**The End of the Cold War: A Russian View**

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Cold War, Soviet Union Communism After the Cold War

***Vladimir Batyuk describes how the Gorbachev reforms, and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union, changed Moscow’s view of the world***.



*Perestroika postage stamp, 1988*

While the geopolitical differences between Russia and the West should not be underestimated, the Cold War was fundamentally about ideology not geopolitics. By contrast, the British-Russian Great Game of the nineteenth century never led to anything like the Cold War, since the ideological differences between the Russian and the British empires at that time were insignificant.

Russia and the other great European powers then belonged to the same privileged club, ruled by a like-minded European aristocracy. The Russian Revolution, a product of the First World War, was both a symptom of, and a contribution to, the decay of that cosmopolitan aristocracy and of the ideological unity of Europe that it epitomised. The Russian form of Communism thus became an attempt to create an alternative, non-Western way of life. In this sense, ideologically the Cold War began as early as 1917. After 1945, with the Soviet Union ascending to the status of superpower, the Cold War was transferred also to the sphere of geopolitics. At the end of the 1980s, however, it became obvious that the Communist experiment had failed miserably. The Soviet way of life, characterised by such ugly features as economic hardships, technological standstill and moral degradation, lost its appeal even for the Soviet people themselves. In the 1920s and 1930s, the West had been scared by Soviet Communist propaganda. In the 1980s, on the other hand, the Soviet authorities had to jam Western broadcasts in order to maintain control over its population.

No wonder that the Communist ideology, which had stimulated the Cold War on the Soviet side, deteriorated gradually. By the 1940s the slogan of ‘World Proletarian Revolution’ had already disappeared from Soviet propaganda. After 1970, the Soviet leaders preferred not to mention such words as ‘Communism’ or ‘class struggle’. And Mikhail Gorbachev, who proclaimed the primacy of ‘values common to all mankind’ over the ‘class struggle’, was merely following in the footsteps of his predecessors, who had gradually rid themselves of the revolutionary features of Communist ideology. The weakening of that revolutionary appeal had led to the deep transformation of Soviet foreign policy, thus paving the way for the end of the Cold War.

It is no wonder that arms control and confidence-building measures stood at the heart of the rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the West at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. During that time, dozens of bilateral and multilateral arms-control treaties were concluded between the two, including such breakthrough agreements as the treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (the INF Treaty); the treaty on Dangerous Military Activities; the Vienna Document of 1990 (on transparency in military forces and activities, and verification); the treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (the CFE Treaty); the treaty on the Reduction and Liquidation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START I); the treaty on Open Skies; the treaty between the United States and Russia on the Reduction and Liquidation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START II); the Chemical Weapons Ban Convention and the Complete Nuclear Test Ban Convention.

The titles of these agreements and treaties look impressive. More significantly, they highlighted the dramatic change in Moscow’s approach to the whole question of arms control. For the first time, the principle of equal security for both parties was safeguarded by treaty. Mechanisms of on-site inspections, monitoring and challenge inspections were included in a number of these documents – the START 1 treaty alone included sixteen different verification and control mechanisms. Contacts, information exchange and co-operation between Russian and Western military all increased dramatically. Also, nuclear risk reduction centres were created.

For the first time since the Cold War began, these treaties led to a reduction of arms, not just to a more sophisticated arms race (as was the case during the détente period). An entire class of nuclear arms – intermediate and shorter-range nuclear missiles – was liquidated, thus eliminating a whole stratum of the pyramid of nuclear weapons. The reduction of the most dangerous destructive weapons – offensive strategic arms – began under the START 1 treaty, signed on July 31st, 1991. Even though the ambiguity of some its provisions made impossible the two-fold reduction of the Russian and American strategic arsenals as envisaged by Moscow and Washington, the treaty did make it possible to reduce these arsenals by a third, amounting to 8,000 strategic nuclear warheads. The realisation of the CFE treaty also made possible an unprecedented reduction in conventional arms: by the mid-1990s, about 49,000 tanks, armoured personnel carriers, heavy guns, aircraft and helicopters had been destroyed under the provisions of this treaty by the European nations, US and Canada. Moreover, the implementation of the Treaty made a massive surprise attack and large-scale offensive operations impossible for the first time in the history of Cold War Europe. And the break-through in transparency at the end of the 1980s made it possible to conclude the Chemical Weapons Ban Convention and the Complete Nuclear Test Ban Convention.

None of these changes in attitudes to arms control in the Soviet Union would have been possible without perestroika and glasnost . Gorbachev’s ‘new political thinking’ changed Moscow’s attitude to the West: the latter was no longer seen as an irreconcilable enemy; rather, Gorbachev and his supporters looked to the West as a partner to the solution of such international problems as arms control, proliferation, environmental protection and so on. Of special importance was Moscow’s co-operation with the West in local crisis management. The memoirs of the former US Secretary of State, James Baker, show that for Washington there was no problem in recognising military parity with the Soviet Union on lower levels: all the US-Soviet arms control debates at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s were about technical details, not about philosophy.

For the leaders of the West, the Soviet willingness to renounce the Brezhnev Doctrine (the assertion following the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 that the states under the Warsaw Pact would intervene in the internal affairs of any of its members which exposed the rest of them to the danger of anti-socialist activity) and to give up the ‘anti-imperialist struggle’ in the Third World, was evidence that perestroika was for real. The strongest argument the Western leaders used to their Soviet counterparts was that, if openness and freedom of choice were good for the Soviet people, they might also be good for the peoples of Eastern Europe, Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Nicaragua.

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, US-Soviet co-operation contributed greatly to the peaceful settlement of a number of local crises. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan was completed in April 1989, as a result of the Geneva accords, to which the Soviet Union and the United States were signatories. In Nicaragua free elections in February 1990 contributed to national and regional reconciliation something which would probably have been impossible if Moscow and Washington had not agreed to cancel the flow of arms to their respective allies, the Sandinistas and Contras. In Angola and Namibia the Soviet Union and the United States sponsored the peace process, the withdrawal of Cuban and South African troops, proclamation of independence in Namibia (in March 1989) and national reconciliation in Angola. Finally, in Cambodia the combined efforts of Vietnam, China, the USSR and the United States culminated in the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, by which the Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia, and free elections were held.

All these regional conflicts were intensively debated by Moscow and Washington at ministerial level. The respective situations there were discussed regularly by heads of corresponding departments in the US Department of State and the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Moscow’s willingness to recognise the results of the velvet revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989 became the real turning point in the history of the Cold War. Neither the Soviets nor the West were ready for such rapid developments in the region that year. In May, the Hungarian government dismantled for the first time a part of the Iron Curtain, namely, a barbed-wire fence along the Austrian border; in the same month, Solidarity won a decisive victory in the first free Polish parliamentary elections; during the summer, the flow of refugees from East Germany through the unprotected Austrian-Hungarian border increased constantly; in October, the local Communist parties in the GDR and Czechoslovakia lost control of the situation, and hundreds of thousands of demonstrators demanded free elections and human rights; on November 9th, the infamous Berlin Wall was pulled down by tens of thousands of East Germans; in December, the Czechoslovakian Communist government resigned in the face of mass demonstrations; on December 22nd, the Ceaucescu regime in Romania was overthrown by armed rebellion supported by the people. In June 1991, the Communist government in Albania fell, and by the end of the year, the Soviet Union itself followed.

Such a quick, virtually painless collapse of the so-called ‘socialist camp’ would have been impossible without the dramatic changes in international relations caused by the end of the Cold War. To cite just one example: on December 24th, 1989, J. Matlock, the US Ambassador to the USSR, informed the Soviet deputy Foreign Minister, I. Aboimov, that Washington would not object if Moscow interfered militarily in Romanian affairs to support anti-Ceaucescu forces. This Washington-sponsored version of the Brezhnev Doctrine ‘the other way round’ became a symbol of change in the US-Soviet dialogue over Eastern Europe.

However, the American historians Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott have rightly stated that ‘if there was a single point at which the Cold War ended, it was probably...the moment when Gorbachev acceded to German unification within NATO.’ The decision of the NATO Defence Planning Committee to review NATO military strategy made on May 23rd, 1990, together with Helmut Kohl’s pledge to reduce the numerical strength of the unified German army, furthered Gorbachev’s decision to accede to Western pressure on that issue.

After Gorbachev won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1990, the common people in the Soviet Union, tired of the economic mess at home, grumbled, ‘Better for him to have won the Nobel prize for Economics’. By 1990, it became clear that what remained of the Soviet economy could not survive without outside help. Massive Western aid to the USSR was first debated during Gorbachev’s visit to the United States in May-June 1990. Dennis Ross, Director of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department under James Baker, asked Gorbachev’s adviser Yevgeny Primakov, ‘How much do you really need?’ Primakov replied, ‘About $20 billion a year for three years’.

By the time of the G-7 summit in London in 1991, Primakov and the economist Grigory Yavlinsky had prepared a plan of radical economic reforms, which were to be supported by massive Western aid. Though Gorbachev apparently approved the plan, he could not inspire enthusiasm for it in London. The Western leaders did not feel that it presented any real changes in Soviet economic policy.

During his very first meeting with Gorbachev, in March 1989, Secretary Baker had told him that, in his experience, it was better to move sooner rather than later on issues such as price reform. ‘We were twenty years late on price reform, so two or three more years won’t hurt’, Gorbachev had replied. But he was wrong. The delay in genuine economic reform ultimately ruined his career and the Soviet Union’s integrity. Three years later, in January 1992, Baker was to meet another Kremlin leader, the Russian president Boris Yeltsin.

For the leaders of the new democratic Russia, the West seemed a natural ally while the Cold War was a tragic aberration of history, caused by Communist ideology. The first Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev strikingly declared:

We are coming from the premise that no single developed democratic civil society, based on rational principles, can threaten us... The developed nations of the West are Russia’s natural allies. It is high time to proclaim firmly, at last, that we are neither enemies, nor junior poor brothers, following the instructions of the rich and malevolent West.

Moreover, Yeltsin’s government even took concrete steps towards forging a strategic alliance between Russia and the West, in particular between Russia and the US. On December 20th, 1991, Yeltsin raised the question of Russia’s admission to NATO. A month later, on the eve of his first official visit to the United States, he proposed joint co-operation in development of a ballistic missile defence programme. Undoubtedly, Western financial help for economic reforms, initiated by Russian deputy prime minister Egor Gaidar at the beginning of 1992, was of special importance to the Russian leadership. In an interview to CNN on January 30th, Kozyrev expressed his confidence that a new Marshall Plan for Russia and other new independent states would be approved.

This new liberal ideology was enthusiastically taken up by a broad spectrum of Russian intelligentsia, because it corresponded to the deeply ingrained pro-Western feelings of the Russian intellectual elite. They sincerely believed that Russia could easily return to the Western, free and prosperous world, out of which she had been forced by the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. In the atmosphere of enthusiasm that prevailed among Russian liberals at the beginning of 1992, such a return was viewed as an eminently possible and practical solution to the majority of the country’s foreign and national security problems.

However, this new liberal strand within Russian foreign policy soon had to face harsh reality. Firstly, the West never expressed much enthusiasm for the integration of Russia into Western security structures such as NATO. Secondly, NATO’s eastward expansion and more particularly, the prospect that the former Soviet Republics might also be permitted to join, caused serious concern to the Russian elite. Thirdly, the United States had adopted a reserved position over the proposed US-Russian co-operation in strategic defence and the idea died out. Fourthly, American activity in the sphere of defence against ballistic missiles caused troubles in the Russian foreign policy community.

Finally, post-Cold War competition in the sphere of arms trade aggravated US-Russian rivalry, especially in such regions and countries as Eastern Europe, Latin America, Iran, China and India. Washington expressed its concern over Russian dual-technology sales in Iran and India, which presumably violated the non-proliferation agreements. Moscow, in turn, rejected such allegations as manifestations of American double standards and hypocrisy and suspected the US of attempting to oust Russia from her traditional arms markets such as Eastern Europe.

After the collapse of Communism, it was non-Marxist ideologies that prevailed in the interrelationships between the two sides, and this is why Moscow and her Western partners have, so far, been able to find acceptable solutions to these problems in their relationship.

After perestroika had emancipated the Soviet citizens from the fear of ‘aggression of American imperialism’, the geopolitical rationale for the USSR’s existence had also disappeared in the minds of the Soviet people. On being asked about the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union, one former member of the Gorbachev government replied: ‘Can you imagine a state that included both Denmark and Iran?’ The USSR encompassed a vastly divergent number of nations. For example, if Estonia, one of the former Soviet Baltic Republics, was ethnically and culturally akin to Finland, the Central Asian Republic of Tadjikistan, with its Farsi-speaking and Muslim population, was similarly close to neighbouring Iran.

Only the Communist ideology had cemented the Soviet empire, uniting such different ethnic groups after 1917 (in similar vein, monarchist and Orthodox ideology had cemented the Russian empire before 1917). Thus the meltdown of Communist ideology undermined both the Soviet system of alliances and, eventually, the USSR itself.

Another reason for collapse was the disintegration of the centralised Soviet economic system. This system had been based on the unequal distribution of national income between members of the Soviet Federation, with some of the Soviet republics, such as the Caucasus republics, Byelorussia, Ukraine and Moldavia receiving a disproportionately high share of resources, while Russia and the republics of Central Asia were donors.

The beginning of the dismemberment of the Soviet empire posed a difficult dilemma for the Russian ruling elite: whether to concentrate all the scarce Russian resources on the consolidation of the fast-disintegrating Soviet Union, or to attempt to invest these resources in the domestic development of Russia. Yeltsin and his entourage chose the second path, and so far the Russian Federation has preferred to focus on domestic development in preference to the restoration of empire.

This policy faces fierce resistance on the part of Russian traditionalists who claim that it was a deliberate decision on the part of ‘democrats’ to destroy ‘our Soviet Motherland’ in order to obtain power. They also proclaim that Russia cannot be a typical nation state, like France or Great Britain: the Russians are imperial people, and thus, Russia’s fate, they say, is to be an empire. Besides this, they argue, while Russia stopped her Cold War against the West, the latter failed to follow suit, continuing its cunning and predatory anti-Russian policies, aimed at the total destruction of Russia.

So far, however, the traditionalists, have failed to produce any new holy creed which would cement the new empire. Besides which, Russia will not face any serious threat from abroad in the foreseeable future, and therefore, the most serious threats to her national security come from within. No new empire, regardless of its ideological background, would save Russia either from economic collapse or disintegration. Moscow now cannot afford to allocate scarce resources on anything other than halting the consequences of economic and financial crisis.

The country’s rulers thus face an uneasy dilemma: either to safeguard Russia’s real national interests, abandoning nostalgia for the glorious imperial past, or to put forward the idea of a new Russian empire. The difficulties that the ratification process of the Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty faced in the Russian Parliament demonstrated that Moscow is still unable to find an acceptable solution to that dilemma.

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