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GORBACHEV AND THE “NEW POLITICAL THINKING”

The radical shift of Soviet foreign policy at the end of the 1980s and the subsequent chain of events that eventually led to the end of the Cold War are justly associated with the name Mikhail Gorbachev. Those who praise him (mostly abroad), like those who curse him (mostly in his own country), may disagree on many subjects, but nearly all recognize the significance of the changes he managed to bring about in the international political arena.

To explain the extraordinary results of his undertakings, one might cite his strategic vision, his tactical skill, his intellectual courage and his strong political will. And yet the principal lever which allowed him to “move the world” (to use as a metaphor the famous remark of Archimedes) was what he called the philosophy of “new political thinking,” which became the foundation of his foreign policy achievements.

To avoid simplification we should not interpret the concept of “new political thinking” as a ready-made set of rules and principles carved into tablets that Gorbachev brought with him when he entered the office of the general secretary in March 1985. Analysts still debate today: Was it a utopian project unconnected from the divisive realities of the world and established traditions of international and interstate relations, or was it just a cover-up for a mandatory strategic retreat of the over-stretched Soviet empire, which was facing the impending terminal crisis of the world communist project? Was the “new political thinking” of Gorbachev dictated by his vision of the controversial but promising reality of an interdependent world, or, as believed by Robert Gates, at the time director of the CIA, was it motivated by the Soviet leaders’ “need for breathing space”¹ to save the obsolete system? If seen in this light, the “new political thinking” was merely imposed on Gorbachev by the Soviet Union’s defeat in the historic competition with its historic rival—the West—which then would have been the true driving force and secret godfather of the new Soviet foreign policy.

At the same time two important aspects of the subject have been ignored. First, the perception that for Gorbachev, establishing cooperative relations between the USSR and the outside world represented an integral part of a much broader project: the democratic transformation of the Soviet political system.² And second, the

¹ James A. Baker III and Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 157.

² Author’s interview with Aleksandr Yakovlev, 16 August 1999.

evolution of both the future protagonist of the “new political thinking” and the real contents of this formula.

In contrast to Gates, the Soviet theorists and practitioners of the “new thinking” considered it a home-grown product, conditioned mostly by internal problems. If they referred to Western sources of influence and inspiration, they mentioned first of all ideas found in the Russell–Einstein Manifesto, the reports of the Palme Commission or the Club of Rome, or similar appeals calling for an end to the absurd logic of nuclear confrontation and demanding that the attention of world politics be turned to the global problems and challenges facing the human species. Moreover, if they admitted that the West was indeed effectively influencing developments in Soviet policy, it was not a question of military threats or politics of “containment,” but rather the example of successful economic development along with the attractiveness of ideas about political freedom, both features that were becoming, in fact, important factors in the internal evolution of Soviet society. Gorbachev himself, when speaking about the roots of “new thinking,” did not hesitate to mention Albert Einstein or Bertrand Russell as being among those whose ideas influenced his intellectual evolution.³

The “old thinking” and the emergence of “new thinkers”

Before we analyze the factors that might explain the appearance of the “new political thinking” in the corridors of the Kremlin with the arrival of Gorbachev, I would like to say a few words about the “old political thinking,” which on a number of occasions at the beginning of the 1980s brought the confrontation between the Soviet Union and the West (above all the United States) to the brink of a third world conflict. Here again, if the Soviet leadership of the Brezhnev era had remained hostage to anti-Western complexes, convinced by its own propaganda about the “aggressive nature of imperialism” and its intention to resort to military force to destroy the socialist community, the ideological wrapping was less an explanation than a cover. There were strong political and corporate *internal* motives for adopting this line, since the Soviet regime used the bugaboo of the “external threat” as an indispensable psychological tool to support the totalitarian system.

This perverse expression of the survival instinct by a dying system pushed the Soviet leadership to finance its “family” of clients in Asia, Africa and Latin America, despite the tremendous cost of economic and military support already being provided to the other “socialist countries” and “progressive” regimes. The imperial foreign policy pursued by an ailing leadership that was totally cut off from the reality of the country inspired not only a rise in symbolic protest acts by political dissidents, but it also provoked concern and even resentment within the Soviet political elite. Seeing Soviet foreign policy evolving in an expansion-

³ Author’s interview with Mikhail Gorbachev, 28 April 1999.

ist direction, a sort of “communist imperialism,” many regime members were troubled by its apparent drift toward neo-Stalinist positions in domestic policy. The deepening international isolation of the Soviet Union destroyed their last hopes for a modernization of the country’s economy, while the widening gap separating the country from the Western world meant the chance for a democratic renovation of the system would be postponed indefinitely.

Views of this kind, despite being shared by only a tiny fraction of the political elite, reflected the emergence of a kind of *alternative political culture* distinct from the official line. Although seldom overtly, a growing number of members of the Soviet political establishment were ready to question the traditional ideological approach to foreign policy.

After several assertive moves of the Soviet leadership on the world scene (the invasion of Afghanistan and the deployment of the new Soviet SS-20 missiles, which provoked the arrival of the US Pershing II and cruise missiles to Western Europe), the representatives of this alternative thinking were joined by prominent figures from the official Soviet scientific *nomenklatura*—the directors and leading experts of prestigious academic institutes who had direct access to the highest levels of the political hierarchy. Some of them served as speechwriters for Brezhnev and Andropov and later formed the basis of Gorbachev’s intellectual reserve.

Without challenging the basic goal—consolidation of the Soviet state’s position in its historic dispute with the capitalist world—at that time many experts, particularly those who were directly associated with the ruling elite, sincerely believed that Soviet socialism could become “competitive” on the international scene once it had been reformed, modernized and democratized. It would then, in order to assure its own survival, no longer be obliged to depend on coercion and repression inside the country, or need to use military threats as a tool in its foreign relations. Alongside the critical judgment of these professionals, such feelings of frustration were also reflected in the civic reaction of an important segment of the Soviet educated class. “The ranks of the (future) new thinkers,” rightly remarks Robert D. English in his study *Russia and the Idea of the West*, “were not limited to a narrow group of security specialists but comprised a broad cohort of social and natural scientists, students of culture and the humanities, ranging from academics to *apparatchiki*.”⁴

Despite the fact that they were classified, the practical effect of the position papers prepared by these institutes and submitted to senior political leaders was little. This situation reduced the role of academic advisers to the status of marginal lobbyists, who could only seek to limit the damage of decisions they considered counterproductive. The situation began to change only when Mikhail Gorbachev became a member of the Politburo in 1979. Gorbachev regularly started to invite academics to his office in the Central Committee to brief him on

⁴ Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 5.

matters related to foreign policy, the world economy or the Soviet strategic situation, trying to build a sort of informal intellectual “think-tank” which hypothetically, in the future, could play the role of his “shadow” advisory cabinet.

By the beginning of the 1980s it had become clear for many that the course of superpower arrogance had left the USSR isolated and led its foreign policy into a blind alley. Yet it would be a serious exaggeration to describe most of the liberal-minded members of the Soviet elite as “Western-orientated.” Few of them were prepared to admit that the source of their daily problems lay in the general inefficiency of the prevailing system. For the majority, the only acceptable explanation for the continuous deterioration of the economic situation of the country and of its evident backwardness in comparison to the prosperous Western world was the huge amount of Soviet defense spending. Without this, they believed, the system would be quite competitive on the international scene. According to Yevgenii Primakov, until 1985 director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, many of his colleagues shared his wish to put an end to the arms race, “not because they assumed it would be impossible for the Soviet economy to keep up with the United States in this competition, but simply in the hope of making better use of the national wealth.”⁵

Belonging, on the whole, to the new generation of the Party *nomenklatura* and too young to have taken part in the war, they did not suffer from the “1941 syndrome” and consequently did not share the complexes of older generations obsessed with the fear of an invasion from without. For this reason, psychologically they were not ready to pay any price whatsoever to protect their country against a threat they considered quite hypothetical.

Whatever their motivation, a considerable number of these foreign policy experts did not expect to witness any radical changes at the top political levels in their own lifetime. Yet although condemned to an existence of dormancy, they constituted a sort of professional political army awaiting its leader. “We could write a lot of memos and speeches for our leaders that stated all these [new thinking] points, but it didn’t matter until a leader appeared in the general secretary’s chair who had come with these ideas beforehand,” noted Georgii Shakhnazarov, a political scientist and, later, deputy head of the Central Committee’s International Department and an advisor to Gorbachev.⁶

Gorbachev reaches power

When Mikhail Gorbachev reached the position of supreme power in the Soviet Union, he was competent in dealing with domestic politics but virtually unprepared when it came to handling international affairs. Two specific areas of

⁵ Author’s interview with Yevgenii Primakov, 17 February 2000.

⁶ Author’s interview with Georgii Shakhnazarov, 30 March 1998.

international relations were part of Gorbachev’s daily concerns, both closely related to the internal situation of the country: the economic burden of the arms race and the war in Afghanistan. Both issues threatened to hold back the radical internal reforms he was planning.

According to the recollections of Anatolii Chernyaev, in the hours following his election to the post of general secretary, Gorbachev noted several major foreign policy issues on a sheet of paper: “stop the arms race, withdraw troops from Afghanistan, change the spirit of the relationship with the US, restore cooperation with China.”⁷ In a later interview, Gorbachev confirmed this set of priorities, placing particular stress on the necessity of stopping the arms race: “without that, any plans for perestroika would have had to remain in the realm of fiction.”⁸

It is not at all surprising that Gorbachev’s first foreign policy agenda could be summed up in a few lines on a sheet of paper. At that time, Gorbachev’s vision of desired change in the Soviet Union’s relations with the West was limited to a general and vague set of intentions. The philosophy of the “new thinking” had not yet been drafted and even its vocabulary did not yet exist.

The new general secretary was impatient to start reducing the burden of the arms race, to begin the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, and to draw Western capital into the Soviet economy in order to provide the necessary financial assistance for his political reforms. Yet he could not start moving ahead in any of these directions without a qualitative shift in his relations with his Western partners. In July 1985 Gorbachev managed to solve the delicate problem of replacing Andrei Gromyko, who had occupied the post of foreign minister since 1957. Gorbachev’s unexpected choice of Eduard Shevardnadze—someone ostensibly competent in any sphere of party or state activities except diplomacy—was proof of his determination to recruit a foreign minister who would undertake no policy other than that of the general secretary.

Next came the first trial for Gorbachev’s exercise in great power diplomacy—his first meeting with Ronald Reagan during the US–Soviet summit in Geneva in November 1985. Despite the fact that the two leaders succeeded in establishing good personal relations, the final outcome of the Geneva summit did not live up to Gorbachev’s initial hopes: achieving a qualitative breakthrough in Moscow’s relations with the West. Nevertheless, it caused the Soviet leader to dismiss his illusion that ending the Cold War would be an easy enterprise, in which merely his statement of best intentions would be enough. He was also forced to accept the fact that exposing the absurdity of the arms race (as he did when talking to Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister, in December 1984) was not enough to bring it to an end, and that the barrier of mistrust separating East and West was probably even more solid than the Iron Curtain dividing Europe. He began to

⁷ Author’s interview with Anatolii Chernyaev, 10 September 1998.

⁸ Author’s interview with Mikhail Gorbachev, 28 April 1999.

realize that a real breakthrough in the Soviet Union's relations with its Western partners would demand a major, long-term strategy.

As a result of the Geneva summit, Gorbachev also reached another important conclusion: he understood that establishing a new type of East-West relations implied not only a new level in the exchange of information about the other side's intentions, but also the need for internal political guarantees supporting official policy statements. It thus became clear for Gorbachev that there was an unavoidable interconnection between the new image he sought for Soviet foreign policy and the internal reforms he was planning to undertake within the country. This connection between the internal and external aspects of his reform plan could not be reduced merely to synchronizing his actions in the two spheres; rather it was a question of an organic political relationship that implied major revising of the established model of Soviet foreign policy.

The two key individuals who helped Gorbachev shape the new foreign policy line in the first months of 1986 were Aleksandr Yakovlev and Anatolii Chernyaev. The former was charged by Gorbachev to prepare the foreign policy section of his political report for the twenty-seventh party congress. The latter, who became Gorbachev's foreign policy aide on 1 February, prepared the draft of Gorbachev's speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 1986—an event that Gorbachev himself characterized as “a meeting that became the starting point for the full-scale implementation of the policy of ‘new political thinking.’”⁹

The part of the report presenting the contours of the new Soviet foreign policy, despite still being drafted in the jargon of *Pravda* editorials, represented a striking contrast to the classic Bolshevik vision of the relations between the USSR and its historic enemy—the capitalist world. For the first time since 1917, the supreme leader of the Communist Party and Soviet state abandoned the “class approach,” which condemned not only national societies but the entire world to antagonistic confrontation, declaring instead “the real dialectics” of modern development to be a combination of “the competition and struggle between the two systems with a growing tendency for *interdependence* among the states forming the world community.”¹⁰ Another important innovation of the report was its abandoning of what until that time had been the cornerstone of all political statements made by the Soviet leaders from the tribune of the party congress: the promise to do away with world imperialism and send it to the “scrap heap of history.”

Having formally abandoned the official goal of constructing an alternative world model opposed to and hostile toward Western capitalist society, Gorbachev also renounced the ambition of his predecessors to mobilize and launch a heterogeneous army of the “progressive forces” against his Western rival. The new ideology of political pragmatism was obliged to sacrifice not only the “class approach” in the

⁹ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 8.

¹⁰ *Political Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the XXVIIth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Moscow: Novosti, 1986), 24. Emphasis by the author.

Soviet Union’s relations with the West, but also the presenting of conflicts in the Third World as an integral component of a world revolution. An apparent semantic change introduced in the report—the replacement of the term “national liberation movements” by the ideologically neutral “regional conflicts”—served to eliminate the antagonistic opposition between “progressive” and “reactionary” forces, and in this way released the Soviet Union from its historic bondage, including the obligation to support self-proclaimed “revolutionaries” across the globe. The new de-ideologized presentation of conflicts in the Third World provided Soviet foreign policy with a salutary way out—inevitable setbacks in this area would no longer have to be interpreted as U-turns in the course of history.

An apparently low-profile approach toward the immediate tasks of practical foreign policy did not mean that the new Soviet leadership had renounced its grand ambitions. They were associated, this time, not with the prospect of an inevitable world revolution, but with world perestroika, which at times seems to have taken on a messianic quality. As Gorbachev wrote in his book *Perestroika and New Political Thinking for Our Country and the World*, first published in the autumn of 1987, he viewed perestroika as a kind of a universal lever capable of transforming not only Soviet reality but also the world situation in general. Declaring that the “new thinking” was necessary to save the world, Gorbachev was still convinced that it also could save the Soviet version of socialism.

The evolution of the “new thinking”

Gorbachev’s speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 1986, which was drafted by Chernyaev, went even further than the report. It was based on several apparently simple ideas. First, the revision of Soviet foreign policy was meant to become an efficient instrument of a major internal political project: a reform of the system that was necessary to assure its competitiveness on the international scene. Second, the national security of the USSR preferably should be assured by political means rather than by concentrating its society’s military, economic and human resources on preparing for a highly improbable military conflict with a potential aggressor.

It so happened that another event that occurred in the spring of 1986 marked Gorbachev not only politically but psychologically, and influenced his evolution as a politician with a global vision of the world—Chernobyl. Before 26 April 1986—the date of the explosion of the reactor at the nuclear power station—his intention to propose a curb on the arms race along with a radical reduction of nuclear weapons was mostly based on economic and security concerns. After Chernobyl his attitude toward nuclear weapons transformed into a psychological aversion, a moral rejection, bringing him, in this respect, closer to Reagan. The fight for a non-nuclear world became a personal challenge.

This should explain how the idea of speeding up the whole process of nuclear disarmament emerged, disarmament that remained hostage both to the still unsettled relations with the US administration (despite the warm handshakes and smiles in Geneva) and the rusty machine of superpower negotiations. Thus, the idea of the Reykjavik summit appeared. “The leitmotiv should be the liquidation of nuclear weapons, with a political approach and not an arithmetical one prevailing. [...] If Reagan does not make concessions, we shall make everything public.” These were the terms Gorbachev used to present the design to the Politburo.¹¹ If they failed to reach an agreement, Gorbachev planned publicly to put all responsibility for the lack of success on the United States, making maximum propaganda use of the impasse. It was in fact based on this condition that he managed to get his colleagues in the Politburo to agree to the package of proposals he was to bring to Reykjavik, proposals that until that time were unprecedented.¹²

The Reykjavik summit is often qualified as a “failure.” After all, the two leaders departed without having reached a historic agreement, an agreement that at certain moments seemed to be within the distance of a stretched hand. And yet for Gorbachev it represented a real leap in practicing the “new thinking.” According to Chernyaev, Gorbachev’s true rupture with the legacy of the past came not only in his offering a true deal to the Americans, but also in his refusal to exploit their rejection politically, to use it for propaganda purposes, thus de facto disregarding the mandate he had brought from Moscow.

Chernyaev considers the “failed summit” to be the crucial turning point in the further evolution of Gorbachev’s approach not only to Soviet–American relations, but also to foreign policy issues in general. In his view, the main result of the Reykjavik summit was more a question of a psychological shift in the minds of the two superpower leaders than any concrete progress on agreements, including the strategic arms and “euro-missile” agreements that were then signed in the months that followed. This later progress would never have been possible without the new level of confidence and understanding reached in the Hofdi house.

In practice, for Gorbachev this meant unilaterally starting to apply the declared principles of the “new thinking” in his own daily practical activity, even without guaranteed reciprocity from his Western partners. At one of the Politburo sessions before Reykjavik he said:

We all—myself, the Politburo and the MID [the Foreign Ministry, ed.]—should realize: if our proposals lead to diminishing US security, we shall obtain nothing. The Americans will never

¹¹ “Ustanovki Gorbacheva grupe po podgotovke Reik’yavika,” 4 October 1986, in A. Chernyaev, V. Medvedev, G. Shakhnazarov, eds., *V Politbyuro TsK KPSS... Po zapisam Anatoliya Chernyaeva, Vadima Medvedeva, Georgiya Shakhnazarova (1985–1991)* (Moscow: Alpina Bizness Buks, 2006), 72–75.

¹² Gorbachev, *Zhizn’ i Reformy*, vol. 2, 26.

buy it. That is why our guiding principle should be: stronger security for all through an equal decrease of the armaments level.¹³

Under Gorbachev’s pressure, the Soviet General Staff reluctantly agreed to accept the total elimination of all intermediate-range nuclear missiles, despite this being extremely asymmetrical. Not only did the quantitative imbalance of the INF Treaty signed in Washington in December 1987 arouse an allergic reaction within the military lobby (the Soviet Union agreed to destroy more than twice as many intermediate range missiles as the US),¹⁴ but also the extremely detailed character of various oversight measures, which included unprecedented possibilities of access by the other side’s inspectors to supervise every stage of the missiles’ destruction.

But in its conceptual form, the ideology of the “new thinking” was publicly presented by Gorbachev *urbi et orbi* a year later in his speech at the UN General Assembly on 7 December 1988. While working on its text, Gorbachev thought of it as an “anti-Fulton speech,” an allusion to the occasion when Churchill first announced the existence of an “iron curtain.” He later wrote: “I wanted to show the international community that we are entering an entirely new period of history where the former traditional principles of relations between states based on competition and the balance of power should yield their place to cooperation and solidarity.”¹⁵

Gorbachev solemnly declared the Soviet leadership’s intention to respect the “freedom of choice” for all peoples to determine their own political and economic systems, and he appealed to all members of the international community to renounce the use of force in settling international disputes. This statement of the new principles that would govern his country’s relations with the outside world was accompanied by the announcement of concrete actions: deep unilateral troop cuts (half a million soldiers) and arms reductions, along with the withdrawal of six tank divisions from Eastern Europe. In this way Gorbachev publicly made it crystal clear that the Brezhnev Doctrine was dead.

While this speech was headline news throughout the world, its key elements had already been formulated by Gorbachev and formally endorsed in the summer of 1988 at the nineteenth party conference in June–July. When addressing its participants he was even more explicit: “A key factor in the ‘new thinking’ is the

¹³ “Ustanovki Gorbacheva gruppe po podgotovke Reik’yavika,” 4 October 1986, in Chernyaev, Medvedev, Shakhnazarov, eds., *V Politburo TsK KPSS*, 74.

¹⁴ Within three years, by 31 May 1991, the Soviet Union and the United States had eliminated 2,692 intermediate- and shorter-range missiles with 4,000 warheads. Of these, 1,846 missiles were liquidated by the Soviet Union: 889 intermediate-range missiles, including 654 SS-20 missiles, as well as 957 shorter-range missiles, including 239 SS-23 “Oka” missiles. During the same period, the United States liquidated 234 Pershing-II, 443 cruise missiles and 169 Pershing-I missiles. V. Medvedev, “Uroki Dogovora o likvidatsii raket srednei i men’shei dal’nosti,” *Yadernyi kontrol’* 6, no. 4 (July–August 2000): 67–74, 70.

¹⁵ Gorbachev, *Zhizn’ i reformy*, vol. 2, 132.

concept of freedom of choice. [...] The imposition of a social system, a way of life or policies from outside by any means, let alone military force, are dangerous trappings of the past.”¹⁶ He later wrote, “Having set for ourselves the course of freedom, we could not deny it to the others.”¹⁷

During the party conference, sensing the subversive potential of the philosophy of the “new thinking,” the conservatives launched an attack against one of its core propositions, an affirmation of the priority of “universal human values” over “class interests.” In the end, both terms were dropped from the final text of the “Theses” for the conference, which nevertheless kept a reference to “the primacy of law and common human morality.” This seemingly abstract debate over the postulates of “new thinking” barely concealed the deepening political conflict within the Soviet leadership with regard to the general orientation of the future reforms. Gorbachev’s speech at the UN did, in fact, become a “watershed,” although not exactly in the sense that he had intended.

The “new thinking” and 1989

From the beginning of 1989, public debates inside the Soviet Union on questions of foreign policy ceased to be merely formal or ceremonial; they began to acquire an importance of their own, since the new approach in foreign policy began to affect the real interests of the Soviet *nomenklatura* and the military establishment. The first signs of embarrassing new problems were related to the unforeseen development of the situation in Eastern Europe.

In these countries, Gorbachev’s speech at the United Nations was interpreted above all as an announcement of a historic opportunity to be seized, a confirmation that the new Soviet leadership was in fact ready to ease its grip on this region. The proof came not so much from Gorbachev’s formal confirmation of every people’s sovereign “right to choose” the path of its own development, but with his announcement of a future unilateral withdrawal of troops stationed in Eastern Europe.

Already in one of the first debates inside the Politburo about Moscow’s relations with the East European countries in July 1986, Gorbachev stated: “It’s impossible to proceed as before. The methods that were applied with regard to Czechoslovakia [in 1968] and Hungary [in 1956] are unacceptable.”¹⁸ In November 1986, Gorbachev convened a secret “working meeting” in Moscow for all the leaders of the CMEA member countries, which included ten full members. The main message that the Soviet leader wanted to convey was an advance warning—in the future each national party and its leadership would be totally accountable

¹⁶ *The All-Union 19th Party Conference, Documents and Materials* (Moscow: Novosti, 1988), 37.

¹⁷ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Razmyshleniya o proshlom i budushchem* (Moscow: Terra, 1998), 48.

¹⁸ Politburo protocol, 3 July 1986, in Chernyaev, Medvedev, Shakhnazarov, eds., *V Politburo TsK KPSS*, 53.

to its own population. There would no longer be the possibility of relying on the protection of the Soviet presence or military might in order to maintain power.

The famous “freedom of choice” proclaimed to be a basic tenet of the “new thinking” philosophy, if applied to the countries of Eastern Europe, could only mean that the “choice” of Soviet-type socialism by these countries in the aftermath of World War II was in fact reversible. Thus, the “choice” of socialism, which until then had been presented as the fulfillment of historical destiny, was downgraded to a conventional political question which, taken away from the hands of history, was to be entrusted to the decisions of ordinary people.

Does this mean that Gorbachev was already prepared at this point in time to accept all the eventual consequences this radical change of Soviet policy would bring in a region that did, after all, represent a sphere of vital strategic interest for the USSR? There is no definitive answer to this hypothetical question. What is nevertheless clear is that at the moment of real choice, faced with the unexpected chain reaction of political turmoil in Eastern Europe largely provoked by his own actions, Gorbachev behaved in accordance with the principles he had formulated at a time when he still believed that he would be able to control the course of events.

With hindsight one might remark that his quasi-religious belief in the omnipotence of perestroika, a conviction that its triumph would transform not only the Soviet Union, but also the other East European countries, in the long run did him a disservice. It nourished a feeling of false security at the top of the Soviet political leadership, based on the assumption that the East European allies of the USSR had no alternative other than to follow their leader, especially one who was pointing the way to freedom and democracy.

However, for anyone who had closely observed the internal evolution of the East European countries during the preceding months, it was evident that the practical implementation of the principle of “freedom of choice” in the absence of any vigorous Soviet counteraction would result in their political defection to the West. Whatever the explanations, the results were obvious: contrary to the hopes or, indeed, the political calculations of Gorbachev, the dramatic political upheaval in the East European countries, somewhat unexpectedly, marked a transition from the triumphant advance of Gorbachev’s diplomacy to a stage where he apparently was no longer the master of the processes he had unleashed.

By the second half of 1989, Gorbachev and his team were being carried along by the turbulent historic current they themselves had initiated. After more than forty years of imposed subsistence in the shadow of the Soviet big brother, Eastern Europe was waking up and, unexpectedly for Gorbachev, this led both to a breach in his frontline facing the West and the emergence of dangerous cracks in the monolithic wall of the Soviet people’s “internationalist” unity.

But first the other Wall had to go – the one in Berlin. Some ask whether the Berlin Wall was torn down on 9 November following an order from Moscow or,

to the contrary, its fall took Gorbachev totally unprepared. Both statements are wrong. Gorbachev certainly did not choose the date “to tear down this wall,” in response to Ronald Reagan’s appeal of several years before. He had merely dug under its foundations, leaving it vulnerable, so that it would collapse at the first outburst of a political storm.

Once Gorbachev delivered his speech at the United Nations renouncing the use of force and, by implication, allowing people freely to choose their own social system, the Wall was already doomed. By the autumn of 1989, Gorbachev’s statement had passed convincing tests, first in Poland, with the installation in August of a non-communist government headed by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, in accordance with the results of free elections, and after that in September in Hungary, where the opening of the Austrian border with the silent consent of Moscow, despite the ire of Berlin, allowed thousands of GDR citizens to flee to the West. With the removal of Honecker, several days after Gorbachev’s hurried departure from Berlin before the end of the festivities on the occasion of the forty-year anniversary of the GDR, the fall of the Wall became just a matter of time.

Fleeing to Moscow from the German snow-slide that he had himself provoked, Gorbachev could not yet measure the scale of avalanche that was expecting him at home. The example of the Eastern Europe (even more than the prospect of German unity), which had transformed into an unexpected testing ground for the policies of “new thinking,” became a stimulus for the national elites of the Soviet republics. From the Karabakh enclave in the Caucasus to the national elites of the Baltic republics, increasing numbers began to defiantly challenge the central power.

Gorbachev’s political opponents logically interpreted the eruption of anti-Kremlin opposition at the periphery of the Soviet empire as the direct consequence of replacing the Brezhnev Doctrine with the principles of “new thinking.” Quite naturally, most were concerned that the uncontrolled developments in Eastern Europe might be a forerunner of change that would threaten their own status; this troubled them even more than potential threats to the geo-strategic position of the world’s second superpower.

During the last two years of Gorbachev’s stay in power, the foreign policy of perestroika, no longer reflecting a consensus within the political class, suddenly intruded debates in the plenary sessions of the Central Committee. Not only Shevardnadze, but also the general secretary himself was subjected to increasingly aggressive criticism by the other members of the party leadership. The sad irony of the situation was confirmed by the fact that when, on 10 December 1990, the Nobel Committee announced its decision to award the Peace Prize to Gorbachev, he felt obliged (as in the case of the two other outstanding Nobel laureates from the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov, although obviously for very different reasons) to decline the invitation to go to Oslo.

With the evident breakdown of the initial consensus on foreign policy, Gorbachev and his foreign policy team remained determined not to swerve from their

avowed political course, or fail to fulfill the obligations they had undertaken with regard to their Western partners. Thus, they had to seek ways to bypass the barrier of obtaining obligatory approval from the Politburo. “In 1989 when their commitment to the deeper democratic nexus of foreign policy was challenged in Eastern Europe the leaders of the new thinking chose principle over power. In 1991 this challenge visited the USSR itself. Gorbachev fighting resurgent Soviet reactionaries as well as his own deep allegiance to the Union hesitated but again chose the path of the new thinking,” writes Robert English.¹⁹

At a certain stage, Gorbachev was faced with a paradoxical situation: because of the aggravation of internal tensions within Soviet society, the further application of the principles of “new thinking,” instead of facilitating reforms, started to increase their political price. In this new political environment, the initial function of foreign policy was transformed: once Gorbachev’s political trump card and the efficient but auxiliary instrument of internal reforms, it increasingly had become perestroika’s last resort. At the same time, Gorbachev discovered that he could not count very much on the support of his foreign partners.

The London meeting of the G7 in July 1991 was a final chance for Gorbachev to strike a new strategic deal with the West. Gorbachev was then engaged in a much larger strategic proposal to the West as a whole, an appeal to invest in perestroika, not just politically but also economically and on a long-term basis. Yet it turned out that in the eyes of his Western partners, having wasted his trump cards and being overtaken by political crises at home, Gorbachev no longer possessed his previous value. In response to his request to set up a hard currency fund to stabilize the ruble through loans to purchase consumer goods when prices were freed, he merely received good wishes for success and promises of technical assistance.

Perestroika appeared to be an exhausted project that no longer promised attractive returns and therefore was no longer worth additional investment. Observing the accelerated weakening of Gorbachev’s position at home, his Western partners quickly abandoned the projects of “castles in the air” promised by his “new thinking,” rather than jointly answering the challenges of the future.

It was only three years since the optimistic initiator of perestroika had proclaimed his inspiring vision of a new world order before the General Assembly of the United Nations, a world order based on rationality, cooperation and the supremacy of international law. In the meantime his policy of “new thinking” had contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the Iron Curtain, but the boomerang of world perestroika launched by Gorbachev returned to the Soviet capital to crush the walls of the Kremlin. Gorbachev proved to be right: the “new political thinking” was indeed a formidable instrument for the transformation of world politics—East and West. But he had to pay for this triumph with his resignation.

¹⁹ English, *Russia*, 228.

Conclusion

In order to evaluate the footmark left by Gorbachev's attempt to apply the "new political thinking" on the international scene, let us try to establish a balance sheet of his action in foreign policy. This may help answer a question that is often asked when his name is mentioned: was this unusual politician a dilettante statesman, an idealist, or a visionary? Or putting it in different words, was it naïve on his part to believe that by proposing new rules of the game and putting the accent on common interests in the face of common challenges, he would be able to transform enemies into partners?

His legacy remains impressive. After less than seven years in power, Gorbachev left behind him a peacefully dismantled totalitarian system in the biggest country on the planet, and a different Russia that had become reconciled with the rest of the world. In a way he launched the first successful "Velvet Revolution" of the East. He encouraged the opening of the Iron Curtain that had descended after World War II, and allowed the reunification of Germany and of Europe after more than forty years of division. He succeeded in initiating, together with his Western partners, a disarmament process that, for the first time in postwar history, not only slowed down, but even turned back the arms race.

In fact, as manifested during the Malta summit, Gorbachev's "new political thinking" was not even very distant from President Bush's vision of the emerging "new world order"; both seemed to share the conviction that that a new international order should move from a "balance of forces" to a "balance of interests," and that this would be achieved through the strengthening of international organizations and the gradual transfer of national sovereignty to the United Nations.

Without any doubt Gorbachev's policies gave a powerful impetus to globalization. He did not hesitate to assist the birth of a new reality, however controversial, with all its as yet unknown dilemmas and contradictions. And whenever it came to a conflict between interests (including his own political survival) and principles, he invariably chose principles.

His extraordinary experience, with its historic achievements and dramatic setbacks, leaves us (in a world that is quite distant from his hopes) with an unanswered question: does the concept of the "new political thinking" belong to the past? Indeed, it seems as though it could not successfully stand the test of confrontation with reality. Or is it still waiting for us in the future?