

The Brezhnev Doctrine: Interventionism and Limited Sovereignty in the Soviet Bloc

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Established by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev in a September 1968 speech, the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine justified the recent Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia, which halted the Prague Spring, a brief period during the summer of 1968 of political liberalization and reform within the Czechoslovak government under the leadership of Alexander Dubček. The doctrine upheld the right of the Soviet Union to protect communist rule through military intervention in the Eastern bloc in cases where “the foundations of Marxism-Leninism were threatened” (Roman 1). Thus, for example, the Brezhnev Doctrine retroactively absolved the brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 nearly twelve years earlier (Kienbaum and Grote 223–226). In fact, the underlying principle of the Brezhnev Doctrine stood as a mainstay of Soviet foreign policy long before 1968: the Soviet Union and its puppet states devised the Warsaw Pact – a treaty of mutual defense and military aid signed in Warsaw, Poland on May 14, 1955 – in part to cement Soviet hegemony during the process of destalinization in Eastern Europe. Regardless, the Brezhnev Doctrine overtly violated the United Nations Charter and even some of the central provisions of the Warsaw Treaty Organization itself (Chafetz 18).

An adequate understanding of the Brezhnev Doctrine, its precedents, and its eventual renunciation demands a deeper historical context. Following the foundation of the Warsaw Pact in May 1955 and two suppressed uprisings in Hungary (autumn 1956) and Czechoslovakia (summer 1968), the Brezhnev Doctrine formalized the pre-existing Soviet policy of limited sovereignty accorded to the Eastern European satellite states (Crump 61). The doctrine purported to validate any Soviet military intervention in the Eastern bloc orchestrated “with the aim of defending

the gains of socialism” by repressing activities and political reforms deemed “counter-revolutionary” (Holden 17). The Soviet regime strove to strike a balance between the artifice of autonomous governance for communist states within its sphere of *de jure* influence and the fortification of its *de facto* total control over the lands it had seized from Nazi occupation in the Second World War. It was not until the tenure of Soviet statesman Mikhail Gorbachev that the Brezhnev Doctrine was officially abjured, with the policy of self-determination jocularly known as the Sinatra Doctrine (so named because the nations of Eastern Europe could now go “their way,” an homage to Frank Sinatra’s song “My Way”) supplanting it in the mid-to-late 1980s (Wilton 20).

The prime example of Soviet interventionism in Eastern Europe came, as mentioned earlier, in August 1968 when Warsaw Pact forces stormed Czechoslovakia to crush the Prague Spring and abolish the liberal reforms of the Dubček government, including the loosening of restrictions on free speech, free press, and travel; the cessation of the government censorship program; the relaxation of law enforcement by state police; and the rehabilitation of political prisoners (Bischof, Karner, and Ruggenthaler 7–9). On the night of August 20, roughly 175,000 Warsaw Pact troops entered Czechoslovakia to occupy Prague and oust Dubček and his allies (Goodman 42). The indignant Czechoslovak government and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia “demanded speedy withdrawal of the occupation forces” (Goodman 43). The Soviets ignored this ultimatum, infiltrated the heart of Prague, and forced Dubček to resign and repudiate his program of “Socialism with a Human Face,” installing a hard-line, pro-Soviet government in his place. Popular outrage in Eastern Europe over the actions of the Brezhnev administration and fears among Communist Party grandees that word of the event and pleas for retribution would

reach sympathetic Western ears, especially if relayed by the increasingly anti-Soviet Romanian government, compelled the formulation of the official policy of limited sovereignty that Western observers soon dubbed the Brezhnev Doctrine (Bracke 375–381).

Contrary to popular perception, the Brezhnev Doctrine had constituted a pillar of Soviet foreign policy and bloc relations well before the tenure of Leonid Brezhnev (1966–1982) and represented, instead, a formal promulgation of the basic Marxist-Leninist precept of “socialist internationalism” occasioned by the furor over the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia (Corfield 1). As legal scholar Charles T. Baroch contends, the Brezhnev Doctrine demonstrated that “Communist-ruled states [had] never enjoy[ed] genuine sovereignty or genuine rights of territorial integrity, that the Soviet Union [might] at any time it deem[ed] proper send troops into any such states in order to pressure Communist rule” (Baroch 686). In broad ideological terms, socialist internationalism undergirded the longstanding struggle of the Communist Party to identify any threat to “traditional socialist norms anywhere in the bloc as a menace to [Soviet] prestige and stability” and, thus, to eradicate any such threat by “subordinating the national interests of its allies to the welfare of the entire socialist community” (Ouimet 65). Relevantly, socialist internationalism also took on a social and cultural color tantamount to that of the Red Scare in the United States, thereby lending the Brezhnev Doctrine further credence. During the Czechoslovak episode in 1968, Soviet *apparatchiks* and propagandists reproached Dubček and his supporters with conspiring with the West, and political theoretician Sergei Kovalev even alleged in *Pravda* that “foreign imperialists [in league with] internal émigrés [had allegedly turned the Prague Spring into a] peaceful counterrevolution . . . no less insidious [than a violent rebellion]” (Ouimet 66).

In the view of many scholars and Kremlinologists, not only did the Brezhnev Doctrine simply codify the pre-existing Marxist-Leninist dogma of socialist internationalism, but also the Warsaw Pact was formed, in part, to equip the Soviet Union to wield unchallenged dominion over the Eastern bloc and the allied armies through the sort of military aggression later legitimated by the Brezhnev Doctrine. Accordingly, the Warsaw Pact might not, as it had seemed to most observers in 1955, have arisen to match the sophisticated military coordination of NATO, but rather to buttress Soviet control of Eastern Europe during and following destalinization. Indeed, as scholar Glenn R. Chafetz puts it, “the problem of the bloc armies’ political and operational reliability suggests that the Warsaw Pact’s main function was control of the allied armies” and “ideological ... legitimacy” (Chafetz 23 and 27). After Stalin’s death in 1953, the Soviet Union and the satellite states embarked on an era of gradual liberal reform, rolling back Stalin’s draconian methods of repression and indoctrination. With this reform and relaxed government control came fear of popular revolt against Soviet hegemony in the Eastern bloc. Ergo, the Soviet-allied states convened in May 1955 to forge a military coalition that would shield Soviet power from internal opposition and dissent without explicitly resorting to Stalinist methods (Chafetz 22–23). Judging from WTO documents and pronouncements from presiding officials, the underlying purpose of the organization was, as one seminal document summed it up, “the preservation of the gains of socialism” (Holden 21). This characterization corroborates the notion that the Warsaw Pact, far from a “single bloc opposed to the NATO powers,” centered less on defense against external foes than on defense against internal objectors (Crump 73).

The Brezhnev Doctrine demonstrably flouted the conventions of the United Nations and nevertheless managed to enjoy full impunity. As per Article Two, Paragraph Four of the Charter

of the United Nations, a binding document to which the Soviet Union was signatory in June 1945:

All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations. (Glazer 177)

Hence, insofar as its use of force contravened the above article of the United Nations Charter, the Brezhnev Doctrine fell afoul of international law. Furthermore, Article Two, Paragraph Seven compounded the illegality of the policy:

Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matter to settlement under the present Charter. (Glazer 177)

In addition, dissimilar to other cases, Article Fifty-One, which protects the right of a nation to self-defense, would not have provided a sturdy basis for the Soviet interventions that the Brezhnev Doctrine purported to justify. Nevertheless, in spite of these categorical infringements of the United Nations Charter, the Czechoslovak government acquiesced to Soviet duress and enjoined the Security Council not to assess the legality of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in

August 1968. Amid Western demands for an investigation into the matter by the United Nations, the Security Council brazenly withdrew the subject from the agenda (Goodman 42–44). Between then and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, no other member nation had called for a discussion of either the situation in Czechoslovakia or the incongruity of the Brezhnev Doctrine with international law (Glazer 177–178).

In tandem with abrogating several provisions of the United Nations Charter, the Brezhnev Doctrine's validation of interventionism within the Soviet bloc overtly breached the Warsaw Pact itself. Two key provisions of the treaty, Articles One and Eight, pertain to this evaluation:

[Article One] The Contracting Parties undertake, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations Organization, to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force, and to settle their international disputes peacefully and in such manner as will not jeopardize international peace and security.

[Article Eight] The Contracting Parties declare that they will act in a spirit of friendship and cooperation with a view to further developing and fostering economic and cultural intercourse with one another, each adhering to the principle of respect for the independence and sovereignty of the others and non-interference in their internal affairs. (Glazer 178)

In view of the Soviet-orchestrated military interventions in the Eastern bloc previously discussed, it seemed that the Soviet Union had no compunction about disregarding the core tenets of

the Warsaw Pact safeguarding self-determination and proscribing interventionism, despite a co-eval tilt towards self-governance in Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, according to legal scholar Stephen G. Glazer and historian Gerard Holden, the architects of Soviet statecraft frequently invoked Article Four as grounds for limited use of force:

In the event of armed attack ... on one or more of the Parties to the Treaty ... each of the Parties to the Treaty, in the exercise of its right to individual or collective self-defense in accordance with Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations Organization, shall immediately, either individually or in agreement with other Parties to the Treaty, come to the assistance of the state or states attacked with all such means as it deems necessary, including armed force. (Glazer 179)

The operative phrase in the article was “collective self-defense,” as this was often construed by the Soviets as a generalized warrant for internal intervention aimed at purging “counter-revolutionary” forces in the Eastern bloc (Holden 11).

The Brezhnev Doctrine, a policy espoused by the Soviet government in 1968 to contrive retroactive justification for the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and the putsch against Alexander Dubček, had already shaped Soviet foreign policy well before Brezhnev’s administration through the Marxist-Leninist concept of socialist internationalism and perhaps by virtue of the ulterior motive – principally, to entrench Soviet dominion over the Eastern bloc during the process of destalinization – behind the formation of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. Furthermore, the Brezhnev Doctrine, with its endorsement of armed intervention and use of force, ran

roughshod over the Charter of the United Nations and the Warsaw Pact itself. In a contemporary context, the Brezhnev Doctrine, Soviet adventurism and brinksmanship in Eastern Europe, and the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia should endure in the annals of history as a cautionary tale against interventionism and contempt for human rights, national sovereignty, and the art of war. From Czechoslovakia to Hungary, to Vietnam, to Grenada, to Iraq, to Afghanistan, modern military interventions aimed at exacting vengeance on “unconventional enemies” or “non-state actors” seem never to produce the desired results and often entail the perpetration of war crimes and infractions of international law, yielding ruinous consequences for both sides dismissed by leaders and pundits as “collateral damage.” Within the larger context of World War II, the Brezhnev Doctrine offers a harrowing insight into the extent to which the Soviets betrayed their avowed role as the venerable emancipators of Eastern Europe from the tyranny of the Nazis. Although Eastern Europe was no longer mired in the carnage and privations of war and, after Stalin’s death, no longer subjected to nearly the same degree of political repression, the Soviet Union periodically meddled in the national affairs of the Eastern bloc states and flexed its military muscle to crystallize its reign and dragoon dissidents into submission.

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