

Chapter 18

The End of the Cold War: 30 Years On

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While going through my archived papers dating back 30 years, I came upon this Oscar Wilde quote: “The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.”

This got me thinking how good it would be to go back in time and replay some actions. Surely something went wrong at some point if Russia is now once again pitted against the United States, has become alienated from Western Europe in a number of aspects and its relationship with some East European nations, including former Soviet republics, is short of hostile.

I anticipate the response: “You have only yourself to blame.”

I want to try to prove that the word “only” is wrong.

To be convincing, I have to pay a lot of attention to Russia’s eternal vis-a-vis, the United States.

For the United States, the outcome of the Cold War meant global domination. This was something that had probably not happened since the Roman Empire.

There was a positive side to Pax Americana, namely slightly more than a couple of decades of conflict-free relations between the major powers. However, this somewhat forced “calm” could not go on for long, as the entire world was changing dramatically.

One way or another, conflicts between great powers have resumed at a scale that is perhaps even more dangerous than during the Cold War. The dominant school of thought has it that we have not yet reached the peak of tensions.

Against this background, *j'accuse* the U.S. administrations (except Reagan’s last years) for one thing in their policies that should have been changed, if we could go back in time: namely, their attitude towards Russia.

But let's put things in proper order.

In March 1985 the Soviet people received a new leader of their country. His name was Mikhail Gorbachev. Now we know what this man did to take the world away from a nuclear catastrophe.

Then, though, very few could hear through the official Kremlin fanfare the first chimes of the bell tolling the end of the Cold War.

Had Gorbachev not come to power, the transformation of the USSR's politics, economy and military known as *perestroika* would not have happened. Or if it had, it would have been much later.

One of *perestroika*'s core elements was the cardinal shift in the Soviet Union's foreign policy. Had it remained the same, it would mean postponing the end of the Cold War for an indefinite period.

Gorbachev's predecessors might even have recognized that the USSR's "tail was pinched in Afghanistan, its nose in Poland, and in between there was a mess in the economy." But they couldn't find the strength to break out of the rut of perennial confrontation.

Strictly speaking, the opposing force had no need to rush. The Americans were in a far better position both in geopolitics and economics. In one of the key aspects of the struggle—the arms race—Washington was ahead of Moscow in terms of technology, finance, and integration of the achievements of defense-oriented research and development in the civilian sector.

The Soviet Politburo would later reveal the top-secret figures: the USSR was spending 2.5 times more on defense per capita than the United States.

Trust between the two superpowers was at a low point. Restoring it required proactive measures. This was an important task, yet it was secondary to the main objective: the desperately needed reconstruction of Soviet society.

Gorbachev started implementing his ideas within the first few days of moving into the Kremlin.

Addressing the leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries, who came to his predecessor Chernenko's funeral, Gorbachev said with clear certainty: "We trust you fully, we will no longer make claims for control or

command. Your policies are guided by national interests (as opposed to the interests of the global socialist system—author’s note), and you bear full responsibility for them before your peoples and parties.”

I am not sure that everyone grasped the seemingly evident meaning of his words: we were no longer responsible for the survival of the Eastern European regimes.

Since the beginning of *perestroika*, the leadership was inundated with thousands of letters from ordinary people asking: Why are we involved in the war in Afghanistan? When will it all end? One general was bold enough to sign with his real name: “I am incapable of explaining to my fellow soldiers what an ‘international duty’ means and to whom we owe it.”

As early as in April 1985, Gorbachev put it bluntly to “our” Afghan President Babrak Karmal: “We will pull out.” Witnesses’ accounts suggest Karmal all but fainted on the spot.

There was no question of whether to stay or to leave. The problem was how to leave. Resolving it took a long time.

For a time, I was at the helm of a working group on Afghan affairs that led negotiations with the Americans. They were slowing down our withdrawal from Afghanistan by providing significant military aid to the Mujahedeen. In the end, however, we managed to achieve a result: the United States and the USSR became the guarantors of the Afghan-Pakistani peace accords inked in Geneva in April 1988.

The last Soviet military officer—who happened to be Commander of the 40th Army General Boris Gromov—left Afghan soil in February of the following year.

People tend to forget that it was Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, new thinking and foreign policy that brought relations with China from hostile to normal; led to normalization of the relations with Yugoslavia; and—last but not least—restored diplomatic relations with Israel.

Here is a quote from my diary: “May 30, 1985. Saw Gorbachev in action: four hours of negotiations with Bettino Craxi, Italy’s prime minister. Gorbachev is definitely different from the ones we saw before: a confident speaker, who doesn’t read from a piece of paper, thinks fast, jokes... He was obviously obliging Andrei Gromyko (then still a For-

eign Minister—author’s note), giving him the floor. Andrei used that when playing hardball: “Not a single Soviet citizen would understand if we restored diplomatic relations with Israel.”

In July 1985 Gromyko, who was minister for 28 years, was replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze. Not a single Kremlinologist could foresee his candidacy; few people knew that Shevardnadze and Gorbachev had long established their like-mindedness.

One year later Shevardnadze made me his deputy, and I was assigned to oversee African affairs and human rights—the latter had just been allocated a separate department within the ministry for the first time in its history.

President Reagan and Secretary Schultz, who didn’t trust Gorbachev at first, started warming to him when they saw that we really meant it when we were talking about human rights.

It was we who needed a radical change in this sphere the most. But those changes were a solid bonus when it came to foreign affairs.

My counterpart in this field at the U.S. Department of State was Richard Shifter. We remain friends till today; we even wrote a book together: “Human Rights, Perestroika, and the End of the Cold War.”¹ I refer this book to everyone who wants to know how much was done in the USSR domestically and in Soviet-American cooperation in this field.

As for African affairs, the war in the southwest was in the spotlight. The Americans, including my friend Chester Crocker, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, had been trying to stop that war since the early 1980s, notably trying to get the Cubans out of Angola. In December 1988, two and half years after the USSR engaged in the conflict from the position of *perestroika*, accords were signed in New York that put an end to that conflict.

Namibia, the last colony in Africa, gained its independence with South Africa withdrawing from the country as well as from Angola. The anti-apartheid movement rapidly gained momentum in South Africa. Cuban forces left Angola.

That was an unforgettable time for me also because Gorbachev’s and Shevardnadze’s trust meant that politically my hands were completely

untied. It was also due to the fact, perhaps, that Africa was not the primary concern among the mountain of problems with which Gorbachev had to deal. Crocker, similarly, once called Africa a stepchild of the Department of State.

Here's my free summary: if it were not for *perestroika*, Crocker would still be looking for a middle ground between South Africa, Angola and Cuba; Sam Nujoma would have to wait years down the second half of the road for independence, and Mandela and de Klerk for their Nobel Peace Prize; Fidel Castro would still push on with the revolutionary process that had been resistant to move, while Angola would still suffer. (In 1986, Nujoma, the leader of SWAPO, the organization that fought for Namibia's independence, replied in the following way to my question about prospects of his country independence: "We've been fighting for 25 years, and we're probably halfway there.")

U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, in his book "Turmoil and Triumph," a signed copy of which I have, wrote about the resolution of regional conflicts, including Africa's southwest: "Nothing could be achieved if it weren't for the core changes in Soviet-U.S. relations."

The major core change was in the scope of real disarmament. The Soviet Union and the United States concluded their first ever agreement on the elimination—that is, not on the limitation, as it had been the case in the past, but on the physical destruction—of a whole class of weapons, namely American and Soviet medium-range missiles.

By the way, the Pentagon tried to dissuade Reagan from signing it as the Pershing II and intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missiles deployed in Western Europe gave America a tremendous advantage over the Soviet Union, while the Soviet Pioneer missiles, better known as SS-20, could not reach U.S. territory. One Pentagon hardliner, Richard Perle, even resigned in protest over this.

President Reagan hadn't yielded. Sadly, the end was not happy.

These positive developments, I insist, were triggered by Gorbachev's *perestroika*. But I specifically underline that his words and deeds awoke President Reagan's peace-making nature. The rapprochement between the USSR and the United States began. It was this decisive motion that led to the end of the Cold War in 1988.

But, unexpectedly, a chilly wind came from Washington.

George H.W. Bush, the new U.S. president, decided to change course. He immediately took a pause to radically revise the policy towards the Soviet Union. For the Kremlin, that had a bombshell effect.

Gorbachev, as follows from his memoirs, felt like a bride abandoned at the altar. Experts on the United States from the Foreign Ministry tried to allay fears of Soviet leaders, saying that in the long run Washington would return to the Reagan era interaction. But it never happened.

When talking to Margaret Thatcher in my presence on April 18, 1989, Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov said in plain terms, "Everything has stopped." Thatcher was trying to comfort Ryzhkov, assuring him that she would "influence George."

I don't know whether or not that conversation played a part, but Thatcher later sounded very dramatic when addressing George Bush, saying that "history would not forgive us if we did not rally to support him [Gorbachev]." François Mitterrand, Giulio Andreotti, and Helmut Kohl told Bush the same, even if less eloquently. All to no avail.

The pause in U.S.-Soviet relations continued almost throughout 1989: Gorbachev and Bush would meet for the first time on Malta only in December. By that time, the cards had already been dealt and the game was actually over. Suffice it to say that the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, one month before Malta.

Throughout that period, the new U.S. administration behaved in a manner that was clearly anti-Gorbachev, spreading doubts as to the Soviet leader's sincerity, insinuating that he would return to a policy of confrontation once he felt strong enough, and auguring his demise, which is exactly what the U.S. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney did in an interview with CNN shortly after assuming office.

Six years later, former Secretary of State James Baker would write a book revealing he was frightened of Gorbachev's popularity in Europe (In Italy I even saw mini icons depicting Gorbachev).

A directive completed in the spring of that year revising U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union stated: "American policy must be designed

not to help Gorbachev but rather to challenge the Soviets in such a way as to move them in the direction we want.”

In parallel with keeping the pause with regard to Moscow, Washington was revising its approach to the seemingly academic question of whether the Cold War was really over.

Thatcher had publicly replied in the affirmative back in November 1988: “We’re not in Cold War now.” Reagan was of the same opinion. He denounced the Soviet Union’s label as the Empire of Evil speaking in its very headquarters—the Kremlin. Outgoing Secretary of State George Shultz was worried that the new administration in Washington “did not understand or accept that the Cold War was over.”

That concern was justified. In May 1989, Bush stated that the Cold War would only end once Europe had become “whole and free.” Later, to dismiss any remaining doubts, he would add that the unification of Europe should occur “on the basis of Western values.”

Bush’s National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft was more explicit: “Our principal goal should be to try to lift the Kremlin’s military boot from the necks of the East Europeans.”

Now that Washington was urging freedom for the East Europeans, the logical question was how long the status quo between the two German states would last. Until then, Washington’s position on the issue was, as Scowcroft wrote in a memo in March 1989, that “no West German expects German reunification to happen in this century.”

Those moods should be overcome. In the first few months of 1989, Bush advisers proposed that he reanimate the German issue from a years-long state of anabiosis. He did it even before Germans.

In May 1989, Bush was the first to publicly bring up the topic of reunification, saying “if you can get it on a proper basis, fine.”

Instead, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s keynote statement to the effect that the German question had been put on the international agenda was made in late August. In late November, Kohl in his famous “Ten points” speech in the Bundestag, openly called for Germany’s reunification. (Nota bene: Kohl didn’t mention NATO among those points.)

Remarkably, Kohl made that statement only after he got a “hint” from a Russian representative (whose visit to Germany had not been made known to Gorbachev) that the Chancellor of Germany correctly interpreted as the Kremlin’s consent to the reunification on some condition (confederation and no rush).

Looking ahead, I should note that German people still view Gorbachev as the one who gave the green light to unification. Back then, both the USSR and Germany hailed the process as part of the historic reconciliation of the two countries. Against the background of today’s problems, Russia still enjoys greater cooperation with Germany than with any other Western country.

Margaret Thatcher may have been somewhat late, but she did eventually warn George Bush that hasty reunification would spell the end for Gorbachev. I would add that this also signaled the end of budding democracy in the Soviet Union, which was exactly what happened then.

It was not until January 1992 that George Bush, in what can be viewed as a summary of his achievements, solemnly told both houses of the U.S. Congress that “By the grace of God, America won the Cold War.” He reiterated that “the Cold War didn’t “end”—it was won.”

A year and a half earlier, when the United States needed the Soviet Union’s support to oust Saddam Hussein’s Iraq from Kuwait, Bush was saying totally different things. Back then, he believed that the Cold War had ended thanks to his cooperation with Gorbachev.

I may witness that the leaders of *perestroika* told the Americans that for the USSR, settling the problems related to the end of the Cold War was a necessary phase which, they expected, would be followed by joint work with the United States to ensure international peace.

Such work was certainly what Ronald Reagan and George Shultz supported. Conversing with Shevardnadze, Ronald Reagan once said: Gorbachev and I are the only ones who can save the world.

Bush, for his part, was not particularly inspired by this perspective. His administration proceeded from the premise that the United States now had an unprecedented chance to become the absolute master of the world, to project U.S. power into the foreseeable future and beyond.

Proponents of a more delicate approach were shouted down by those who believed that the United States would be powerful enough to pull this off. Temporarily, the latter even decided that they had no need for Western Europe as an ally, let alone Russia.

Washington did not conceal the fact that it would resort to any and all means needed to prevent the emergence of a rival that could threaten U.S. interests.

The “we will do what we need to do and to hell with Russia” attitude resulted in preserving NATO as a politico-military alliance, first (despite the Warsaw Pact was dismissed), and then expanding it eastward. U.S. diplomat George Kennan assessed it as the most fatal mistake in the post-war history of the United States.

Still, there was, for a time, a lingering chance for a better future, compared to how it eventually panned out. I mean joint efforts to overcome the split of Europe.

There were also appropriate instruments to start building European security on the new basis of agreements between 35 states-signatories in the 1975 Helsinki Accords and the 1990 Paris Charter for a New Europe.

In 1991, while serving as USSR ambassador to Italy, I was involved in serious discussions with Italian Foreign Minister Gianni De Michelis about the possibility of setting up a European security council as part of the OSCE. De Michelis was dreaming of a “grand treaty” between the Soviet Union and the European Community that would also mean a sort of USSR–West joint venture, and told me that a USSR–EU association agreement could materialize in the near future.

West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher also took a solid stance. He said that Bonn did not want to leave NATO, nor did it want to see the Alliance expand. What was wrong with Genscher’s ‘One Germany, One Europe’ formula?

In September 2015, I met wheelchair-bound Genscher in Berlin, at an event to mark the 25 years since the completion of the Two Plus Four Group’s mission. It dealt with the external aspects of German reunification. I had, at some point, represented the Soviet Union in the group. Genscher said this during an open discussion: “I wanted to

overcome the split of Europe, but I did not want to move the dividing lines further to the East.”

During negotiations with Gorbachev in February 1990, Kohl said that NATO would “naturally” not expand eastwards, as he thought it went without saying.

U.S. Secretary of State James Baker similarly stated that Germany’s reunification would be incorporated into pan-European structures, or would at least run in parallel with the consolidation of those structures. Bush also mentioned the OSCE in the context of Eastern Europe’s democratization.

Mitterrand, for his part, called for guaranteeing the Soviet Union’s security and proposed setting up a European confederation of West European countries and former Communist states, including the renewed USSR.

There were many voices in Europe calling for a security system on the continent that would be run by Europe with the comprehensive participation of Russia.

However, it took three for this tango. The U.S. administration was firmly committed to building a post-Cold-War Europe around NATO, meaning without Russia.

At the same time Moscow was assured that a new Europe would mean a new NATO. The declaration of July 1990 NATO Summit in London did contain plenty of positive statements by its leaders, and it did incorporate much of what the USSR proposed at the onset of perestroika. Among others, NATO promised not to be the first to use force.

Earlier, in March 1987, Thatcher told Gorbachev that NATO would never use force unless in response to an attack.

Twelve years later, NATO bombed Serbia for 78 days, remaining out of reach for Serbian air defenses. This was done without any approval of the UN Security Council and in direct violation of the UN Charter. NATO members violated their own charter as well by attacking a state that had not performed any acts of aggression against any member state of the alliance.

They had also neglected the 1997 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation. This Act symbolized good intentions between Moscow and NATO. Had they materialized, perhaps the Act would have been a breakthrough. But NATO's actions against Serbia were such a blow for the Act that it could not endure.

This came as a great shock to Russia, which was never truly comprehended in the West. Western countries preferred to forget all about the Yugoslavian case as soon as they could, just like they forgot about Kosovo precedent set by the forceful revision of the European borders.

Russian society, formerly quite sympathetic of the West, started to revise its views: apparently, the West says one thing and does another. Nationalism acquired momentum in Russia. In March 2019, the Russian media dedicated a generous coverage to the 20th anniversary of the Belgrade bombings.

Other "initiatives" of the consecutive U.S. administrations—wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, military operation in Libya, withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and from other agreements on curbing arms race (most recently, the United States pulled out of the INF Treaty), claims not to expand NATO eastward (Russian politicians are convinced those were intentional lies), expelling Russia from G8, and so on—all had contributed to the disillusionment of the Russian people in the West.

As for pan-European security, if there ever was a chance to overcome U.S. obstruction by joint efforts of the Soviet Union and a number of Western European countries, it could only emerge in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, under Mikhail Gorbachev.

However, there came the Belovezha Accords whereby Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk, President of Ukraine (the main "heroes") dissolved the USSR. For Yeltsin, such a drastic decision was probably the only effective way to realize the main aim: deprive Gorbachev of his office as soon as possible.

Under Yeltsin, who pleaded for U.S. support in his ongoing internal political squabbles, the weakened Russia was not something that Washington cared to reckon with. As a result, the split in Europe was overcome, leaving Russia by the wayside.

This configuration finally has determined the mindset of the Russian people with regard to the West. The initial excitement of belonging to the greater community of nations was replaced with the clear feeling that the West did not need Russia on an equal footing.

A similar change happened in Russia's politics, which had long been aimed at making the country a party of Western structures.

It was, in effect, the United States that sabotaged Russia's attempts to integrate into the West. Unfortunately, a lot of our people think that it was for the better. By way of "compensation," Russia retained (or regained, as some believe) the freedom to operate in an unrestrained manner in the international arena.

During *perestroika*, Bush and Baker were faced with the choice between Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

Gorbachev viewed the reforms as part of the broader context of rejuvenated socialism. In essence, he sought to usher in a socially-oriented economy on the basis of social-democratic ideas, including a free but state-supervised market, and full-fledged democratization of the country.

Gorbachev's reforms produced a fundamental result: the authoritarian Soviet political system had been torn down. Who else but the democratic United States should have been the one to support the Soviet president at this fateful moment?!

The Americans did not care that much about nuances. They favored the anti-communist rhetoric offered by Yeltsin in his bid to win over the sympathies of the West. Indeed, Yeltsin was easier to deal with.

It was not the United States' strategies that played the decisive role in the defeat of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, but rather the entire system of Russia's internal development, first and foremost the escalated struggle for power.

That said, I still believe Washington's choice was inexcusably wrong. They failed to think out of the box of habitual stereotypes. This time, they lacked the strategic vision of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or Ronald Reagan.

In August 1992, one of the founding fathers of “new thinking,” Alexander Yakovlev, told me bitterly that the West had betrayed *perestroika*.

I would like to add color to the picture. When visiting Moscow shortly after the abortive August 1991 coup, Secretary of State Baker wrote back to President Bush: “It is undeniable that the local success of the democrats here is extremely important for us because it would change the world for the better. What is at stake is equal to the post-war revival of Germany and Japan as our democratic allies. The failure of the democrats would make the world much more threatening and dangerous, and I am convinced that, should they prove unable to provide for the population, they will be replaced by a xenophobic, authoritarian leader.”

Four months after Baker’s visit, a new government came to power in Moscow. As the new leader, Yeltsin suited the Americans just fine. Both sides made numerous statements about strategic relations.

In reality, however, Washington mostly payed lip-service to Yeltsin’s “democrats.” Significant U.S. assistance was offered only when Yeltsin’s position was becoming fragile, and communists could potentially return to power.

While the United States turned a blind eye to the new Russian government’s domestic policies (such as the Chechen War and using tanks against the democratically elected parliament) the Kremlin’s performance had to be adequate in international affairs.

Under U.S. pressure, Russia gradually lost policy independence. The war in the Balkans provided an example of it, I know this first-hand.

At the same time, Russia was not let in on the decision-making processes. The rule of the day was ‘cooperation without participation,’ as U.S. political analyst Samuel Charap put it.

Cooperation went out the window when the ‘forget Russia’ attitude was replaced by one resembling ‘the worse for Russia the better,’ with little concern for the possibility of this approach backfiring.

Russia’s centuries-long vital interests would be repeatedly dismissed and denied until the situation escalated into the armed conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine.

In April 2015, speaking to CNN about the conflict in Ukraine, Baker made a reasonable proposal to the effect that the United States and its Western European allies needed to find a way of returning Russia to the fold of the international community. He also admitted as an afterthought that, following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, the United States should have found a way to incorporate Russia into NATO. In Baker's opinion, Russia should have been admitted into the international community, but this did not happen, so the situation is as it is.

In continuation of Baker's thought, I would add, that the United States should have admitted it had played its part in the situation being as it is.

If we are to disregard this, if we think that only Russia—whose actions were often reactive—is to be blamed for all the sins, including those before 2014, then some lessons of the past 30 years will be lost on us.

As far as I know, the first instance of U.S. economic sanctions imposed on czarist Russia was for its mistreatment of Jews. This quickly acquired habit of punishing summarily and unilaterally passing down verdicts is at odds with Russia's nature.

Surviving centuries of the Tatar-Mongol yoke and retaining its status as a great power for three hundred years, Russia has developed a distinct intolerance to being told what to do by foreign states.

We will rather tighten our belts than cave in to a bully. We will identify our own interests and choose methods of protecting them. Is this not what the Americans are doing?

The collision of U.S. dominance and Russian 'mutiny' leaves little room for maneuvering out of the 'Cold War 2.0,' also known as the hybrid war. Just like with the previous Cold War, any possibility to break it off successfully will materialize only after the United States and Russia have found common ground.

This will happen sooner or later, just because there is no acceptable alternative.

Today, I recognize some of the scenarios that I have seen more than 30 years ago. Demands are growing louder in Western Europe and

the United States, urging politicians to dare to seek ways out of the confrontation rather than sitting on their hands and waiting for the hammer to fall.

To my great delight, one of those voices belongs to George Shultz.

There is also something new to the current situation. The “urge” to make peace with Russia is coming to the U.S. Western Coast from across the ocean. *En passant*, I don’t quite understand why Washington is doing so much to bring Russia closer to China.

The most convincing reason for a new Russia–U.S. rapprochement is the fearsome fact that a nuclear apocalypse is dangerously close again. This makes me think at times that living in a bipolar world was safer.

Still, it is not easy for the current generation of politicians to get to work in this respect. They are part and parcel of the national egotism, which, thanks to the omnipotent United States, too, has become ubiquitous in the international arena. They are being governed by aggressive domestic lobbies.

Just like during the Cold War, geopolitical disagreements are complemented by ideological differences, this time those related to values.

However, as they said in Ancient Rome, *Dum spiro, spero*. The common wisdom and sense of responsibility of the leaders of three major world powers—the United States, China, and Russia—must prevail.

The paths away from the edge of the cliff are more or less known. This is not the first time we have found ourselves on that cliff, after all.

Certainly, global development, primarily in terms of technological advances, makes the task of finding a consensus more difficult than before. Yet, even this task is manageable.

The problem is lack of goodwill, as the parties involved prefer, for the time being, to play with fire.

There is one thing in which political analysts should rejoice: their profession is, once again, in demand. And not just for analyzing the opportunities missed over the past 30 years, but also for devising possible ways out of the geopolitical impasse. As well as for ranting at the powers that be, who generally ignore our recommendations.

Note

1. United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington DC, 2009.