

# **A Critical Evaluation of Mikhail Gorbachev's Role in Ending the Cold War**

Written by Rafal Nedzarek

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RAFAL NEDZAREK, JUL 30 2012

Mikhail Gorbachev is one of the prominent figures who are believed to have had their part in bringing the end to the Cold War. It may also be said that he is the most controversial character among them. We have seen a multitude of contrasting opinions about the motivations and consequences of Gorbachev's statesmanship, ranging from Western euphoric fascination in the 1990s to accusations of treason by the members of the collapsed Soviet establishment. More analytical judgments point to the problem of the factual importance of individual agency in shaping the considered events. Several years after the end of the Cold War it became apparent that the USSR was bound to 'lose' the prolonged competition with the Western world. Especially the rigid, wildly inefficient planned economy presented a self-defeating idea. Additionally, Communism as an ideology began to lose its appeal among third world countries, and in the early 1980s the Kremlin was beginning to realize that the possibility of a Communist expansion had become rather marginal. Simultaneously, there was growing pressure from the United States which reinitiated the arms-race with resources vastly beyond the Soviet capabilities. Parallel to these arguments is the recognition that even if the Soviet cause was moribund, it was not certain when and how the Cold War would end. The competition could have extended well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century – or could have ended in a nuclear confrontation.

Trying to account for the discrepancy between such hypothetical scenarios and the actual events that took place in the late 1980s, one feels bound to address the central problem of the relation between structure and agency. In response to this issue, the following discussion starts with two main parts. The first of them constitutes an analysis of the structural (both international and intra-USSR) factors in the 1980s. The second section dissects the individual agency of Gorbachev as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in a face-off with the given material and ideational structures. The third and final part of the discussion is designed to provide Gorbachev's figure with the background of the collective agency operating during the considered period, as well as to answer the question of the discrepancy between the secretary general's intentions and the actual results produced. These two issues are essential to understanding how much merit Gorbachev 'deserves' for the part he played in ending the Cold War.

### **Domestic and International Structures in the 1980s**

Undoubtedly, when Gorbachev was elected CPSU general secretary by the Politburo and the Central Committee, he inherited control over a state that was already crumbling economically. Among relatively immediate causes of the feeble economic outlook was a vast spike in oil prices which encouraged Soviet planners to over-invest in oil production infrastructure, hoping that the price trend will continue. In effect, the Soviet economy was heavily dependent on energy exports which accounted for 80 percent of the country's hard currency earnings from the early 1970 till the mid-1980s. Overall, the economy was largely oriented towards industry, construction and transport, and thus was unable to meet growing consumer demand of the late 1980s (Prados, 2011: 106).

The very nature of the Soviet economy made any initiatives for reform extremely difficult and their success uncertain at best. In order to be effective, modern economies often require quick producer reactions to the fluctuating and direction-changing consumer demand. The problem of the Soviet 'non-capitalist' model was that the overwhelming majority of production decision-making was centralized, relying on time-consuming statistical measurements. The

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problem was further aggravated by the rigidity of five-year plans that put additional emphasis on long-term predictions which, more often than not, proved to be inadequate to the actual state (Prados, 2011: 107). Inefficiency of the command economy had developed throughout the four decades after the end of World War II. In fact, the Soviet economy experienced a long-term decline (from the 1950s until the early 1980s) in the rate of economic growth (Brown, 2010: 248). At the time when Gorbachev ascended to power, annual GDP increases oscillated around 2 percent – which translated into actual stagnation (Prados, 2011: 108).

Another urgent problem of the Soviet economy was the enormous amount of the country's military spending. The Red Army consumed between 20 and 30 percent of GDP, and received major share of sophisticated technology (Prados, 2011: 107). It is worth mentioning that the Gorbachev 'administration' remained for some time unaware of the enormous strain the military establishment actually had on the economy. The problem of military spending constituted a crucial merging point between the Soviet economy and political system. It was a matter of astounding internal disinformation (Prados, 2011: 109). The inflated bureaucratic norms of secrecy were exploited not only for the sake of vested interests of generals but also by the political paranoia of the 'old guard' officials (Zubok, 2000: 357). The same risk-averse circles caused tremendous friction when Gorbachev attempted radical changes in the USSR's military posture vis-à-vis the international environment. This problem is well illustrated by the manner in which the Kremlin ended the war in Afghanistan. Although the initial idea of withdrawing the Soviet troops was proposed by Gorbachev as early as in 1985, the military, concerned with their reputation, forestalled the withdrawal until February 1989 (Brown, 2010: 255).

The enormous rigidity of the Soviet political system proved to be a double-edged sword. In the highly hierarchical, centralized structure, the general secretary of the CPSU Central Committee enjoyed a great deal of immunity and enormous political power. It was the ubiquitous fear of instability that brought Gorbachev to this position. After a streak of deaths of consecutive general secretaries (Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, Yuri Andropov in 1984, and Konstantin Chernenko in 1985), members of the Central Committee decided, for once, to turn away from gerontocracy and chose the young (around twenty years younger than other Politburo members) and promising *apparatchik* Mikhail Gorbachev (Prados, 2011: 39). The haste in which Gorbachev's candidature was accepted seems to have made the members of the Central Committee overlook any foreshadowing of Gorbachev's reformist inclinations. Once in power, he could introduce the needed reforms with virtual immunity to open political contestation from within the CPSU (Brown, 2010: 263).

Despite the hermetic nature of the Soviet regime, domestic forces operating in the USSR were interconnected and influenced by the external factors of the international system. Gorbachev was more than aware of the acute need for improvement in the field of Soviet foreign policy. A thaw in the USSR's relations with other countries was prerequisite "to offset bottlenecks in domestic reform, reopen the spigot on multilateral credits, and create a path to economic gain by reducing military spending" (Prados, 2011: 42).

Prior to Gorbachev's rule, Soviet policymakers had strained USSR's political relations with most of the major international actors. The United States had gained a clear economic advantage, and was about to step up its efforts to dwarf the USSR's military capabilities. Soviet strategists were concerned about the introduction by Ronald Reagan of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a program aimed at developing ground- and space-based systems that would shield the US from Soviet nuclear ballistic missiles (Zubok, 2000: 349). A success of this initiative would mean an ultimate nemesis for the Soviet Union, since it would undermine the country's nuclear deterrent.

At the same time, the Western European statesmen perceived the USSR as dangerously aggressive. Bearing in mind the Soviet military interventions in Eastern Europe in 1956 (Hungary) and in 1968 (Czechoslovakia), Western Europeans followed with contempt the news about the Red Army occupying Afghanistan since 1979. The situation in Eastern Europe was becoming increasingly volatile, as "goodwill towards the Soviet Union was conspicuously lacking", especially among the populations of the USSR's crucial Warsaw Pact allies – Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary (Brown, 2010: 252). The introduction of martial law in Poland in 1981-3 was a major signal of the erosion of Communist authority in that region.

On the other side of the globe, there was a growing chasm in USSR's relations with the People's Republic of China,

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caused by the Sino-Soviet ideological divergence since the late 1950s. Soviet relations in the region were additionally marred by territorial disputes (regarding the Kurile Islands) with Japan, an emerging economic power-house. The difficulties the newly elected general secretary were facing are accurately depicted by Richard Sakwa who observes that "Brezhnev's foreign policy had culminated in the nightmare of encirclement by hostile powers" (Sakwa, 1990: 315).

Soviet external problems were not limited to the inter-state level. The tremendous qualitative difference in living standards across the 'Iron Curtain' induced with increasing power a rethinking of the economic model imposed by the Kremlin. Eloquence of Western prosperity was clearly visible among the USSR's Warsaw Pact allies. The growing advocacy of the free-market economic model added momentum to the persistent nationalism in the region. Eastern Europeans took no heed of Gorbachev's "promise of a new Communist rule based on the moral and political legitimacy of Lenin" (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 103). Similar atmosphere was taking hold in the Soviet Union itself. Although the quality of life of the Soviet population was evidently better than that of previous generations, increasing numbers were comparing their situation with the wealth of the developed countries in the West – and, needless to say, arrived at frustrating conclusions (Kotkin, 2003: 67). In retrospective, this indirect destabilizing influence the West gained inside the USSR and among the Warsaw Pact allies seems to have been a byproduct of the vivid success of democratic political systems and market economies, which were then understood to be intimately linked (Brown, 2010: 264). Arguably, the growing discontent among the Communist societies made them more sensitive to temporary setbacks which were a necessary consequence of economic reforms envisaged by the Gorbachev administration.

## Gorbachev in Action

Mikhail Gorbachev had thorough knowledge of the nuanced inner mechanisms of the CPSU. It was obvious to him that to have any chances of introducing his far-reaching reforms he had to gather a considerable 'power base' and install it as high in the Party's hierarchy as possible (Sheehy, 1991: 202). Gorbachev introduced sweeping changes in the Foreign Ministry. As early as in the summer of 1985, he managed to replace the much-revered foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, who had held this post since 1957, with Eduard Shevardnadze. Although the latter lacked foreign policy experience, Gorbachev trusted him and regarded him as a like-minded ally (Brown, 2010: 249). Other significant posts were filled with open-minded, 'sensible' figures as well. Among the most notable were Anatolii Dobrynin, Vadim Medvedev, Anatolii Cherniaev, and Aleksandr Yakovlev (Brown, 2010: 250).

Gorbachev succeeded in gaining limited influence over the Ministry of Defence (MoD). He used the embarrassment caused by the breach of Soviet air defences by a young West German pilot, Matthias Rust, who managed to land his Cessna near Red Square on 28 May 1987, as a pretext to make a reshuffle in the MoD cadre (Brown, 2010: 251). This gave both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze more freedom of action in arms-control negotiations.

Apart from bold cadre politics, Gorbachev made considerable efforts to alter the ideational structures existent in the CPSU mind-set on foreign policy (Prados, 2011: 68). In his speech on 14 October 1986, for example, Gorbachev reported on the progress made during the Reykjavik summit: "[t]he meeting has convinced us that the path we have chosen is correct and that a new mode of political thinking in the nuclear age is necessary and constructive" (Freedman, 1990: 234).

Gorbachev's advocacy of 'new political thinking' had the greatest impact abroad, among other world leaders and policymakers. The main objective of his foreign policy, reducing threat perceptions in the West and avoiding another arms race, was met relatively soon. The lack of agreement in Reykjavik, due to Ronald Reagan's enchantment with the SDI, required that Gorbachev changed the common CPSU stance on that issue (Brown, 2010: 257). Having managed to convince other party members that SDI could not possibly be a game-changer, Gorbachev was able to strike a deal on different terms. On 8 December 1987, Gorbachev and Reagan signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty which bound both sides to remove that type of missiles from Europe (Freedman, 1990: 123).

Another crucial step was the announcement of a break away from the 'Brezhnev Doctrine' which stated that "a

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Communist state could not renounce communism" (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 119). In his speech at the United Nations General Assembly on 7 December 1988, Gorbachev sent a clear message to the political elites of Central and Eastern Europe that they could transform their political and economic systems without fear of Soviet intervention. In the same speech, he announced considerable troop withdrawals from the territories of the USSR's Warsaw Pact allies (Freedman, 1990: 278). The fall of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe that followed in 1989 is argued by some to have been a prelude to the end of the Cold War.

Alexander Wendt, one of the most recognized proponents of the constructivist approach to the study of international relations, argues that Gorbachev's 'new thinking' may be interpreted as evidence that "[international political] actors can engage in self-reflection and practice specifically designed to transform their identities and interests and thus to 'change the games' in which they are embedded" (Wendt, 1992: 420). Indeed, what differentiated Gorbachev, as a foreign policy-maker, from previous Soviet leaders was his ability to learn from his diplomatic interactions. According to Vladislav M. Zubok, the most important aspect of Gorbachev's learning process was his growing realization of the fact that the Soviet Union was both militarily and economically inferior to the West (Zubok, 2000: 355).

Gorbachev's applauded successes as a foreign policy-maker were accompanied by repeated failures of his *perestroika* within the USSR. For the general secretary, the need for restructuring the Soviet economy was a crucial issue. It is commonly argued, however, that his view of the necessary reforms was ideologically limited and inadequate to the actual needs of the Soviet society in the late 1980s. Gorbachev's plans for economic reform "scarcely touched upon the crucial issues of central planning, private property, free markets, consumer goods, or private business" (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 101). It seems quite apparent that his intention was to improve the efficiency of the USSR's economic model and not to transform it into a free-market democracy. Arguably, it was precisely the latter that the country dramatically needed (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 124).

Gorbachev proved to be an indecisive economic reformer – averse to pushing the reforms too far, he repeatedly dismissed his economic advisors and their schemes (Prados, 2011: 40). In hindsight, Gorbachev himself admits that, because of this hesitation, the most favourable window of opportunity (1987-8) was missed (Prados, 2011: 112). Many authors point out that Gorbachev could not cope with his internal conflict between the consciousness that profound transformation is required and his own system-supportive tendencies (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 125). This discrepancy is clearly visible when we compare the awkwardness of the economic *perestroika* with the relative success of *glasnost*.

During his first speech as CPSU leader on 11 March 1985, Gorbachev advocated introduction of 'openness' (*glasnost*) in the political life of the Soviet Union. Seeing the traditional obsession with secrecy as a crucial barrier to the development of the society, he initiated a comprehensive campaign to foster freedom of information, honest discussion, and political participation of wider groups of citizens (Sakwa, 1990: 66). For Gorbachev, this process meant a reshaping of the government into a genuine "representative of Soviet society" envisioned by Lenin (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 102). Additionally, Gorbachev understood *glasnost* as a feedback mechanism, enabling the leadership to keep in contact with popular opinions and expectations (Sakwa, 1990: 69). In everyday life, *glasnost* translated into a loosening of the censorship of the major media – press, television, and radio – as well as of the creative arts. However revolutionary all this may sound, one has to remember that *glasnost* itself was subject to considerable limitations. As Stephen White observes, "it was possible to be controversial in support of *perestroika* but not (broadly speaking) against it" (White, 1991: 91).

Nevertheless, the government's openness came about in arguably at the least suitable moment, as the economic reforms were beginning to have their toll on the material living standards of the regular Soviet citizens. In addition to the widespread criticism of the present shortcomings of the reformist agenda, *glasnost* also encouraged uninhibited revisiting of the Soviet past (Tolz, 1995: 99). This latter aspect resulted in a rediscovery of distinct nationalities among the peoples of Central Asia and Caucasus. Portended by acts of violence between the Kazakhs and the police forces in Alma-Ata in 1986, the turmoil broke out with full ferocity in the late 1988 in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 103). The problem of Soviet multi-nationalism was all the more difficult to address as it had been largely overlooked in the Kremlin's political calculations. The rise of Russian nationalism, with Boris Yeltsin as the leader, spelled an approaching dissolution of the USSR. Combined

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with the regime change among the Warsaw Pact allies, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant an abrupt end of the superpower rivalry.

## Revisiting Gorbachev's Merits

Thus far, Mikhail Gorbachev presents himself as an initiator of major changes both in the international image of the Soviet Union and in the country's politico-economic functioning domestically. Yet his importance in the analyzed events is not uncontested. John Prados questions the possible role of individual agency among the late-Cold War leaders, arguing that "the ship of state was a supertanker, not a sailboat, and responded to the tiller quite differently than a small craft" (Prados, 2011: 43). To put it in more academic terms, the collective agency exerted by other individuals – either politicians, academics, celebrities, or even 'ordinary' citizens – constituted in itself an ideational structure (e.g. of norms, expectations) within which the world's most influential leaders of that time, Reagan and Gorbachev, were bound to operate. Prados identifies cultural transformation within the Eastern Bloc as a subject for further study (Prados, 2011: 131).

At the moment, we have to limit ourselves to consulting the well-systematized accounts of the condition of Soviet political elites. Archie Brown, for example, suggests that Gorbachev may be understood as a representative of a critically thinking part of the *nomenklatura*. His political philosophy was significantly influenced by the Western thought, as he was a voracious reader of foreign literature. Among his readings were works by prominent social democrats such as Willy Brandt and Francois Mitterrand (Brown, 2010: 261). The possibility to have access to Western books created a window for the privileged officials, or at least those of them who were inquisitive enough, allowing a closer look at the arguments of the 'other'. Vladislav M. Zubok argues that some elements of 'new thinking' were formulated among the Soviet rulers even before Gorbachev came to power. The author points to the war scare of the early 1980s and the quiet turn away from the obsolete Brezhnev Doctrine among the policy-makers (Zubok, 2000: 348).

Such evidence strips Gorbachev of some of his merit as a political 'innovator'. However, his character was of tremendous importance as it presented a unique mixture of diplomatic charisma and incompetence in domestic affairs. It is difficult to conceive of a better scenario than the one that took place when Gorbachev was the leader – it seems that neither a 'poor diplomat-successful reformer' nor even a 'successful diplomat-successful reformer' would have been likely to produce a better ending to the Cold War. After Gorbachev's skillful reduction of international tensions, the collapse of the USSR caused by his awkward domestic policies could proceed without sparking off a global conflict.

This interpretation brings us to the final point of the discussion. Common sense suggests that we should judge the value of people's actions, both their merits and faults, by the relation of the actions' outcomes to the initial intentions of the agents. The same rational dictum may be applied to the critical assessment of Mikhail Gorbachev's role in ending the Cold War. The first observation that comes to mind is that his attempt at economic reforms was an utter fiasco. Gorbachev intended to dismantle the stifling Soviet political system and to revitalize the faltering economy. At no point did he want to undo the state itself. To the contrary, he did not hesitate to use 'hard power' in order to preserve the integrity of the USSR. For instance, in response to the Lithuanian declaration of independence on 11 May 1990, Gorbachev decided to intervene militarily (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 128).

It is also argued that his passiveness during the political crises among the Warsaw Pact allies was not as benevolent as it may seem. John Prados explains Gorbachev's invitation for the Central and Eastern European countries to conduct politico-economic reforms as a way of relieving the Soviet budget. Once they increased their economic efficiency, the CEECs would not be so heavily reliant on subsidies and foreign aid from the USSR (Prados, 2011: 114). Vladislav M. Zubok, on the other hand, argues that "Soviet reformers believed that transformation would lead to 'national communist' regimes and would not endanger the Warsaw Pact" (Zubok, 2000: 353). Unlike in the case of Lithuania, which was 'domestic' to the USSR, potential political costs of military intervention in the CEECs deterred Soviet leadership from involvement after the crises broke out.

However failed were Gorbachev's policies inside the Eastern Bloc, he still deserves praise for revolutionizing Soviet

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relations with the West. If not for Mikhail Gorbachev, who “broke the Cold War’s ideological straitjacket”, “the end of [the confrontation] could have played out very differently and very dangerously” (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008: 146).

## Conclusion

Mikhail Gorbachev was elected general secretary of the CPSU at a time when the Soviet empire was economically crumbling and encircled by hostile powers. The unfavourable international situation prompted the Soviet administration to maintain enormous military spending. Despite this ‘vicious circle’, the USSR remained politically stable. To reverse the country’s inevitable decline, Gorbachev came up with bold initiatives both in the area of foreign policy and in the domestic dimension. His personal diplomacy and unilateral concessions succeeded in deflating threat perceptions among Western statesmen. Within the USSR, however, Gorbachev’s awkward reforms eroded the very foundations on which the central authority of the Kremlin was based. His economic reforms were indecisive and lost their boldness over time. However, their negative effect on the material living standards of disenchanted Soviet citizens remained considerable. Popular discontent was aggravated by the open criticism of the establishment’s shortcomings by the media, which had been enabled by the introduction of *glasnost*. Even more importantly, the policy of ‘openness’ led to a reemergence of multiple nationalisms within the USSR. The eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union did not provoke an international military conflict. This peaceful collapse was possible chiefly because of Gorbachev’s tremendous breakthroughs in foreign policy in 1987-8.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s record as the last Soviet leader presents a puzzling mixture of unprecedented success and spectacular failure. It may be perceived as a stroke of luck that someone with such personality made it to the top post of the Soviet political establishment. Once in power, he proved to be a *virtuoso* at exploiting the system’s centralized, hierarchical structure in order to impose his own vision of foreign and domestic policies. Gorbachev’s open-mindedness enabled him to adapt and evolve as a foreign policy-maker. He, more than anyone else, deserves praise for breaking the ‘ideological straitjacket’ of the Cold War. At the same time, Gorbachev turned out to be an incompetent domestic reformer. Apparently, a steadier economic restructuring would have produced better outcomes. It may be argued that an even more important mistake was, ironically, the introduction of *glasnost* into the Soviet Union’s political life. To give an alternative, we may point out that there was no talk of ‘openness’ during Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms in China. The PRC managed to carry on, and its ‘state-capitalism’ has created the world’s second largest economy.

Apart from his patchy performance, Gorbachev’s merit has been further eroded by new evidence which shows him as a mere representative of the growing numbers of ‘new thinkers’. It is also argued that the diplomatic breakthrough was induced by the ‘climate of opinion’ set by the collective agency of other prominent individuals. Nevertheless, Mikhail Gorbachev was the only individual who was able, because of his position, and willing to change the USSR’s attitude towards the West and *vice versa*. It was his skillful diplomacy that prevented a violent end to the Cold War.

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