

Is the World Really Safer Without the Soviet Union?

Mikhail Gorbachev | December 21, 2011

A man waves a Russian flag during a rally November 21, 1988 (MF/AA/REUTERS Pictures)

Virtually all American commentary about the end of the Soviet Union extols what the West is believed to have gained from that historic event. On this twentieth anniversary of the breakup, The Nation presents three writers who focus instead on what may have been lost. Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union's last leader and first constitutional president, argues that a chance for a more secure and just world order was missed. Stephen F. Cohen, a historian and longtime Nation contributor, reminds readers of the political, economic and social costs to Russians themselves. And Vadim Nikitin, a US-educated Russian journalist, presents a new interpretation of pro-Soviet nostalgia. —The Editors

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union twenty years ago, Western commentators have often celebrated it as though what disappeared from the world arena in December 1991 was the old Soviet Union, the USSR of Stalin and Brezhnev, rather than the reforming Soviet Union of perestroika. Moreover, discussion of its consequences has focused mostly on developments inside Russia. Equally important, however, have been the consequences for international relations, in particular lost alternatives for a truly new world order opened up by the end of the cold war.

Following my election as general secretary of the Communist Party in March 1985, the Soviet leadership formulated a new foreign policy agenda. One of the key ideas of our reforms, or perestroika, was new political thinking, based on the recognition of the world's interconnectedness and interdependence. The top priority was to avert the threat of nuclear war. Our immediate international goals included ending the nuclear arms race, reducing conventional armed forces, settling numerous regional conflicts involving the Soviet Union and the United States, and replacing the division of the European continent into hostile camps with what I called a common European home.

We understood that this could be accomplished only by working with the United States. Our two nations together held 95 percent of the world's arsenals of nuclear weapons. It was therefore of enormous importance that at my first summit meeting with President Ronald Reagan, held in Geneva in November 1985, we stated that "nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." We also agreed that the USSR and the United States would not seek military superiority over each other. At our next summit, in Reykjavik in 1986, Reagan and I went on to discuss specific ways to achieve a world without nuclear weapons.

Concrete steps in that direction soon followed. In December 1987 President Reagan and I signed in Washington the INF Treaty—the first and still the only agreement eliminating two classes of weapons of mass destruction, intermediate- and short-range missiles. In 1991 President George H.W. Bush and I signed in Moscow the first START treaty, reducing strategic nuclear weapons by half, and then in the fall of the same year we agreed to eliminate most tactical nuclear weapons on both sides.

The road to these agreements was difficult, but the result was mutual trust, which enabled me and President Bush to state at the Malta summit in December 1989 that our two nations no longer

regarded each other as enemies. It meant that the cold war was over. This opened the way to cooperation in ending regional conflicts that had raged for decades in various parts of the world and in pushing back Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait in 1990, and, most important, led to peaceful change in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989–91, based on the free choice of its people. This process culminated in the unification of Germany. Conditions were now in place to revive the United Nations as the main tool for international conflict resolution and prevention.

What happened after the Soviet Union ended in 1991? Why were the opportunities to build what Pope John Paul II called a more stable, more just and more humane world order not realized? To answer this question we need to look back at the events associated with the breakup of the Soviet Union and the West's reaction to it.

The breakup of the Soviet Union interrupted perestroika—an attempt to effect an evolutionary transition from totalitarianism to democracy in a vast country from 1985 to 1991. The achievements of perestroika were real and many. It brought freedom, including freedom of speech, assembly, religion and movement, as well as political pluralism and free elections. We started a transition to market economics. But we acted too late to reform the Communist Party and to transform the Soviet Union into a new, decentralized union of sovereign republics.

Contrary to what is sometimes asserted, the Soviet Union was not destroyed by any foreign power but as a result of internal developments. First, in August 1991 the anti-perestroika conservative forces organized a coup against my leadership that failed but weakened my position. Then, on December 8, defying the will of the people, who had supported renewal of the union in a referendum in March 1991, the leaders of three Soviet republics—Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the leaders of Ukraine and Belorussia—meeting in secret, abolished the Union.

This event led to euphoria and a “winner's complex” among the American political elite. The United States could not resist the temptation to announce its “victory” in the cold war. The “sole remaining superpower” staked a claim to monopoly leadership in world affairs. That, and the equating of the breakup of the Soviet Union with the end of the cold war, which in reality had ended two years before, has had far-reaching consequences. Therein are the roots of many mistakes that have brought the world to its current troubled state.

I used to say to my negotiating partners, Reagan, Bush and other Western leaders, that all of us would need to change our thinking—not only the Soviet Union but the West as well—because the rapid changes under way in the world leave all of us with no other choice. But as long as the West insisted on its purported victory in the cold war, it meant that no change was needed in the old cold war thinking and that the old methods, such as using military force and political and economic pressure to impose one model on everyone, would still be used.

Within such a matrix, the United Nations and its Security Council become expendable or at best an impediment, while international law is viewed as a burdensome legacy of the past. That was the attitude taken by the United States and its supporters in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and in Iraq in 2003. American pundits started talking about the United States as more than just a superpower, calling it a “hyperpower” capable of creating “a new kind of empire.”

Thinking in such terms in our time is a delusion. No wonder that the imperial project failed and that it soon became clear that it was a mission impossible even for the United States. Military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, based on the assumption that might is right, severely undermined the American economy, in addition to causing tens of thousands of deaths. Today many in the West admit that it was the wrong path to take, but the time that could have been used to build a truly new world order was lost.

The erroneous interpretation of the end of the cold war, the disappearance from the world arena of a strong partner with its own views—the reforming Soviet Union—and the weakening of Russia also had a negative impact on European developments. The Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which was signed in 1990 by European nations, the United States and Canada—a blueprint for new security architecture of the common European home—was relegated to oblivion. The United States and its allies instead decided to expand NATO eastward, bringing that military alliance closer to Russia's borders while claiming for it the role of a pan-European or even a global policeman. This

usurped the functions of the United Nations and thus weakened it.

In the early 1990s it was also decided to accelerate the enlargement of the European Union, also eastward. Despite the EU's real achievements, the results of its expansion have been ambiguous, as has become particularly clear in recent months with Europe's unprecedented financial and economic crisis.

The expectations that all of our continent's problems would be solved by building Europe from the West eastward have not been fulfilled, and in fact they were bound to fail. A truly whole and democratic Europe must be built not only from the West but also from the East, including Russia. I often recall my conversation in the fall of 1989 with Pope John Paul II. A man with a profound and comprehensive view of the world and not given to triumphalist euphoria, he regarded perestroika as a vitally important step in the advance of freedom and democracy as well as an opportunity to build a truly united Europe. Speaking of the East and West, he said that "Europe should breathe with two lungs." But after the disappearance of the Soviet Union, Western leaders chose a different path. As a result, Europe's role and weight in world affairs have been far less than their potential. New dividing lines have appeared in our continent, now much closer to Russia's borders, and twice—in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and in the former Soviet republic of Georgia in 2008—conflicts led to bloodshed.

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In short, the world without the Soviet Union has not become safer, more just or more stable. Instead of a new world order—that is, enough global governance to prevent international affairs from becoming dangerously unpredictable—we have had global turmoil, a world drifting in uncharted waters. The global economic crisis that broke out in 2008 made that abundantly clear.

The West must undertake a critical reassessment of all that preceded this painful crisis. It is more than just a crisis of global finance or even a crisis of an economic model based on a race for hyperprofits and excessive consumption that grinds down the earth's resources and ruins nature. The crisis grew out of the arrogant conviction of "the collective West" that it had the recipes to solve all problems and that there was no alternative to the "Washington Consensus," which claimed to work equally well for all countries.

The crisis, the end of which is not in sight, seems to have sobered up some world leaders and prompted a search for collective solutions to global challenges. But the results so far have been slight. International organizations, particularly the United Nations, crippled by the unilateralism of the United States and NATO, are still faltering, unable to fulfill their task of conflict settlement. The G-8 is not sufficiently representative of the global community, and the G-20 has not become an effective mechanism.

Policy-making and political thinking are still militarized. This is particularly true in the United States, which has not renounced the methods of pressure and intimidation. Every time it uses armed force against non-nuclear weapon states, countries such as Iran become more determined to acquire nuclear weapons.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century US military budgets accounted for nearly half the world's spending on armed forces. Such overwhelming military superiority of one country will make the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons impossible to achieve. Judging by the weapons programs of the United States and a number of other countries, they are setting their sights on a new arms race.

It makes me wonder whether every time there is a crisis or conflict, leaders will try to resolve them by resorting to military force. The only way to break this vicious circle is to reassert the principles of mutual security, which formed the core of our new political thinking more than twenty years ago.

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Finally, there is post-Soviet Russia and its role in the world. During the period following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States and the European Union kept relations with Russia in a state of uncertainty. On the one hand, there were numerous declarations of cooperation and even strategic partnership. On the other hand, post-Soviet Russia was not given a voice in resolving key problems, and obstacles were put in the way of its integration into the European and global

economy. It seems that while being given occasional pats on the back, Russia is still being treated as an outsider, not as a serious and constructive force in world affairs.

At the same time, the Russian people remember how during the 1990s the West strongly recommended and applauded “shock therapy”—the radical reforms that resulted in the collapse of the Russian economy and plunged tens of millions of its citizens into poverty. In the eyes of many Russians, it meant that the West did not want a revival of Russia—that it wanted Russia only as a supplier of resources that “knows its place.”

Periods of Russia’s weakness had occurred before, and they always proved temporary. Recently, US and EU policies toward Russia have begun to reflect an understanding of that fact. Despite difficulties, the policy of resetting relations with Russia initiated by President Barack Obama produced clear results, such as the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, signed in 2010. Though the “reset” has powerful enemies in Washington (and in Moscow), it was an important American acknowledgment that Russia will remain a serious player in world politics and that partnership with it is indispensable.

I am convinced that it is time to return to the path we charted together when we ended the cold war. Once again, the world needs new thinking, based not just on the recognition of universal interests and of global interdependence but also on a certain moral foundation. Today one often hears that politics is a dirty business, incompatible with morality. No, politics becomes dirty and a zero-sum, lose-lose game only when it has no moral core. This, perhaps, is the main lesson to be learned from the past two decades.