**Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War**

Op-Ed, [*New Straits Times*](http://www.nst.com.my)

*April 5, 2006*

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**This op-ed was reprinted in Beirut, Lebanon's *The Daily Star* on April 25, 2006, as "The Man Who Preferred a Soviet Whimper to a Dying Bang".**

**The Soviet collapse was due to the decline of communist ideology and economic failure. This would have happened even without Gorbachev, writes JOSEPH S. NYE.**

EARLIER this month, Mikhail Gorbachev celebrated his 75th birthday with a concert and conference at his foundation in Moscow. Unfortunately, he is not popular with the Russian people who blame him for the loss of Soviet power.

But, as Gorbachev has replied to those who shout abuse at him: "Remember, I am the one who gave you the right to shout."

When he came to power in 1985, Gorbachev tried to discipline the Soviet people as a way to overcome economic stagnation. When discipline failed to solve the problem, he launched perestroika ("restructuring"). And when bureaucrats continually thwarted his orders, he used glasnost, or open discussion and democratisation. But once glasnost let people say what they thought, many people said: "We want out."

By December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Gorbachev's foreign policy, which he called "new thinking", also contributed to the Cold War's end. Gorbachev said that security was a game from which all could benefit through co-operation. Rather than try to build as many nuclear weapons as possible, he proclaimed a doctrine of "sufficiency", holding only a minimal number for protection.

He also believed that Soviet control over an empire in Eastern Europe was costing too much and providing too little benefit and that the invasion of Afghanistan had been a costly disaster.

By the summer of 1989, East Europeans were given more freedom. Gorbachev refused to sanction the use of force to put down demonstrations. By November, the Berlin Wall had fallen.

Some of these events stemmed from Gorbachev's miscalculations. After all, he wanted to reform communism, not replace it. But his reforms snowballed into a revolution driven from below rather than controlled from above. In trying to repair communism, he punched a hole in it. Like a hole in a dam, once pent-up pressure began to escape, it widened the opening and tore apart the system.

By contrast, if the Communist Party's Politburo had chosen one of Gorbachev’s hard-line competitors in 1985, it is plausible that the declining Soviet Union could have held on for another decade or so.

It did not have to collapse so quickly. Gorbachev's humanitarian tinkering contributed greatly to the timing.

But there were also deeper causes for the Soviet demise. One was the "soft" power of liberal ideas, whose spread was aided by the growth of transnational communications and contacts, while the demonstration effect of Western economic success gave them additional appeal.

In addition, the huge Soviet defence budget began to undermine other aspects of Soviet society. Healthcare deteriorated and the mortality rate increased (the only developed country where that occurred). Eventually, even the military became aware of the tremendous burden caused by imperial overstretch.

Ultimately, the deepest causes of the Soviet collapse were the decline of communist ideology and economic failure. This would have happened even without Gorbachev. In the early Cold War, communism and the Soviet Union had considerable soft power. Many communists led the resistance against fascism in Europe and many people believed that communism was the wave of the future.

But Soviet soft power was undercut by the exposure of Stalin's crimes in 1956 and by the repression in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Poland in 1981.

Although in theory communism aimed to establish a system of class justice, Lenin's heirs maintained domestic power through a brutal security apparatus involving lethal purges, gulags, broad censorship and ubiquitous informants. The net effect of these brutal measures was a general loss of faith in the system.

The Soviet economy's decline, meanwhile, reflected the diminished ability of central planning to respond to global economic change. Stalin had created a command economy that emphasised heavy manufacturing and smokestack industries, making it highly inflexible—all thumbs and no fingers.

As the economist Joseph Schumpeter pointed out, capitalism is "creative destruction", a way of responding flexibly to major waves of technological change. At the end of the 20th century, the major technological change of the third industrial revolution was the growing role of information as the scarcest resource in an economy.

The Soviet system was particularly inept at handling information. The deep secrecy of its political system meant that the flow of information was slow and cumbersome.

Economic globalisation created turmoil throughout the world at the end of the 20th century, but the Western market economies were able to reallocate labour to services, restructure their heavy industries and switch to computers. The Soviet Union could not keep up.

Indeed, when Gorbachev came to power in 1985, there were 50,000 personal computers in the Soviet Union; in the United States, there were 30 million. Four years later, there were about 400,000 personal computers in the Soviet Union, and 40 million in the US.

According to one Soviet economist, by the late 1980s, only eight per cent of Soviet industry was globally competitive. It is difficult for a country to remain a superpower when the world doesn’t want 92 per cent of what it produces.

The lessons for today are clear. While military power remains important, it is a mistake for any country to discount the role of economic power and soft power. But it is also a mistake to discount the importance of leaders with humanitarian values. The Soviet Union may have been doomed, but the world has Gorbachev to thank for the fact that the empire he oversaw ended without a bloody conflagration.

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**For Academic Citation:**

Nye, Joseph S. "Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War." *New Straits Times*, April 5, 2006.