

# Did domestic considerations dictate Gorbachev's foreign policy approach?

Written by Andrew Thomas Park

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This essay argues that Gorbachev's foreign policy approach was determined, to a high degree, by the domestic considerations the Soviet Union faced at that time. The idea that these domestic considerations simply 'dictated' Gorbachev's foreign policy approach is, however, too simple. Rather, as will be argued, Gorbachev's foreign policy approach was a result of his own perception of these domestic considerations, which placed perestroika and the revitalization of the Soviet economy, as well as glasnost as the chief means by which the Soviet Union could reform itself and survive. Another key aspect in Gorbachev's foreign policy approach was the rapidity with which it developed and unfolded. The rapid pace of Gorbachev's foreign policy, it is argued, was also a result of domestic considerations – namely the slow pace of Gorbachev's domestic reforms and the frustration that this engendered, which resulted in bold attempts to re-energize and break the dead-lock. This boldness also attests to the role which the personality of Mikhail Gorbachev played on his foreign policy approach. Thus this essay essentially argues that domestic considerations did dictate a need for a change in domestic policy, but it was the interpretation and formulation of this change (the necessity for perestroika and glasnost) by General Secretary Gorbachev which more accurately dictated both the direction and pace of Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev.

### *I. Gorbachev's Early Domestic and Foreign Policy Development.*

From very early on, Gorbachev saw the imperative of improving the economic performance of the USSR, and its link to its standing as a global power. During the politburo meeting on 11 March 1985 which appointed him as General Secretary, Gorbachev stated that “our economy needs more dynamism” and that “this dynamism is essential for our democracy, [and] for the development of our foreign policy.”[1] Following a year of limited reform to the economy, Gorbachev had come to believe by February 1986 that the situation facing the Soviet Union was such that “what is needed is radical reform.”[2] At the same time, Gorbachev was similarly frustrated by the deadlock in relations with America, following the promise of the Geneva summit in November 1985. In his memoirs, Anatoly Chernyaev, who became Gorbachev's foreign policy adviser in February of 1986, recalls that the General Secretary had begun seriously contemplating another meeting with President Reagan by April or May of that year.[3] Such contemplation eventually led to the Reykjavik Summit of October 1986.

That Gorbachev saw the nuclear disarmament issue as related to the Soviet Union's economic problems is shown in the minutes of an 8 October 1986 politburo meeting – the last meeting before the Reykjavik talks began on the next day. In this revealing document, Gorbachev declares that it is important to end the deadlock after Geneva: “The United States has an interest in keeping the negotiations machine running idle, while the arms race overburdens our economy. This is why we need a breakthrough; we need the process to start moving.”[4] Thus to Gorbachev, the motive for a change in foreign policy (negotiations on nuclear missiles) is overtly the welfare of the Soviet economy, and concern over the burden which the arms race placed on it. Gorbachev saw the attainment of a stable and secure international environment as a necessary condition for improving the economy by removing the strain of excess military spending. This is further confirmed by a politburo meeting on 30 April 1986, nearly six months prior to Reykjavik. After a gloomy prognosis on the state of the Soviet economy by the Minister of Finance, Gorbachev comments that “our real standard of living ranks last among all CEMA [the Comecon states in the Eastern bloc] countries. Fifteen years ago our standard was higher than that of Bulgaria and Romania. Of course the military is

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a drain. But what can we do here? Ensuring security has to come first...”[5] Not only is the sense of frustration palpable, but so too are Gorbachev’s priorities and his logic: the USSR’s economic state and the welfare of its people has declined, military spending is a major contribution to this, but military spending cannot be reduced in an unsafe environment. A key factor, then, in Gorbachev’s motivation for the Reykjavik summit is the need for the USSR to reduce its military spending.

As is well known, military expenditure was, indeed, very high in the Soviet Union, averaging around 16 per cent of GNP for most of the Cold War period.[6] Estimates of the total military expenditure of the USSR from 1987 show that it was still 16.6% of GNP, and only began to drop by the late eighties, down to 12.3% in 1990.[7] While David Kotz and Fred Weir in *Revolution from above*, argue that, given the stable rate of military expenditure to GNP (roughly 16%) throughout most of the USSR’s post-war history, “it is unclear why a military burden that had become no larger relative to the economy should have undermined growth after 1975,”[8] it must be remembered that it is the perception of gross military spending which matters. Besides the documents already detailed which show Gorbachev’s concern with military expenditures, his memoirs elaborate that “not even the Politburo members knew the full picture” of the state’s actual spending and budget – “not just the military budget, but the real state budget was also a secret.”[9] Such uncertainty would have helped fuel suspicions of the burden the military was having on the economy, especially given its continued poor performance.

The opacity of the military budget previously mentioned, and the need to oppose this points to a key aspect of Gorbachev’s policies – glasnost. Combating such opacity in the military budget was one aim of glasnost, as was providing space for debate, which was amply used throughout 1986.[10] Moreover, glasnost was a particularity of Gorbachev’s and his teams’s approach. An intimate and influential member of this team was Alexander Yakovlev, in charge of ideological and media matters in the Party.[11] In his book on the Gorbachev years and the collapse of the USSR, published in 1993, Yakovlev reflects that, “strictly speaking, the turn toward glasnost was not inevitable in those years. It was dictated more by the philosophy of perestroika and its initiators than by immediate necessity.”[12] The voluntary path to glasnost, to openness, was, to Yakovlev, less a necessity but a choice which Gorbachev and the other reformers consciously made. Yakovlev goes on to muse on what makes for a state’s national security “on the threshold of the twenty-first century,” and concludes that it is “determined by the government’s openness to participating in all forms of international communication and cooperation, and its actual capacity to create and support a civilized, legal, and democratic world order”[13] Though written after the Soviet Union had already collapsed, such thoughts do give an insight into the state of mind of the USSR’s chief ideologist at the time. Such thoughts take on more significance when viewed in light of the development and progression of Gorbachev’s domestic and foreign political thinking, which will be discussed in the following section.

### *II. The Middle Years of Gorbachev's Domestic and Foreign Policy Development.*

Faced with domestic economic setbacks and the apparent failure of the Reykjavik talks, Gorbachev chose to press on with a deepening and extension of his reforms, which he declared during the Central Committee plenum of January 1987. Democratization and the extension of openness were to be the main focus, as Gorbachev detailed in his concluding speech to the plenum. “We need democracy like air” declared Gorbachev, “the main point is that openness, criticism and self-criticism, democracy, are necessary for our advance, for accomplishing immense tasks.”[14] Aside from seeing the publication of Gorbachev’s *Perestroika*, the year 1987 led to a flowering of analysis on all sides over what Gorbachev’s reforms and its ‘new thinking’ meant for foreign affairs, as well as a clarification of the relationship of those domestic reforms to foreign affairs.

Only more than a month after the January plenum, Gorbachev arranged an international forum where the topic of nuclear dis-armament became a platform for a wider discussion of his ‘new thinking’ in foreign affairs.[15] In his keynote speech to the distinguished intellectuals from around the world who had gathered in Moscow for the forum, Gorbachev emphatically linked the Soviet Union’s new foreign policy to its domestic one: “Before my people, before you and before the whole world, I state with full responsibility that our international policy is more than ever determined by domestic policy, by our interest in concentrating on constructive endeavours to improve our country. This is why we need lasting peace, predictability and constructiveness in international relations.”[16] Meanwhile, to a domestic audience of Soviet Trade-Union officials, Gorbachev linked the weak domestic position of the Soviet Union

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to the stepped-up anti-communism of the early years of the Reagan administration: “the all-out offensive – economic, political, psychological and militarist – launched by the forces of reaction at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s was dictated, among other things, by our internal state of affairs.”[17] The combined message was clear: a weakened USSR domestically invited international trouble and tension, including even the risk of nuclear war, while the foreign policy of the USSR itself was directed towards peace and stability.

One of the most important ways that this ‘new thinking’ was reflected in Soviet foreign policy was in the warming of relations with the West, and given the embargo by the USA over the Afghanistan war, with Western Europe in particular. Following Prime Minister Thatcher’s visit to Moscow in March 1987, Gorbachev explained the importance of Western Europe to the USSR in a conversation with his close advisers. According to Chernyaev, Gorbachev declared that: “it’s obvious that not a single issue can be decided without Europe...We even need it for our domestic affairs, for perestroika. And in foreign policy Europe is simply irreplaceable.”[18] Gorbachev went on to explain the reason for the importance of Western Europe, as well as what this meant for foreign policy: “we must lower military confrontation as much as possible...Our major goal is to utilize the scientific and technological potential of Western Europe, all the more so since our friends in CEMA are so involved there.”[19] Less than a month later, Gorbachev declared the idea of an ‘all European house’ in a speech in Prague, declaring: “we assign an overriding significance to the European course of our foreign policy...in the spirit of the new thinking we introduced the idea of the “all European house”...”.[20] In his *Perestroika*, Gorbachev elaborates that “the building of the “European home” requires a material foundation” which would include “the launching of joint ventures, the implementation of joint projects in third countries...and broad scientific and technological cooperation.”[21] It is clear that the economic importance of Western Europe, and its potential to help the Soviet economy, was uppermost in Gorbachev’s mind in his conception of a ‘common European home.’

There was some progress, in tandem with Gorbachev’s rhetoric, for increased economic relations between the Soviet Union and Western Europe. The central committee approved a document entitled ‘Basic Provisions for the Radical Restructuring of Economic Management’ in June 1987 as well as a number of decrees to enact these plans.[22] Trade liberalization measures were enacted in 1987, but tight controls on the profits from trade did little to encourage increased trade.[23] A similar picture emerged with regards to the hoped-for joint ventures: the Soviet desire for joint-ventures in the export market clashed with foreign investors’ desires to access the untapped Soviet domestic market.[24] Even new regulations in 1988 failed to radically increase foreign investment in the Soviet Union, which still had serious hurdles in the form of poor infrastructure and an unreliable supply system.[25] By 1989 there were only 164 joint ventures, worth a disappointing \$500 million in total.[26] Good relations with the West were, however, important in that the Soviet Union began borrowing heavily from Western lenders. By the end 1988 the estimated net Soviet debt was \$23 billion dollars – whereas in 1984 it was only \$11 billion, and despite the estimated \$9 billion that was loaned to the USSR in 1988 alone, the amounts were never enough, especially when an increasingly large share was diverted to purchase consumer goods in order to keep the populace under-control.[27]

Gorbachev’s foreign policy’s clear economic goals – to stimulate and revive the Soviet economy – despite being the mainstay of his foreign policy, do belie the other valid justifications and origins of the ‘new thinking.’ These were put forward by the former Soviet ambassador to the US and adviser to Gorbachev, Anatoly Dobrynin, in a March 1988 article on the ‘basic principles and new thinking’ of Soviet foreign policy.[28] To Dobrynin, Soviet policy stems from the understanding that “it is no longer possible to win the arms race, like nuclear war itself.”[29] This, in turn leads to the principle of interdependence where “the security of any state is impossible without equal security for all.”[30] The cornerstone of this, in turn, is “the principle of reasonable adequacy” whereby the Soviet Union preserves military strength only in an amount to be sufficient for defensive action.[31] Dobrynin also called for “the establishment of confidence in the world arena, and, moreover, primarily between the nuclear powers.”[32] Whether or not these arguments genuinely reflect the core rationale for the ‘new thinking’ approach to foreign policy – and the argument in this essay is that on the whole they do not – it nevertheless cannot be argued that such views are not compatible with the hard-headed goals of reducing the need for a high military budget and creating a stable environment from which to advance the USSR’s economic development. That these two different rationales are not mutually exclusive was poignantly recorded in a discussion between several “young scholars” from various “leading Moscow research centres” published in May 1988 in the Soviet journal *International Affairs*. [33] Amidst a general agreement amongst the nine participants who took part that economics was the prime force and reason for the ‘new thinking’, Viktor

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Nemchinov of the USSR Academy of Sciences' Institute of Oriental Studies, rather touchingly declared that: "when we talk about the new thinking, we are referring above all to the breakthrough from the diplomatic level of relations to those of morality and ethics and of philosophical concepts." [34] It was sentiments like this, one imagines, which helped win Gorbachev the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990.

### *III. The Later Years of Gorbachev's Domestic and Foreign Policy Development.*

A necessary corollary to the focus on a foreign policy which would be economically beneficial was the scaling back of the Soviet Union's commitments to those areas where it did not stand to gain: the Third World and its Eastern bloc satellites. With regards to the Third World, although a reduction of Soviet engagement there would also result in an easing of tensions with America, which was what Gorbachev was aiming for, there were other direct economic benefits to reducing the Soviet commitment to the Third World. Simply put, supporting the Third World was expensive. A 1990 report in the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* noted that of the 85.845 billion rubles owed to the USSR until November 1 1989, 37.156 billion was owed by developing countries in the socialist fold (such as Cuba and Vietnam), while 42 billion was owed by non-socialist developing countries (such as Egypt and Syria). [35] A political analyst writing in the Soviet *International Affairs*, Andrei Kolosov, evidently believes that this is a price too high, and declared that: "economic expediency, not ideological and political preferences, should become the determinant for developing economic ties with the Third World as well." [36]

Kolosov also criticizes the length of time it took for the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan, and while admitting that it was politically courageous, declares that "our participation in the war there remained the chief impediment to normalisation of relations with the rest of the world." [37] Indeed the delay in withdrawing from Afghanistan appears as a serious mistake and runs counter to Gorbachev's foreign policy approach in general. Chernyaev cites a politburo meeting in 1987 where Gorbachev declares: "of course we could get out of Afghanistan fast, without another thought...but we have to think about our country's authority, about all the people who've fought in this war...We'd only embitter everyone by abandoning our duty after losing so many people." [38] Although Gorbachev's eventual decision to withdraw Soviet troops in stages starting in 1988 does conform to the inner logic of his own foreign policy approach, it is clear that here was an example where Gorbachev felt uneasy and at odds with his own policy. Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's translator confirms that after it was agreed in Geneva for the USSR to withdraw, Shevardnadze was not happy because "he continued to feel something like a human obligation to Najibullah [the Afghan communist leader] and a few others in the Afghanistan government...Shevardnadze had a sharp sense of human tragedy." [39]

Gorbachev and his Foreign Minister had similar feelings when it came to relations with their own 'fraternal' neighbours in the Eastern bloc. Gorbachev's close aide Chernyaev wrote that he and others often sensed that Gorbachev was "unenthusiastic about contacts with socialist leaders." [40] Likewise, Pavel Palazchenko, the previously mentioned translator, who was close to both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, states that talks with some Eastern bloc leaders had become "an ordeal for both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, and I sometimes heard them vent their feelings, but not in public." [41] The fundamental cause, personal dislikes aside, for the Soviet leadership's dislike of the Eastern bloc was because it was increasingly perceived, from the late 70s and early 80s, as an expensive, debt-ridden liability for the Soviet Union. [42] The January 1987 plenum which strengthened calls for democratization and glasnost was also viewed sceptically from the Eastern bloc, while differences became more acute as the USSR began to judge its Eastern bloc neighbours on how disposed they were to perestroika and glasnost. [43] Yet Gorbachev frequently maintained that the future of the Eastern bloc was to be entirely up to themselves to decide. [44] Gorbachev's 1988 speech to the United Nations which declared Gorbachev's intentions to withdraw 500,000 of its roughly 575,000 troops from Eastern European countries was a major indication that Gorbachev was sincere in his statements on non-interference. [45] Although the Soviet determination to avoid military interference in the affairs of its Eastern satellite states has been convincingly shown to be a mind set which emerged at the time of the 1980-81 Solidarity crisis in Poland, prior to Gorbachev's rise to power. [46] This was the foreign policy approach, then, followed consistently by Gorbachev, which led ultimately to the end of communism throughout the Eastern bloc in the end of 1989, and would also inspire strong opposition domestically in the Soviet Union.

### *Conclusion*

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This essay has argued that the economic aspect was the key component of Gorbachev's foreign policy approach. The underlying goal of his foreign policy was to strengthen the USSR, which to Gorbachev meant to strengthen it economically. In order to do so, Gorbachev saw an increasingly radical program of restructuring (perestroika) as the only option. Gorbachev also saw openness to the world and democratization as key components of this restructuring – the only things, in fact, which could secure the victory of this necessary reform. Thus Gorbachev's foreign policy was directed by the need to create an international environment that was amenable to such a reform at home.

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