

SOVIET PERESTROIKA, THE END OF THE COLD WAR AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM.

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The end of the Cold War and the unprecedented cooperation between former bitter rivals—the United States and the Soviet Union—led to a profound transformation of the international system. The extent to which international relations changed is often hard to appreciate without a backdrop of comparison with the status quo ante—the state of the world on the eve of perestroika in the Soviet Union.

The early 1980s are often called the years of the “second Cold War.” In March 1983 President Ronald Reagan unveiled his new objective of building a protective anti-ballistic shield around the U.S. territory—the Strategic Defense Initiative, dubbed “Star Wars” by its opponents in the United States. In November 1983, in response to the massive program of development of Soviet intermediate-range “SS-20” missiles the United States and other NATO countries began the deployment of intermediate “Pershing” and cruise missiles in Western Europe. Reacting to this move, the Soviet side abruptly walked out of U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations. Fear of nuclear war returned for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In addition to the global strategic competition, both countries’ political leaders were denouncing the other’s socio-political system as unacceptable on moral terms. Ronald Reagan called the Soviet Union the “Evil Empire,” leaders of which could not be trusted, and the Soviet propaganda worked actively to portray the ills of American democracy at home and its imperialist behavior abroad. Military spending became a major burden on both countries’ economy, rising up to 15-20% of the Soviet GNP and leading to record budget deficits of the Reagan administration. By 1985, it became obvious that to avoid the dangerous confrontation, a new approach was required in the U.S.-Soviet relations to break the existing deadlock.

Such a breakthrough in U.S.-Soviet relations became possible after Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev became the new General Secretary in the Soviet Union. A series of initiatives begun by Gorbachev in 1985 transformed not only the Soviet foreign policy and the U.S.-Soviet relations, but the entire international system, and culminated in the end of the Cold War.

By 1991, a new state of international relations was characterized by the unprecedented agreements on disarmament concluded between East and West, solemnly announced rejection of use of force in international relations, reinforced cooperation of major powers with a strengthened role of the United Nations, Soviet retreat from Afghanistan and resolution of important regional conflicts in the third world, integration of Europe no longer divided into two blocs, and development of new democracies—all on the basis of the emerging multipolarity and genuine multilateralism in international politics.

The Vision.

Most of these changes were a product of Gorbachev's new vision for the world, which was first outlined in his book *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper&Row, 1987), and then most eloquently in his speech to the U.N. General Assembly on December 7, 1988. Many of Gorbachev's supporters within the Soviet leadership contributed significantly to the development of this set of ideas, most importantly Alexander Yakovlev and Anatoly Chernyaev. This vision comprised a number of basic principles: rejection of the use or threat of use of force as instruments of foreign policy; freedom of choice of the political system by the peoples as a universal principle, to which there should be no exceptions; deideologization of interstate relations; supremacy of the common human values; reasonable sufficiency rather than strict parity in armaments, multilateral cooperation in resolution of regional crises.

Another important part of Gorbachev's vision was the idea of a common European home, which ultimately made possible the unification of Germany, and the signing of the Paris Charter for Europe stretching potentially from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Gorbachev's vision for Europe was one of a continent without borders, where people and ideas would move freely without fear of war. In this Europe, both military blocs would gradually dissolve their military organizations, and the security functions would be taken over by the newly strengthened OSCE framework, and the United Nations.

Not all the ideas of new thinking found their realization, and some produced unintended consequences, but they provided the impetus for the unprecedented change, which we now call the end of the Cold War.

This paper will address the main developments leading to the end of the Cold War as they were initiated by the Soviet leadership and in most cases reciprocated by the U.S. and Western European leaders. Such an approach contests one popular interpretation of the end of the Cold War developed mainly in the United States, which claims that the radical change in Soviet positions on arms control and regional conflicts was the result of the assertive policy and arms buildup of the first Reagan administration, which essentially forced the Soviet Union to confront the reality of its decline and opt out of the competition.¹

Arms Control and U.S.-Soviet Relations.

Assessments of the Soviet strategic capabilities and prospects of Soviet behavior developed by the CIA in the early 1980s present a picture not of a declining opponent, but of a strong and dangerous rival, who had recently achieved a full strategic parity with the United States. In 1981, the U.S. intelligence community concluded that the Soviet leaders "view their current strategic position as supporting the conduct of an assertive foreign policy and the expansion of Soviet power and influence abroad."² CIA analysts were pessimistic regarding the possibility that change in leadership would lead to changes in policy, "the membership of the Soviet Politburo

has changed substantially during the last 10 years, but this has apparently not altered Soviet strategic force objectives.”³ No conciliatory gestures on the part of the Soviet Union were anticipated by the Reagan administration.

And yet, the first breakthrough in arms control came very early on in perestroika—in April 1985 Gorbachev put a halt on the countermeasures to the U.S. deployment of Pershings in Europe, while at the same time canceling the further Soviet deployment of SS-20. In August of the same year, the Soviet leaders announced a moratorium on all nuclear tests, and then proposed an unprecedented on-site seismic monitoring by foreign scientists. They also offered to make the moratorium indefinite if the U.S. stopped nuclear testing. The American response was negative.

A series of summits between Ronald Reagan, and later George Bush and Gorbachev gave an opportunity for the American and Soviet leaders to establish personal trust and achieve further breakthroughs in very complex questions. In 1985 in **Geneva**, Reagan and Gorbachev made a joint statement, which reflected a sincere belief that both leaders held dear—that nuclear war could never be won and therefore should never be fought. This was precisely the belief and the principle that brought the two leaders together, and opened the possibility for other bold changes in the formerly adversarial relationship. The meeting in Geneva was followed by the Soviet proposal calling for the total elimination of all nuclear weapons announced in January 1986.

During the next summit, in **Reykjavik** in October 1986, during the difficult negotiations on strategic weapons, a true meeting of the minds occurred when both leaders discussed their deepest conviction, which was not fully shared by their governments on either side—that a complete elimination of nuclear weapons was possible. The two leaders came close to reaching a historic agreement on substantial cuts leading to further total elimination of strategic nuclear weapons altogether. However, Reagan’s insistence on SDI and Gorbachev’s unwillingness to accept it prevented the leaders to come to a final agreement.⁴

In December 1987, developing the understanding reached at Reykjavik, Gorbachev and Reagan signed the Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF), which removed the entire class of nuclear weapons from Europe and Asia, and included intrusive verification measures. The INF treaty was followed a year later with the Soviet unexpected announcement in Gorbachev’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly of the unilateral dramatic reduction and restructuring of Soviet forces in Europe.

During the **Malta** summit in early December 1989, U.S.-Soviet relations have crossed an important qualitative threshold although no significant treaties were signed. In their memoirs, Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush who succeeded Ronald Reagan devoted special attention to the understandings reached in Malta as the turning point in ending the Cold War. The discussion involved the leaders’ understanding of the new emerging world order, progress in arms control, cooperation in resolving regional conflicts, and the unfolding events in Eastern Europe.⁵ In Malta Gorbachev made a statement to Bush that “the U.S. should start from the assumption that the USSR will not start a war with the United States under any circumstances, and moreover, [the USSR] is ready not to consider [U.S.] it adversary.”⁶

The process of arms control culminated in the START treaty of July 1991, mandating deep reductions in the Soviet and U.S. strategic nuclear forces, which became possible as a result of the Soviet decision to “unlink” the issues of strategic offence and defense in the negotiations and despite the U.S. insistence on the development of the SDI program.

Eastern Europe and the Unification of Germany

As much as the change in U.S.-Soviet relations was monumental, the most significant developments, which we associate with the end of the Cold War, unfolded in Europe. Europe was at the heart of Gorbachev’s vision for a new international order. Gradual mutual demilitarization and eventual dissolution of NATO and the Warsaw Pact and economic integration between the CMEA and the EEC was envisioned as the road to the Common European Home. New Europe required a new pan-European security structure free of the Cold War associations. This structure would be built on the institutional basis of the CSCE, utilizing the infrastructures from both NATO and the WTO.

One can argue that the Cold War itself originated and ended in Eastern Europe. Moscow-directed consolidation of communist regimes in that region in the late 1940s led to the fears of Soviet expansion in the West, which contributed to the process of the U.S.-led anti-Soviet consolidation through the Marshall Plan, the division of Germany, and finally the establishment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and the erection of Berlin Wall in 1961. All Soviet leaders regarded Eastern Europe as a sphere of strategic and ideological importance to the Soviet Union, and any opposition to the socialist rule there was brutally suppressed with force as in Poland and Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

From the very first steps in power Mikhail Gorbachev generated hopes of reform and liberalization in the countries of Eastern Europe. Although never formally abandoning the socialist choice, the Soviet reformers declared that the socialist model had to be freely chosen by the people, not imposed by an external power. Gorbachev’s understanding of socialism was one of a democratic system based on universal human values with a strong system of social support for the citizens.⁷

When the roundtable negotiations initiated by President Jaruzelsky with Solidarity leaders began in Poland, the Soviet leadership did not try to prevent the opposition from sharing power with the PUWP, but rather encouraged the negotiated character of the transition, and made explicit their position that in their view national reconciliation with Solidarity was the only correct choice for Poland.⁸ In June 1989 the Solidarity-led opposition swept the first round of the parliamentary elections, and on August 22, the first coalition government of Eastern Europe headed by Solidarity member Tadeusz Mazowiecki was formed in Poland. When in August 1989, following the old pattern of “socialist internationalism,” Ceausescu tried to call privately for a Warsaw Pact intervention in Poland, his attempt was flatly rejected by Moscow.⁹

It was precisely the principle of freedom of choice, which was announced by Gorbachev in his speech to the United Nations in December 1988, and his refusal to

use force, which became the key to the door to the democratic transformation for East European countries.

The Soviet leadership remained committed to this principle also when on November 9, 1989, thousands of East Germans breached the Berlin Wall, and as in the fall of 1989 the wave of “velvet” revolutions rolled over Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Gorbachev’s permissive attitude towards the events in Eastern Europe was wisely reciprocated by the Bush administration, which acted very cautiously toward Eastern Europe to allay the Soviet fear that the United States might make an effort to speed up the events in the region. Bush referred to this position repeatedly during the summit in Malta, and in his memoirs, as saying that he did not “jump up and down on the Berlin Wall.”¹⁰

The issue of German unification was probably the hardest of all the problems facing the Soviet leadership in 1989. Without opposing in principle the idea of a German unification, Gorbachev and Shervardnadze held the position that the unification process had to be slow and gradual, with reciprocal concessions from the East and the West, and had to be synchronized with the establishment of a new pan-European security system that would supercede the two existing alliances.¹¹

When the events had overtaken that vision, and the elections of March 1990 in East Germany confirmed the overwhelming support of the East Germans for a rapid unification, Gorbachev showed a great flexibility in several summits with Bush and Kohl in the framework of Two Plus Four negotiations. He eventually agreed to the unification of Germany via incorporation of the GDR into FRG on the basis of Article 23 of the Basic treaty, and to united Germany’s membership in NATO in return for the formal renouncement by the united Germany of the WMD and reduction of the strength of its conventional armed forces, and for Bonn’s financial support for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany.

Helmut Kohl pursued the emerging window of opportunity with great assertiveness, adding new demands and speeding up the process of unification from a rather cautious Ten-Point Plan of late November 1989 to a full unification with membership in NATO, which took place in October 1990. The evolution of the positions and the detailed process of German unification are well documented in full transcripts of Kohl’s conversations with Gorbachev and other leaders published by German Bundesarchive.¹²

One can argue that the unification of Germany was a defining moment for the post-Cold War world and the emerging international system that developed in the late 1990s. Gorbachev’s idea of the Common European Home made important progress in the Paris Summit of 34 European and North American heads of state and in the Charter of Paris for New Europe signed on November 21, 1990. It defined Europe as a peaceful and democratic community of nations, and outlined the mechanism of political consultation for arriving at decisions. The Paris Charter strengthened and vitalized the OSCE and recognized it as “the main common framework for managing and stimulating a continuous change.”¹³

In a major breakthrough in arms control in Europe, representatives of 21 European countries and the U.S. signed the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty in November 1990, the primary purpose of which was to reduce the risk of surprise attacks and massive conventional war in the heart of Europe. The treaty

required individual countries to reduce equipment not to exceed their national limits negotiated within the group limits and provided for a special verification mechanism.

The Third World

Throughout the Cold War, the Third World was one of the arenas of competition between the two blocs, providing the superpowers an opportunity to contest their superiority not in a direct confrontation, but by proxy—in numerous regional conflicts. Upon coming to power, Gorbachev began an extensive review of Soviet relations with its “socialist-oriented” allies in the third world and with the national liberation movements, which were often involved in bloody and prolonged conflicts, such as in Nicaragua, Angola, and Namibia. The new Soviet leaders, in contrast with their predecessors, expressed the view that regional conflicts had local roots and should not be considered in the framework of superpower conflict, but rather that cooperation of regional and great powers could be a constructive road to resolution of such conflicts.

Starting from the most important and costly regional conflict, withdrawal from Afghanistan was Gorbachev’s first and major foreign policy goal proclaimed immediately after he became General Secretary.¹⁴ The final decision to withdraw was taken by Soviet Politburo in November 1986 and announced to Najibullah.¹⁵ However, the United States was dragging its feet in the U.N.-sponsored Geneva negotiations on Afghanistan. Only after the U.S.-Soviet summit in December 1987, Reagan expressed readiness to sign the Geneva accords on Afghanistan. Gorbachev announced the timetable for the Soviet withdrawal in February 1988; it began on May 15, 1988 and was completed in January 1989.

In Afghanistan, as in other regional conflicts, the Soviet position called for a process of national reconciliation, where no single group would claim a total victory, but all the important political forces would have to work together for a compromise solution with support from regional structures and in the situation where the superpowers would have to stop arms supplies to the opposing groups.

Such a solution was eventually reached in Angola, putting an end to a very complex conflict that had been going on for 15 years and involved Soviet and American military supplies and Cuban and South African militaries. The initial agreement on disengagement by Cuban and South African forces, signed in 1989, was negotiated with Soviet and U.S. mediation, and linked the withdrawal of the Cuban forces with South African agreement to grant independence to Namibia. However, the fighting between UNITA and MPLA in Angola continued as long as U.S. and the Soviet Union continued to supply the conflicting sides with military assistance.

The final Bicesse Accords, signed in May 1991, called for the end of Soviet and U.S. military supplies and set up a framework for elections, which were held in September 1992.¹⁶

The conflict in Central America, and most importantly in Nicaragua was central to the Reagan Doctrine of supporting anti-Communist insurgents anywhere in the world, to whom the President referred as “freedom fighters” in his 1985 State of the Union Address. The Soviet Union provided military and economic assistance to the

Sandinist government. Intent on reversing the communist victory in Nicaragua, U.S. administration officials were using proceeds from arms illegally sold to Iran to support the Contras in Nicaragua, which was in direct contradiction of the congressional ban on military aid to the Nicaraguan insurgents.¹⁷

As part of its overall reassessment of regional conflicts, the Gorbachev leadership began to encourage its Sandinist allies to work for national reconciliation and toward democratic elections. The emphasis shifted from the superpower conflict in Nicaragua to the indigenous roots of the conflict and to the regional framework spearheaded by President of Costa Rica Oscar Arias.¹⁸ Arias was quite successful in bringing regional leaders into the peace process, which called for ceasefires in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, and free elections in each of the countries.

During the Malta summit, the issue of reconciliation in Nicaragua was raised by the US side as one of the key obstacles in U.S.-Soviet relations. The understanding achieved in Malta between Bush and Gorbachev removed the last obstacles from the reconciliation process. With strong support for elections by the Soviet allies, the Sandinists agreed to hold free elections in February 1990, and accepted the victory of the opposition forces led by Violetta Chamorro.

As a result of strong multilateral support for the process of national reconciliation, and withdrawal of the external support for militant factions, ceasefires took hold in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala and elections were eventually held in each of these countries.

The Persian Gulf War

The true test of the emerging post-Cold War order came in August 1990 when the Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait. In August 1990, there were up to 8,000 Soviet military and technical specialists servicing Soviet-Iraqi contracts in Iraq. It was estimated that the Soviet Union stood to lose 1 billion 200 million dollars on curtailing economic and military cooperation with Bagdad.¹⁹ The decision to support the United States on the sanctions and later military action in Iraq was made by the Soviet leaders in the spirit of the new multilateral approach to regional conflicts. Here was a clear case of a military intervention, and both Shevardnadze and Gorbachev did not hesitate in condemning the action.²⁰

From the very beginning, the issue has transformed into a test of the new nature of U.S.-Soviet relations and of the new thinking itself. Both sides saw it in this perspective. Ambassador Matlock described that position in his memoirs: "If 'new thinking' and the 'common interests of mankind' meant anything, it should mean that the Soviet Union would condemn the aggression and join us in bringing pressure on Iraq to withdraw."²¹ Gorbachev was well aware of possible consequences of such an event had it happened several years earlier: "During the period of the Cold War, such conflict could have brought the opposing blocs directly to a military, nuclear confrontation."²² Soviet cooperation was indispensable in passing the U.N. Security Council Resolution 678 authorizing the use of force in the Persian Gulf, and in repelling the aggression in 1991.

James Baker called August 3, 1990—the day of the U.S.-Soviet statement on the Iraqi Aggression—“the day the Cold War ended.”²³ In his speech to the U.S. Congress made on September 11, 1990, after meeting with Gorbachev in Helsinki, President Bush described the new world order “struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we’ve known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice.”

Conclusion.

The transformation of international relations that occurred in the second half of the 1980s will remain as a focus of study and interpretation for years to come. New sources will probably emerge to shed light on the complexity of processes that were briefly outlined above. One may argue that the Cold War was over well before the dissolution of the Soviet Union—some time in late 1989, with the wave of peaceful revolutions overtaking East European countries one by one, East Germans breaching the Berlin wall, and U.S. Ambassador cautiously suggesting a need for Soviet “military assistance” to the pro-democracy forces in Romania.²⁴

The end of the Cold War had good chances to result in an interdependent international system based on multilateral cooperation of all major powers within the framework of collective security institutions—the newly strengthened (to a large degree as a result of the cooperative response to Iraq’s aggression in Kuwait) United Nations, and the reinvigorated Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (raised to a new status with the signing of the Paris Charter). The newly united integrated Europe was to become the center of this international system, with East European countries in the process of consolidating their democratic gains and finding their place in the community of democratic nations. With the fear of global nuclear war receding into the past, the relations between great powers were no longer to be defined by the security dilemma, but rather by a balance of interests based on the principle of reasonable sufficiency in nuclear armaments.

The transformation left no stone unturned in the Third World as well. As superpowers stepped back from their global confrontation, regional peacemaking processes were given a chance, with the both Soviet Union and the United States encouraging their former clients to find ways toward national reconciliation. Long-standing bloody conflicts were settled in the countries of Central America and Africa. On the wave of this historic change, South Africa abandoned the regime of apartheid and chose the road of national reconciliation.

All these changes are directly attributable to the tremendous impulse for progress produced by the new thinking of Mikhail Gorbachev, which found willing and enthusiastic partners in the leaderships of the major Western countries, bringing the international system to the promising perspective of cooperative multilateralism by the early 1990s.

¹ For an excellent review of various scholarly interpretations of the end of the Cold War and the available sources on the subject, see David S. Painter and Thomas S. Blanton, “The End of the Cold

War,” in Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig eds., *A Companion to Post-1945 America* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2002), pp. 479-500

² Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict, 1981-1991. National Intelligence Estimate. Top Secret. March 2, 1981, p. 2 The National Security Archive

³ Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict Through 1990, National Intelligence Estimate. Top Secret, December 16, 1980, The National Security Archive

⁴ *Razmyshleniya Gorbacheva o Reykjavike*, October 12, 1986, Anatoly Chernyaev's Notes. The Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow.

⁵ George Bush, Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), pp. 159-170

⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i Reformy* (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), v. ii, p. 145.

⁷ Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 119-120

⁸ Charles Gati, *The Bloc That Failed: Soviet-East European Relations in Transition*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 168; Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era, the United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1990*, New York: Poseidon Press, 1991, pp. 360-361

⁹ Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet relations and the End of the Cold War*. The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C. 1994, p. 604

¹⁰ George Bush, Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p. 167

¹¹ Jacque Levesque, “The Emancipation of Eastern Europe,” in *Ending the Cold War: Interpretations, Causation, and the Study of International Relations*, ed. by Richard Herrman and Richard Ned Lebow, New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2004, p. 123

¹² Hans Jurgen Kusters and Daniel Hoffmann, eds. *Deutsche Einheit: Sonderedition aus den Akten des Bundeskanzleramtes 1989-90* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1998)

¹³ Jaakko Blomberg, “The CSCE after the Paris Summit.” Address to a Dinner of the European-Atlantic Group, December 3, 1990

¹⁴ Anatoly S. Chernyaev, *Shest Let s Gorbachevym* (Moscow: Kultura, 1993), pp. 57-58

¹⁵ CC CPSU Politburo Session Transcript, November 13, 1986. The National Security Archive, Russian and East European Archival Documents Database (READD).

¹⁶ For an insightful study of the U.S.-Soviet cooperation in the Angolan conflict see Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition: The Rise, Fall and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1976-1996*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999)

¹⁷ For a collection of documents on this subject, see Malcolm Byrne and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (New York: New Press, 1993)

¹⁸ See Rober Pastor, *Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992)

¹⁹ *Zapis Besedy M. S. Gorbacheva s presdentom S.Sh.A. G. Bushem*, September 9, 1990. Transcript of Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush (on-on-one), Helsinki, Finland, p. 16—Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation. Moscow.

²⁰ Pavel Palazchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p.215

²¹ Jack Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 410

²² Mikhail S. Gorbachev, op. cit., p. 240

²³ James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolutions, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 1.

²⁴ Thomas S. Blanton, “When Did the Cold War End?” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 10, 184-190