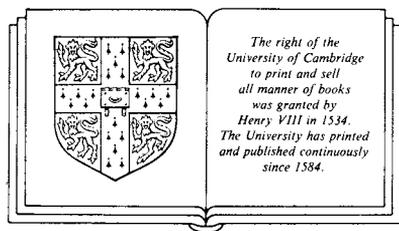


Soviet–British Relations since the 1970s

Edited by

ALEX PRAVDA and PETER J. S. DUNCAN



PUBLISHED IN ASSOCIATION WITH
THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE
LONDON NEW YORK PORT CHESTER
MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1990

Printed in Great Britain by The Bath Press, Avon

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Soviet–British relations.

1. Great Britain. Relations history, with Soviet Union 2. Soviet Union relations, history with Soviet Union

I. Pravda, Alex, 1947– II. Duncan, Peter J. S., 1953–

303.4'8241'047

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Soviet–British relations / edited by Alex Pravda and Peter J.S. Duncan
p. cm.

Published in association with the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

ISBN 0-521-37494-4

1. Great Britain – Foreign relations – Soviet Union. 2. Soviet Union – Foreign relations – Great Britain. I. Pravda, Alex, 1947–

II. Duncan, Peter J.S., 1953– III. Royal Institute of International Affairs.

DA47.65.S64 1990

327.41047-dc20 89-36868 CIP

ISBN 0 521 37494 4

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I Introduction: pre-*perestroika* patterns

ALEX PRAVDA

The Soviet Union is central to British defence policy and Moscow considers London to be a pivotal member of the Western alliance. Yet relations between the Soviet Union and Britain have attracted little attention and less analysis. The Soviet literature is smaller than that on relations with France or West Germany and consists largely of descriptive historical surveys.¹ What analysis exists is confined mostly to studies of Britain and British politics which pay scant attention to relations with the USSR. On the Western side there is remarkably little on contemporary relations between the two countries. We have a number of good historical studies, concentrating mostly on the pre- and immediate post-war periods.² The sparseness of the literature on the last twenty years is highlighted by the fact that two reports of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee provide perhaps the fullest information and comment on the recent period.³ Britain hardly figures in the relatively small body of literature on Soviet relations with Western Europe and what treatment it attracts is typically couched in security terms.⁴

The thin coverage of Soviet–British relations in the academic literature is a product of both scholarly focus and the nature of the subject. British foreign policy questions, outside the defence and security areas, have until very recently attracted surprisingly little academic interest. Analysts working in the Soviet foreign policy field have long neglected relations with the states of Western Europe by comparison with their extensive concern towards relations with the US and the Third World. The relative neglect of British–Soviet relations in the literature reflects not just the vagaries of academic fashion but the nature of the relations themselves. For thirty and arguably forty years after the revolution of 1917, Moscow’s relations with London were critical to Soviet foreign policy and figured centrally on the international stage. Since then the decline of British power and the rise of superpower dominance have combined to overshadow Soviet–UK relations. Even within the superpower shadow Soviet relations with Britain have had a less discernible profile than those with West Germany or

France. Elusiveness has compounded this decline in salience. Soviet bilateral relations with Britain have appeared to be less active than those with other major West European states. Paris, Rome and Bonn have conducted quite vigorous bilateral relations while London has preferred to deal with Moscow through multilateral fora, the CSCE and most notably NATO. Similarly, the Soviet Union has conducted its British policy as part of a wider strategy towards Western Europe and the Atlantic alliance. Soviet relations with Britain depend more than do relations with France or West Germany on movements in larger East–West contexts. Relations between the Soviet Union and Britain are thus particularly difficult to disentangle from the skein of broader multilateral interactions.

The fact that the strands of the relationship are woven closely into the larger pattern of Soviet relations with the United States and Western Europe does not diminish their significance or interest. Indeed, the very diffusion of British–Soviet relations makes their study as rewarding as it is difficult. While West German relations with the Soviet Union constitute the central focus of the triangular European–Atlantic–Soviet relationship, looking at this through the prism of Soviet–British relations yields a revealing perspective that sets into sharp relief the Atlanticist/European problems of managing change in East–West relations.

Soviet–British relations are significant not simply for the insights they can provide into these wider sets of relationships. Though very much a part of East–West relations, the bilateral relationship between the Soviet Union and Britain does have a life of its own, distinct though not autonomous. A degree of distinctiveness emerges, for instance, if we compare the patterns of Soviet–British and more general East–West relations over the years. While the cycles in bilateral relations have followed the overall East–West pattern, the exact contours differ significantly. A graph plotting the course of development of the two sets of relations would show the Soviet–British curve declining earlier and often more sharply at times of general decline in East–West relations but also rising earlier from the low points in the broader relationship. As Curtis Keeble chronicles in chapter 2, active hostility in relations between Britain and the fledgling Bolshevik regime in the civil war period was followed by the early establishment of formal contact. Similarly, after the Second World War relations between Britain and the Soviet Union were among the first to cool and the first to start showing signs of warming in the mid-1950s. Over twenty years later, events in Afghanistan and Poland affected Soviet relations with Britain more adversely than they did with France, Italy and West Germany. Yet it was Soviet–British relations which were among the first to show some recovery in the post-Brezhnev period. The historical record thus delineates a relationship between the two countries that has oscillated with a slightly different rhythm and within a

somewhat narrower band at the lower end of the spectrum of variation in East–West relations.

Two sets of features of the relationship have helped to account for this distinctive pattern of oscillation. One is the low intensity, the ‘thinness’ of bilateral contacts. Attitudes on both sides have tended towards cool wariness. Cultural affinities and non-governmental as well as economic ties have been weaker than those linking the Soviet Union with France, Italy or West Germany. This has made the relationship vulnerable to its other distinctive feature: ill-aligned national interests. Not only have British and Soviet interests intersected at few points; their compatibility has also been complicated by dependence on the development of broader East–West and West–West relationships. The first two sections that follow review the nature of mutual perceptions and the ‘thinness’ of contacts; the last briefly considers the configuration of interests that have shaped relations. This introductory chapter thus seeks to sketch the *established* features and patterns of the relationship before *perestroika*.

IMAGES AND PERCEPTIONS

Notoriously slippery as objects of analysis, national images and perceptions merit the careful attention they receive in chapters 3 and 4 since they affect the mutual assessment of behaviour and shape the climate in which Soviet–British relations are conducted. Through the decades the prevailing climate has been one of mutual mistrust based on distant wariness. This contrasts with the mixture of more intense emotions linking the Soviet Union with countries such as France or Germany, both countries with histories of far greater and more direct involvement with Russia and the USSR. History also affects, if to a lesser degree, mutual national images in Britain and the Soviet Union. For the British, the Soviet system still bears the imprint of imperial Russia, a regime combining the worst features of continental authoritarianism. The more recent history of the Soviet Union reinforces such negative images with Marxism–Leninism and totalitarianism. The image of the Soviet system as totalitarian, as a regime suppressing individual rights and values has, as Michael Clarke shows in chapter 4, long prevailed among the British public, officials and politicians alike, largely regardless of party affiliations. Alien in its domestic absolutism and ideology, the Soviet system also appears objectionable and threatening by virtue of an imperial expansionism often perceived to be inherent in national ambition and compounded by Marxist–Leninist messianism. For many British politicians and officials, then, the Soviet Union has seemed a threat on at least two scores: as an alien system of government and as an insecure and ambitious international power. Shaping their image of the Soviet Threat is a mixture of instinctive

antipathy to Marxism–Leninism and pragmatic mistrust of historical Russian security concerns and imperial ambitions.⁵

Given the huge disparities in power and influence between the two countries, it is hardly surprising that Britain figures far less prominently in Soviet public and elite consciousness. The Soviet picture of the West is dominated by the United States, and in the European context, France and the Federal Republic of Germany. Soviet public attitudes towards Britain may be described as ones of detached respect rather than the admiration for cultural achievement which still attaches to France or the curious blend of awe and anxiety that surrounds Germany. Britain is seen as a rather distant, old-fashioned and conservative society, nostalgic about its historical greatness rather than optimistic about its future. Among the Soviet elite these general images are amplified by assessments of Britain found in the specialist literature which here, as in other areas, reflects as well as refracts opinion within policy circles. As Peter Duncan shows in chapter 3, Soviet specialists have tended to highlight the economic ills and social injustices of a divided society ruled by an entrenched elite serving the interests of ‘monopoly capital’. British ruling circles have appeared to their Soviet counterparts as old-fashioned, formal and aloof if polite in manner. Andrei Gromyko, who once served as Ambassador to London, recalls in his memoirs how Anthony Eden conformed to his picture of a typical Englishman: ‘Tall, gaunt, slightly phlegmatic and almost always smartly dressed in black.’⁶ Another former Ambassador to London, Ivan Maisky, recalls his Minister, Litvinov, telling him of the existence within the British elite of class-based hostility towards socialism and *realpolitik* inclination towards co-operation with the Soviet Union.⁷ Soviet commentators and officials still tend to see these two tendencies as creating a duality, a certain ambivalence in British elite attitudes towards the Soviet Union that makes them unpredictable and unreliable as a partner. A mix of instinctive antipathy and pragmatic wariness on the British side has thus reinforced Soviet uncertainty and detached suspicion.

CONTACTS AND TIES

Distance and wary detachment in mutual images and perceptions correspond to a pattern of contacts and ties that may be described as low in intensity.

Cultural contacts have run at a relatively low and fluctuating level. The regular educational, scientific and artistic exchanges which began in earnest thirty years ago have remained hostage to the vicissitudes of the overall political relationship. As John Morison points out in chapter 8, cultural relations are a sensitive barometer of political relations and have usually been the first to reflect a downturn in the general climate, as happened, for instance, in the aftermath of the invasion of Afghanistan and the imposition of martial law in Poland. Slow to build up, cultural relations have failed generally to realise the full potential of

British interest in Russian culture and, more markedly, have fallen short in capitalising on the popularity in the Soviet Union of English literature and especially language. In part this reflects the difficulties of working with the Soviet bureaucratic machine which, until Gorbachev, had regarded with suspicion attempts to spread Western values. In part, too, the failure to take full advantage of Soviet public interest in things English stems from the low priority London has typically accorded cultural diplomacy, an activity promoted far more vigorously by Italy, West Germany and France. The Continental intellectual tradition that helps to explain the differences between British and other West European states' cultural relations with the Soviet Union also partly accounts for distinctions in non-governmental political contacts.

The presence on the Continental political scene of large Marxist parties and trade union movements has meant that their contacts with Moscow have traditionally formed an important element in overall national relations with the Soviet Union. Differing attitudes to the USSR have often figured significantly in domestic politics, making relations with the Soviet Union a salient if divisive issue. In Britain the question of contacts with the Soviet Union has been neither as prominent nor as controversial. One obvious reason lies in the very different composition, political orientation and influence of the Left in the United Kingdom. The most evident disparity in the configuration of the Left in many Continental countries and the United Kingdom is that between communist parties. By comparison with France or Italy Britain has scarcely had a serious communist movement. This has clearly affected Moscow's conduct of relations with British communists. Coming on top of the usual problems posed by political disagreements, the derisory electoral performance of the British party has prompted Moscow, at least over the last thirty years, to keep relations at a low level.

The Soviet Union has paid far more attention to fostering ties with two components of the broad Left exercising far greater influence on society and policy: the peace movements and the trade unions. The Soviet Union has consistently given declaratory though not material support to the various peace groups, notably CND, not so much for their leftist political tendencies as for their influence on public opinion on defence issues. Potential policy utility rather than political affinity has also shaped Soviet attitudes towards the trade union movement. As Mike Bowker and Peter Shearman stress in chapter 7, when choosing partners, whether within the trade union movement or elsewhere in Britain, Moscow has typically made attitudes and benefit to the Soviet Union and its foreign policy the most important criteria.

Pragmatism and regard for Soviet foreign policy interests have also shaped Moscow's relations with the most important organised force within the Left in Britain, the Labour Party. While evincing public preference, albeit mixed with critical comment, for Labour's policies over those of the Tories, Soviet

commentators have often found it difficult to distinguish Socialist from Conservative foreign policies. In Moscow's eyes Labour's international stance has suffered from two disabilities which have tended to complicate relations. First, those on the British Left often feel even more strongly about the Soviet pursuit of coercive policies at home and, particularly in Eastern Europe, than do their Tory counterparts. Secondly, in order to deflect criticism from strongly patriotic opinion within the party, the trade unions and the electorate, Labour pledges on foreign and especially defence policy have often undergone substantial trimming in their translation into policy once the party is in government.⁸ Such pragmatic shifts, as well as the perennial divisions within the Labour Party, have often created the impression in Moscow of a lack of trustworthiness and principle. Gromyko, for instance, writes derisively of the Labour Party's ideological foundation under Gaitskell as that of 'the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, plus some petty bourgeois admixtures'.⁹ As the Soviet Union sets great store by predictability and policy consistency, Moscow may well prefer dealing with Conservative rather than Labour governments.¹⁰

The low level of Soviet contacts with the Left in Britain and the adjustment of these contacts to pragmatic foreign policy utility considerations has meant that non-governmental political ties have had little direct apparent impact on overall Soviet-British relations. The same pragmatic factors have shaped a far thicker relationship with the Left in Germany, particularly with the SPD, and have significantly affected Soviet relations with the FRG. The absence of a strong non-governmental strand has had mixed indirect effects on Soviet-British relations. On the one hand relations have developed in a less politically and ideologically contentious domestic atmosphere than is the case with France, Italy or West Germany; on the other, the relationship has not had the important political constituency and lobby it enjoys where ties with the Left are far stronger.

The area usually expected to provide non-contentious and stable support for strengthening bilateral relations is trade. Commercial relations formed the earliest links between Britain and Soviet Russia and have since proved a resilient if slender bilateral connection. The 1921 trade agreement marked a pioneering move to recognise the new Bolshevik regime. Britain was the first Western ally to try and normalise relations and considered trade the most appropriate instrument. As Lloyd George told the House of Commons in February 1920: 'We have failed to restore Russia to sanity by force. I believe we can save her by trade. Commerce has a sobering influence in its operations.'¹¹

The extent to which trade proved able to help relations was conditioned, as Michael Kaser chronicles in chapter 9, by disruptive changes in Soviet policy. Commercial contacts did little to cushion these. Still, the United Kingdom remained the Soviet Union's leading Western trading partner until the mid-

1960s when the expanding volume of exchanges quickly dwarfed Britain's sluggish share. Over the last ten years Britain has ranked between sixth and ninth in OECD exports to the Soviet Union, coming well below all major competitors. France and Italy have stayed comfortably in the top half dozen, a group headed of course by the FRG.¹² The reasons for the slow growth in trade that underlies Britain's slippage in the league table of Soviet Western partners are both political and commercial. The general climate of political relations has on occasion affected the development of trade. The series of expulsions of Soviet representatives from London in 1971 and the freeze in political and diplomatic relations between 1979 and 1983 may well have impeded the success of British companies in securing contracts.¹³ On the British side, political tensions can foster an impression in business circles that the government disapproves of trade with the USSR.¹⁴ A more specific source of difficulty has been the constraints that COCOM restrictions place on British sales of high technology, a field which figures importantly in UK exports to the Soviet Union.¹⁵ COCOM therefore attracts occasional complaints from British businessmen as well as perennial criticism from Moscow. In general, however, the range of potential exports covered is relatively small and Michael Kaser suggests that the hampering effect on British exports has not been particularly great. Nor indeed has the impact of the overall changes in political relations: the analysis of data in chapter 9 shows that the historical pattern of Soviet trade with Britain seems to be freer of fluctuation than that with other major Western partners.

Stability at low levels of trade seems, therefore, largely to be the result of a range of economic and commercial factors. The 'fit' between the Soviet and British economies is less good than that between the USSR and other West European trading partners. Industrial structures are less compatible and patterns of exchange less conducive to expansion of trade.¹⁶ The high expectations set by agreements reached in 1975 when Mr Wilson extended a £950 million credit were disappointed when the Soviet Union failed to take advantage of the facility offered.¹⁷ More recently, British exporters have suffered from the fact that the United Kingdom, unlike its European competitors, does not import large quantities of energy from the Soviet Union. Since Moscow has traditionally sought to balance trade where possible with individual hard currency countries, Britain has been at a disadvantage. West European states such as West Germany, France and Italy, which import large quantities of Soviet natural gas, have been better placed to make counter-trade arrangements.

Furthermore, as Mr Gorbachev told Mrs Thatcher in December 1987, British companies are seen as less competitive than those from other West European states.¹⁸ It does seem that even in some traditionally strong export sectors British companies perform less well than their West German, French or Italian counterparts. This may be linked to issues of British business approach and

culture. As Anna Dyer suggests in chapter 10, British companies tend to be less interested in penetrating the bureaucracy that surrounds the Soviet market, a tendency noted by the 1986 Foreign Affairs Committee report on UK–Soviet relations which described British businessmen as often lacking in the ‘persistence, tolerance, flexibility and patience required’.¹⁹ While Italian, French and particularly West German firms are prepared to invest steady effort over a period of several years and ultimately reap the benefits of a lasting relationship, the horizons of most British companies are limited to the short term. Only a handful of the 1,200 that do business with the Soviet Union have the commitment or the facilities to compete effectively on the Soviet market. Of the 600 members of the Soviet–British Chamber of Commerce, a mere ten large companies account for approximately one-quarter of all exports to the Soviet Union.²⁰ This narrow base of British business interests in the Soviet Union has policy as well as commercial dimensions. The low level of overall Soviet trade – running at something like 1 per cent of British foreign trade, approximately on a par with Turkey – means that commercial support for better relations with the Soviet Union is relatively weak. Soviet commentators tend to exaggerate the interest of British business circles in Soviet trade as well as their efforts to influence government.²¹ Soviet–British relations have typically lacked a powerful lobby capable not only of cushioning disruptions in ties but, more importantly, of promoting a thicker and more stable relationship.

POLITICAL AND SECURITY RELATIONS AND INTERESTS

The climate of political, diplomatic and security relations has clearly set the dominant tone of the overall relationship between the two countries. This dimension of relations, particularly in the security sphere, presents a pattern of contact that is stronger and more extensive than in other areas. Nevertheless, political relations are still low in intensity when compared to Soviet contacts with other major West European states. Symptomatic of this is the relative infrequency of high-level political contact between London and Moscow when compared to substantial periods of near-institutionalised summity between Soviet leaders and their American, German and French counterparts. As in other spheres of the Soviet–British relationship, bilateral relations have been confined to a narrow band of issues. The low level of bilateral contact reflects the paucity of direct interests linking the two countries, interests that they can both best deal with on a bilateral rather than multilateral basis. Neither country has vital interests of a political rather than security nature that directly involve the other.²² This contrasts starkly with Soviet relations with the Federal Republic of Germany insofar as they share direct interests particularly vital for the FRG,

including the issue of ethnic Germans resident in the USSR as well as the obvious question of the development of relations with the GDR and its East European neighbours, issues over which the Soviet Union has exercised a dominant sway. Where British and Soviet interests intersect they form part of wider sets of issues which involve multilateral structures on the British side. Neither human rights questions nor matters of Third World conflict, let alone British and European security issues, lend themselves easily to bilateral negotiations.

While the agenda for bilateral negotiations has remained very restricted, the spectrum of issues for dialogue between Moscow and London has typically ranged more broadly than is the case in Moscow's relations with Bonn or Paris. The Soviet-British pool of issues suitable for useful discussion is wider if less deep. The 'wide and shallow' nature of the agenda mirrors the breadth and diffuseness of British international experience, interests and to some extent influence. Soviet estimates of Britain's international status have tended to highlight its global as well as Euro-Atlantic standing. While Soviet analysts stress the international decline of the United Kingdom and the tendency of London to entertain unrealistic ambitions,²³ based on past rather than present capabilities, they give more credence to British than to French claims to global interests. Britain is still often described as a major factor in world politics,²⁴ as a 'second-rank leading power', and is valued for its Third World experience. Permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council and the respect London commands in other international organisations reinforces Britain's global status in Soviet eyes. Moscow has often found it useful to consult London on regional issues, particularly in those areas where Soviet involvement exceeds knowledge and experience.²⁵

Two factors have coloured Soviet-British exchanges on Third World issues as on other questions: a high degree of friction and the United States connection. Precisely because Britain retains interests in the Third World and still aspires to global influence, London is sensitive to signs of Soviet expansion and reacts more critically than do other major West European states. At the same time, the British tend to take a somewhat less automatically ideological view than do the Americans of the Soviet pursuit of regional influence. Exchanges with London, therefore, provide Moscow with an informed, critical yet less emotionally charged view of Third World issues than they get from Washington. In substantive terms, however, Britain's political proximity to the United States and its very limited global capabilities confine exchanges to consultation rather than anything approaching negotiation. Britain may adopt a somewhat more detached stance than the United States, yet, in Soviet eyes, almost invariably supports American policy.

The United States connection also bears centrally on Britain's relations with

the Soviet Union in the European arena. Soviet assessments have generally depicted Britain's European affiliation as lacking in the strong commitment evident among its major European Community partners; Britain has appeared as a rather reluctant European in Moscow as well as elsewhere.²⁶ Undoubtedly a major force within the Community, Britain is seen as adopting an Atlanticist rather than European stance on many critical policy issues. The basis on which the UK qualifies as a 'medium power of the first rank' in Soviet eyes, remains predominantly Atlantic rather than European. Its Atlantic approach to Europe means that London takes a rather broader view of most European issues and considers that key European questions fall within the ambit of multi- rather than bilateral political discussion with the Soviet Union. For instance, Britain has generally displayed less interest than has France, Italy or Germany in Eastern Europe *per se*, except in the wider context of human rights issues. Britain's concern with Soviet and East European human rights records is inherent in the emphasis placed on the objectionable moral nature of the Soviet system, the totalitarian dimension of the Soviet threat. Characteristically, it was on Basket Three of the Helsinki process that Britain played an active and at times leading critical CSCE role.²⁷

The broader processes of European political détente associated with Helsinki have figured less prominently in British–Soviet exchanges on European issues. Paris, Rome and Bonn have provided more fruitful and important partners for Moscow on the mainstream agenda of East–West political relations within Europe because they have a strong commitment to the notion of détente as a process of change. They have therefore ranked far higher in Soviet estimates as European interlocutors.²⁸ Britain, by contrast, has shown itself chary of détente as a process of changing East–West relations in Europe since the shifts involved have appeared to threaten or at least weaken Atlantic links which are essential to NATO, European security and, perhaps most important from London's standpoint, Britain's Euro-Atlantic standing and role.

At the core of post-war anxiety about the Soviet threat lies traditional British concern about the emergence of a hegemonic power on the European continent exercising political domination rather than simply military primacy. Actual fears of the Soviet Union posing a military threat to Western Europe have long receded; over thirty years ago Anthony Eden minuted to Cabinet that he did not believe the Russians had any plans for military aggression in the West.²⁹ However, Eden's apprehension about the potential danger and challenge to Europe represented by Soviet economic and political influence, backed by military power, has remained at the forefront of British thinking about the Soviet threat. London has tended to place far more consistent emphasis than Rome, Paris or Bonn on Soviet determination to drive wedges in the Western Alliance. Its stress on Moscow's 'splitting' strategy stems not so much from a more

percipient or even different understanding of Soviet objectives as from a greater concern that *any* loosening of Atlantic ties represents a particular threat to British interests. After all, it was London which played the key role in initially inducing the United States to make a firm commitment to Europe on the basis of a Soviet threat to West European democracy. The American commitment and its associated NATO–Atlantic linkages clearly remain the keystone of the arch spanning Britain’s Atlantic influence and its standing in Europe. Not unnaturally, Soviet moves to thicken bilateral political relations with Western European states, especially the FRG, raise a spectre of wedge-driving and decoupling. London is therefore peculiarly reluctant to engage with the Soviet Union on a bilateral basis on political issues of a European nature. As Margot Light notes in chapter 6, Britain has kept bilateral political relations, as distinct from multilateral relations, to a minimum. Moscow fully appreciates London’s position and has therefore concentrated European diplomatic efforts on France – which is inherently inclined to assert national independence of the United States – and in particular on the FRG, which has the greatest national interest in long-term political rapprochement in Europe.

Soviet analysts see Britain’s standing in Europe as determined by its Atlantic links. They view London as Washington’s most loyal European ally and in turn see Britain’s influence in Europe hinging on its special relationship with the US. As seen by Moscow, the strongest element of that relationship and indeed the firmest basis for British influence in Europe lies in the military sphere. Britain qualifies militarily as the most important European member of NATO ³⁰ in as much as it alone possesses a strategic and nuclear deterrent, deploys considerable forces on the central front and plays a full role in the integrated military structure of NATO. British interests and opinion thus bear importantly on all NATO questions, particularly those involving the nature of transatlantic links. The security standing of Britain and its key involvement in European and also out-of-area NATO activity makes London both an important yet difficult interlocutor for Moscow.

Military issues make up a thicker strand of common concern shared by the two countries yet they also present the most intractable conflicts of interest as they are all inherently adversarial. Moreover, security issues overwhelmingly, of course, form part of a multilateral rather than bilateral agenda. British policy towards the Soviet Union is shaped in security matters, to an even greater extent than in other areas, by Alliance considerations. For instance, as Christoph Bluth notes in chapter 5, British concern to pre-empt unilateral moves to reduce forces on the central front prompted London to play an active role in promoting MBFR talks. The fact that Moscow has not been able to deal with London on security matters as a French-style independent actor does not, however, negate the considerable importance of the security dimension of the relationship. In some

circumstances Britain's very embeddedness in NATO, as well as its own military capability, have enhanced the salience of London for Moscow and vice versa. On strategic nuclear issues, Britain's national capability and its integration in NATO have enlarged areas of common concern and potential interaction. The fact that Britain's deterrent is targeted against Moscow (the 'Moscow criterion') increases the importance for the Soviet Union of British nuclear forces beyond their numbers. As Christoph Bluth notes, Soviet analysts do not rule out the possibility that in a crisis Britain could assert national targeting priorities. Possession of a nuclear deterrent force gives Britain an interest in preventing nuclear proliferation, seeking to limit testing to some extent and halt the spread of chemical weapons. All these are areas in which London has played an important part in multilateral negotiations involving Moscow.³¹

Generally, however, Moscow sees Britain's 'independent' nuclear deterrent as highly dependent on the United States both in a strategic and technical sense. Security links with the US in Soviet eyes give London the kind of access to Washington not shared by other NATO members. Such access, and the special relationship of which it forms part, have considerably raised the status and value of Britain in Soviet eyes as an interlocutor on security as well as regional and other political issues. The value of the special relationship has of course declined since the 1950s and early 1960s when Britain could still perform some mediating or at least communication role between the United States and the Soviet Union. As direct superpower relations developed, the scope for any such role narrowed. The value of Britain's special relationship has also to some extent been reduced by the rise of West Germany to prominence as the United States' key European ally, at least in political regional terms. Still, there is no zero-sum relationship between West German and British ties and influence with the United States. London's close links with Washington have continued to provide a basis for British involvement, albeit increasingly an indirect one, in superpower relations.

Looking not merely at the security strand of Soviet-British relations but at the relationship as a whole, it is clear that the circumscribed agenda of common concerns and directly negotiable issues limits both the stake and the leverage on either side. The highly asymmetrical nature of the relationship means that the Soviet Union should possess potentially far greater leverage, in the form of sanctions. Yet moves such as political and military pressure on NATO which might operate as sanctions have in fact only helped to further objectives to maintain firm Atlantic links. The incentives that Moscow can offer London are also few since Britain has remained wary of rapprochement, again for reasons of Atlantic solidity. On the British side, leverage has been limited to trade, which has generally run at low levels, and co-operation or opposition in various multilateral fora on political and security issues. In none of the above areas have considerations of British policy movement constituted a sufficiently important

factor for Moscow to act as effective leverage. The Soviet Union has long considered relations with London as important but less likely to yield as high a return on the same investment as relations with Paris or Bonn. For the last thirty years Britain has figured importantly for the role it plays and the returns it may yield in larger sets of relations with the West in general and the United States in particular. For Britain the larger structural dimension of the relationship has also proved decisive. Relations clearly figure more prominently in calculations in London than in Moscow. But they figure as part of a more complex equation that also involves Washington and Bonn. Considerations bearing on the Western Alliance and British domestic politics, rather than changes in the nature of the Soviet Union and threat, have tended to shape British policy towards Moscow. London has tended to view rapid changes in East–West relations as likely to disturb the stability of the framework which largely defines Britain’s established international position and role. Hence, while remaining wary of Soviet expansionism, London has tried on occasion to correct destabilising tension as well as to warn against excessive détente in relations between Moscow and major Western capitals. British policy, as Margot Light notes, has typically been a dual one of armed vigilance coupled with a search for agreements.

It is largely British concern to be both vigilant and prudent, to help temper the extremes of East–West relations, that accounts for the distinctive historical pattern of relations between the two countries noted earlier. In both the ‘first’ and ‘second’ Cold Wars, it was British policy moves which initiated shifts in the bilateral relationship. Soon after the end of World War II the United Kingdom took a key role in alerting the West to the dangers of the Soviet threat; by the mid-1950s London was trying to play an active part in seeking to engage the USSR politically and relieve some of the Cold War tension. Similarly, Mrs Thatcher, after taking a harder stance than most of her allies towards the Soviet Union in 1979–83 – perhaps uncharacteristically doctrinaire by standards of traditional British pragmatism – sought to improve dialogue with Moscow at a time when general East–West tensions remained high. Soviet–British relations during the first three years of the Gorbachev leadership generally ran ahead of those between the Soviet Union and other West European states. In line with traditional British concern to strike a balance and avoid extremes, as East–West relations have improved apace since 1987, so unease seems to have grown about the destabilising effects of such a rapid new détente and London has played a prominent role in cautioning against premature changes in Western security policy.

To a marked extent, then, the contours of the last decade and indeed of current British policy and Soviet–British relations seem to conform to the historical pattern: oscillation between distant coolness, friction and some degree of warmth. At the same time, the last four or five years have seen the political