that for 1952.

Malenkov appears determined not to implement his programme of increasing the supply of consumer goods at the expense of the USSR's military might.

Weapons production in the European satellite countries seems to have increased considerably in the current year.

It was already thought that the USSR had an arsenal of atomic bombs big enough to influence its overall strategy. Recent statements by the USSR about the H-bomb suggest that it has also made progress in this area.

The new trend in Soviet policy has not been reflected in the level of Soviet occupation troops in Germany. At all events, they have not decreased.

The number of air-space incidents (the most recent instance occurred on 31 July 1953 in the Vladivostok

area) are an indication of the determination with which the USSR will defend its territorial integrity and its air space.

The USSR's military potential has displayed no shortcomings at all. Quite the opposite is true. There is no indication of any weakening in this area.

General conclusions

1. The USSR's potential

There has been no diminution of the USSR's potential over recent months.

Three factors still have to be borne in mind:

- a. There is a totalitarian dictatorship in the USSR which enjoys considerable economic and military power.
- b. This dictatorship demonstrates extreme suspicion of any government that does not adhere to instructions from the Communist Party.
- c. Soviet leaders have no scruples about resorting to force to achieve their objectives. As long as this situation persists, no one can claim that the danger facing the world no longer exists.

1. The risks of war

The West's strong determination to resist, which has been demonstrated on two occasions over recent years, has taken the wind out of Soviet expansionist policy. However, it does not seem to have shaken the Communist regime to the point that the Soviet leadership would be ready to spark a large-scale conflict in the hope that spectacular military successes would strengthen their position before the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation had been able to reach full strength.

It seems likely that, to date, the Soviet Government has never seriously wanted to run the risk of dragging the country into a major war with the West. Its policy has been: 'All sorts of mischief short of war.' In the past, however, it has continued to test its own assessment of the weakness or lack of determination amongst Western nations and as a result has, since the war, engaged in several particularly dangerous ventures.

Without doubt, current policy harbours less risk and, from that point of view, it seems that the threat of war in the short term has considerably decreased. (South-East Asia and Iran, however, continue to be volatile regions).

It is impossible for anyone to say that this more flexible attitude on the part of the USSR will last. However, one thing is certain: the Soviet Government will be quick to exploit any weakening by the free world and will not flinch at re-embarking on a more forthright policy if it judges that the circumstances are propitious.