3 The Foreign Policy Background

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Union’s increased concern with the sea can only be understood in the light of the changes which have taken place in her foreign policy since 1953. Stalin to the day of his death saw his country as encircled and threatened by a hostile world, as she had been since the Revolution and the Civil War. His slogan of ‘Socialism is one Country’ symbolised this siege mentality in both internal and external policies. Hitler’s invasion and the near defeat and signs of internal break-up which followed it confirmed this attitude which did not disappear at the end of the war. Based on Stalin’s conviction of the inevitable hostility of capitalist to communist countries, it merely transferred historical and ideological suspicions to Russia’s erstwhile allies, particularly the United States. The latter’s open commitment to capitalism, her opposition to Russia’s claim to suzerainty over Eastern Europe and her monopoly of atomic weapons made her the chief threat. When to these she added the commitment to support a militarily united Western Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949 and thus deny the Soviet Union the influence in Europe to which Stalin believed her performance in the war had entitled her, the onset of the political and military confrontation of the Cold War was inevitable. Its transformation into actual hostilities involving the new weapons of mass destruction now possessed by both sides seemed more than likely as long as an increasingly megalomaniac Stalin ruled the Soviet Union.
A new era in Russia’s external policies was announced by Khrushchev at the Twentieth Party Conference of the CPSU in 1956, when, in addition to his denunciation of Stalin’s internal mistakes and excesses, he rejected his predecessor’s negative and defensive view of her place in the world. While accepting a continuance of an adversary relationship with the United States Khrushchev claimed that his country’s growing strength, both economic and military, now enabled her to conduct the confrontation with confidence. Moreover the United States, aware of her opponent’s new strength and of the futility of nuclear war, would be less and less tempted towards aggression. This would enable the competition between the two powers to be conducted by non-military means. To this pragmatic analysis Khrushchev added ideological legitimisation by proclaiming as a principle of Marxist–Leninist thought the concept of ‘peaceful co-existence between states of differing social systems’. Henceforward this was to be the basis of the Soviet Union’s relationships with the non-communist world. The security of the state and the expansion of socialism no longer demanded a war to the death with capitalism.

A more positive departure from Stalin’s immobilism was contained in Khrushchev’s announcement of the Soviet Union’s intention to take advantage of the emergence of a great number of newly independent states since the end of the war and the struggles for freedom from colonialism still to be decided. Stalin had been suspicious of these developments because of the nationalist and bourgeois nature of their leadership but to Khrushchev they represented a great opportunity. By backing them Russia could simultaneously weaken the economic and political influence of capitalist–imperialism and establish her own leadership of a global movement of progressive states, thus substantially increasing her world influence. In addition there would be economic advantages in the opening up of new export markets and wider access to raw materials. It is noteworthy that between 1955 and 1965 Russia’s foreign trade increased from 5.2 per cent of her total trade turnover to 11.9 per cent. There has also been an increase in economic assistance, first to support general development, but increasingly from the mid-1960s, concentrating on military aid. This has noticeably been given to nations with acceptable political systems or strategically important locations: Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Vietnam and Angola, to say nothing of Cuba, where Castro’s regime has become completely dependent upon Soviet economic aid, and which in return has become an essential agent of Russia’s African policy. Another element of this active foreign policy has been the supply of