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Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy (1917-1991)

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Abstract

Until 1985, the USSR followed two schools of Soviet diplomacy: Stalinist and neo-Stalinist. Under the leadership of Mikail Gorbachov, radical changes in both the theory and practice of Soviet foreign policy resulted in a new concept based on a vision of the world in full evolution. In his self-proclaimed "new political thinking", Gorbachov moved the emphasis from the importance of class struggle in international relations to "mutual security" and the role of politics in resolving disputes, and underlined the interdependency of the contemporary world. He called for mutual efforts to solve problems such as debt, hunger, pollution and disarmament in particular. The Soviets also referred to new political thinking to explain surprising policy moves, such as the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan, the acceptance of on-site inspection in the 1986 Conference on Disarmament in Europe (CDE) and the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) agreements, and the payment of UN dues long in arrears. Although Gorbachev can be considered to be an innovator, there were other leaders who had initiated dramatic changes in foreign policy throughout Soviet history. For example, at the time of the revolution itself, in 1924, in 1953-1955, and, although to a lesser degree, in the first few years after Brezhnev's rise in 1970. In all these periods, change was imposed in a top-down manner by referring to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and importing ideas and slogans from the outside world. This article aims to examine the tradition of change in Soviet foreign policy from the formation of the Soviet Union, with a specific focus on the antecedents to Gorbachev's "new political thinking" and the ensuing.

Keywords: Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev, Soviet Union, Foreign Policy

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1. The Period of 1917-1924

When the Bolsheviks came to power, they were convinced that it was neither possible nor necessary for revolutionary Russia to have a foreign policy toward the capitalist order. They believed that revolutions would soon happen in the West, and therefore saw little need to be interested in a policy toward governments and leaders who would soon be overturned. The Communist International (Comintern) was established in March 1919, with headquarters in Moscow, with the aim of world revolution. In its New Year's proclamation to the Soviet people in 1920, it declared, "We shall establish workers' and soldiers' councils in Berlin and Warsaw, in Paris and London, and the might of the Soviets will one day extend throughout the whole world."[1] During the fervour of the early post-revolutionary period, the Bolsheviks did not shy away from using Soviet resources to expedite the world revolutionary process. For example, they provided arms, agents and propaganda, but unsuccessfully attempted the export of revolution in the Russian-Polish war of 1920.

However, the revolution in the West did not materialize. Because some of the new regime's class enemies were not as hostile as Lenin had predicted, the Bolsheviks began to formulate and to practice a diplomacy of "coexistence." They established trade ties and secured *de jure* political recognition from an increasing number of countries, beginning with neighbours such as Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran and the Baltic states, following with Germany in the Rapallo treaty, and then the major powers of the Versailles system, including Britain, France and Italy. However, they still regarded diplomacy as a temporary solution. The Bolsheviks still hoped for proletarian revolution, and in spite of solemn promises to the contrary, the new regime was unwilling to renounce subversion in order to develop correct relations with "bourgeois" regimes.

[1] Georg von Rauch, *A History of Soviet Russia,* New York: Prager, 1957, p. 149.

The failure of these attempts at revolution, together with changing conditions in the Soviet Union and Lenin's death in January 1924 saw the end of the first phase of Soviet foreign policy and led the way for a major shift in doctrine. In December 1924, Stalin published an article entitled "The October Revolution and the Tactics of the Russian Communists", in which he proclaimed the doctrine of "socialism in one country."[2] According to the new doctrine, the world revolution had been temporarily postponed because capitalism, although still ultimately doomed, had managed to stabilize itself for the time being. Given these conditions, the correct course to take was to give up efforts to promote revolution abroad and to concentrate on building the economic and military strength of USSR. In this way, they would be able to create a bastion for communism that could stand strong during a drawn-out period of international reaction.

2. The Period of 1924-1953

Stalin gave the party a new and, in his own opinion, a more congenial role by announcing the need for speedy domestic industrialization. In this way, Stalin's reformation served to bridge the increasing gap between reality and ideology, and thus helped to preserve the ideology's credibility. Although he advocated the possibility of socialism in one country, Stalin still held on to Lenin's doctrine of the inevitability of wars.[3] Until his death in 1953, Stalin continued to proclaim the inevitability of war, although victory in World War II required the doctrine to be modified to a certain

[2] *Ibid.* p. 168.

[3] Lenin originally propounded this doctrine in his Imperialism, The Highest State of Capitalism which appeared in 1916 and which drew upon Marx and early 20th century Marxist authors to argue that private property and the existence of social classes were the causes of war. After he established Bolshevism in Russia, Lenin continued to stress the possibility of wars between the capitalist powers, but also modified his doctrine to account for revolutionary war between the new workers' state and the capitalists. He also stressed that under certain circumstances the capitalists would compose their differences and launch a concerted effort to annihilate the Bolshevik regime. See E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923,* 3 volumes, London: Pelican Books, 1966.

degree. The Soviets' establishment of Communist rule in Eastern Europe meant that there was no longer socialism in one country, but in a wider "camp" which was surrounded by a hostile but internally divided capitalist "camp". After 1947, Stalin downplayed the inevitability of imperialist attack on the USSR. They went back to the more purely Leninist, that is, consistent with the classic analysis in imperialism, emphasis on "intra-imperialist contradictions" and wars between the capitalist powers.[4]

This body of doctrine suited Stalin as he set about the task of post-war reconstruction and restarted the industrialization program of the 1930s. It also represented at least a theoretical explanation of how the long-awaited global Communist revolution would happen. Namely, Japan, Germany and other imperialist powers would recover much of their previous strength. This would lead to another cycle of war between the mentioned powers, thus leading to the victory of Communism. Although Stalin's doctrine was theoretically coherent and served his domestic purposes, by the early 1950s it was seriously out of touch with reality. The idea of a new capitalist war involving powers which had been united by alliance, and which had been overwhelmingly dominated by the economic and political strength of the United States was less than credible, and it was this gap between ideology and reality that threatened to undermine the credibility of Marxism-Leninism.

3. The Period of 1953-1985

This being so, Stalin's successors did not wait long after his death before they initiated sweeping changes in Soviet foreign policy doctrine and practice. By going back to and reinterpreting certain statements and policies of Lenin from the early 1920s, first

[4] Frederic S. Burin, "The Communist Doctrine of the inevitability of War", *American Political Science Review,* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1963), pp. 334-354.

Malenkov and then Khrushchev began to purport that there could be a protracted period of coexistence between the two systems. They also argued that the period of coexistence would be spent waiting passively for improved revolutionary prospects to happen. Instead, the Soviet Union and its allies would use this time to undertake active policies to weaken and undermine the capitalist system, without ensuing global war. These policies included support for wars of national liberation in the underdeveloped world, the exploitation of "contradictions" within the Western world, and efforts to outstrip the West in both economics and technology.

Khrushchev expressed these changes clearly in his report to the 20th party congress in February 1956, when he declared that capitalist encirclement had come to an end, as had the inevitability of wars. When explaining why wars could be avoided, Khrushchev stated that "as long as capitalism survives in the world, the reactionary forces may try to unleash war. However, war is not fatalistically inevitable. Today there are mighty social and political forces possessing means to prevent the imperialists from waging war."[5]

The Soviets subsequently laid these views down in the 1961 part program, which stated that the growing strength of socialism "will make it actually possible to banish world war from the life of society even before the complete victory of socialism on earth, with capitalism surviving in part of the world."[6] This was almost the complete opposite of the earlier view that war would lead to the victory of socialism. After 1956, they justified the expansion and strengthening of socialism on the grounds that only socialism could prevent the unleashing of war: "To abolish war and

[5] *Pravda,* 15 February 1956.

[6] Jan F. Triska, *Soviet Communism: Programs and Rules,* San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1962, p. 65.

establish everlasting peace on earth is a historic mission of communism."[7]

Like "socialism in one country" had done so in 1924, "peaceful coexistence" served a number of purposes. Firstly, it gave a new leadership new leeway in domestic and foreign policy, and narrowed the widening gap between doctrine and reality. Secondly, peaceful coexistence represented another departure from the doctrine of imminent revolution, still at the core of Marxism-Leninism and the alleged reason for existence for an international Communist movement. In the late 1950s, Khrushchev developed the argument that the final victory of Communism would come about through, or at least be facilitated by, economic and technological competition.[8] It was his opinion that the Soviet Union was quickly outpacing the United States and other Western countries in industrial strength, and soon would be able to provide a better standard of living for its people.

Peaceful coexistence remained the fundamental basis for Soviet foreign policy in 1960s and 1970s. Kosygin and Brezhnev did not attempt such a sweeping doctrinal revision as that of Stalin in 1924, or by his successors in 1953-1956. Nevertheless, during their time, they made significant modifications in the interpretation of peaceful coexistence. When these men took power in late 1964, it was already apparent that many of the optimistic assumptions on which Khrushchev had based his doctrine of peaceful coexistence were debatable. Neither did the Soviet Union seem to be continuing their rapid outdistancing of the United States in economics and technology. After 1960, Soviet growth rates decelerated as those of the United States concomitantly increased. The United States was now in a position to challenge the, admittedly somewhat exaggerated, Soviet lead in the space race. Khrushchev and younger leaders like Kosygin

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] See Khrushchev's "On Peaceful Coexistence", *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 38, No. 1 (1959).

began to remark with concern on a Soviet lag in even basic industries such as chemicals and machinery.

Khrushchev was also proved wrong in many of his assumptions about the durability of peace with the West. The series of U-2 overflights that had occurred between 1956-1960 revealed that Khrushchev's claims of Soviet military strength were extremely exaggerated. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 served to expose Soviet weakness. After the brief détente, in the mid-1960s the United States once more entered what the Soviet leadership regarded as a more "aggressive" period. During this time, the US became heavily involved in Vietnam, sent marines to the Dominican Republic, and supported Israel when it defeated the Soviet Union's Arab allies.

This more dangerous Western adversary led to to a change in Soviet priorities during Khrushchev's final years, and the Soviets postponed further cutbacks in non-strategic forces to launch major new strategic programs. The military build-up continued and was expediated under Kosygin and Brezhnev, who altered the emphasis in Soviet doctrinal and propaganda pronouncements. The new leaders minimised Khrushchev's exaggerated claims about overtaking the United States economically, and talked more candidly about the danger of war and the aggression from the West. They underlined the significance of political and military factors in determining the course of history rather than purely economic ones.

By the late 1960s, the new leaders had succeeded to a certain extent in balancing Soviet policy and rhetoric. They had both improved Soviet military capabilities and scaled back their claims as to what military power could achieve. The course of East-West relations in the 1970s would have undoubtedly run smoother and less confrontational had Brezhnev remained satisfied with addressing Khrushchev's imbalances and excesses. However, when he became more dominant in the Soviet leadership in the

early 1970s, Brezhnev began to make his own excesses. He developed a militarized foreign policy doctrine in which he connected global political and social change to the growth of Soviet power. In his report to the 25th party congress in early 1976, Brezhnev declared that "the passage from cold war and from the explosive confrontation of the two worlds to détente was largely connected with changes in the world correlation of forces."[9] Although the "correlation of forces" was not strictly a military concept, under Brezhnev it certainly had a strong military connotation.

The Brezhnev regime further developed the concept of a "restructuring (perestroika) of international relations" which would occur given the shift in the correlation of forces.[10] The growing economic and military strength of the East not only made sure that socialist gains were "irreversible", as Khrushchev had claimed, but also helped to encourage "progressive" changes both in the West, and in the developing world in particular. Even though events appeared to make prospects for revolutionary change even more distant, Brezhnev was in the position to assert that long-term trends were favourable to the Soviet Union, and that the final crisis of capitalism was still imminent.

Despite initial apparent successes which caused the West cause for some alarm, Brezhnev's approach ultimately turned out to be unfounded. After 1979, the gap between doctrine and reality once more began to widen. Rather than allowing the Soviet Union to spin the military aspects of the correlation in its favour, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the West adopted a number of countermeasures. The most noteworthy of these were the NATO INF dual-tract decision, and the Reagan defence build-up. In the meantime, the East suffered a series of setbacks with the chaotic

[9] *Pravda,* 25 February 1976.

[10] R. Judson Mitchell, "A New Brezhnev Doctrine: The Restructuring of International Relations", *World Politics,* Vol. 30, No. 3 (1978).

situation in Poland, the dragging on of the war in Afghanistan, the slowdown in the Soviet economy, and the general ineffectiveness of the Soviet leadership itself, both under Brezhnev, and then under his two short-lived successors. The time was right for a new leader who not only would bring Soviet policy back to life, but would also formulate new slogans and doctrines to restore a balance between Soviet rhetorical claims and reality.

4. The Period of 1985-1991

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, East-West relations were poor, but improving slightly. The Soviets had walked out of the arms control talks in late 1983, and Andropov had launched a harsh diatribe against the United States and its allies. However, in 1984, the Chernenko regime managed to get the US-Soviet arms control negotiations back on track.

As it has been shown, the USSR followed two schools of Soviet diplomacy, Stalinist and neo-Stalinist, until 1985. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev laid out a new concept of foreign policy, which was based on a vision of the world in full evolution.[11]

The aim of Gorbachev was to make sure that the USSR faced the 21st Century as a great power. Were the USSR to continue to decline as it had done so far, it was in danger of slipping into the Third World. Gorbachev knew this and made it known. He was viewed as an "enlightened" and "courageous" patriot. On a number of occasions, he came dangerously close to "heresy", and angered the more conservative members of the party, the army and the KGB. Although these institutions, who formed the

[11] Gorbachev's personality was perfect for this diplomatic game. Diplomats had called Andre Gromyko "old sad face", but Gorbachev did not shy away from showing his emotions. He created a new climate, and seemed to be concerned about everything human. He was forward thinking, and thus counted on "all that unites, not all that separates." See *Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy,* McNair Papers, Number 7, National Defense University, The Institute for National Strategic Studies, Washington D. C., 1990.

backbone of the regime, understood well enough the need for reform, they wanted it to proceed under their control. In this power struggle, Gorbachev chose to focus on the transformation of East-West relations. Gorbachev preferred "*da*" ("yes") to "*nyet*" ("no"), and transparency (*glasnost*) to secrecy. He advocated opening up, activism, and enlightened realism after decades of closure, immobility, and rigid ideology.

The "hard line" school consisted of all those whose task was to affront the outside world; namely, Andre Gromyko and his generation, with Molotov as their model. Their approach was appropriate to the times of unrelenting struggle between capitalism and socialism, and -imperialists and communists.

When Gorbachev arrived at the Kremlin, an event which the Army and the KGB had facilitated, the Army saw the practical benefits of a greater de-Stalinization of the Soviet system. Their aims were purely "functional": to unclog the system, to give it new dynamics, and to reinforce socialism as the single system tied closely to the country's tradition. The upper echelons of the Army disapproved of certain major aspects of Gorbachev's approach, in particular the policy of unilateral concessions to the West, which were, in their opinion, demoralizing and dangerous. They were unable to see the long-term advantage, political and military, if the West was pushed towards disarmament by public opinion.

In his early approach to foreign policy problems, Gorbachev followed a traditional, Brezhnevian line; but he was still aware of the strategic dilemmas that would eventually lead him to radicalize Soviet foreign policy under the slogan of "new political thinking." He blamed the West for deliberately sabotaging the positive trends of the 1970s, thus following Chernenko in calling for an early return to détente. However, he also sensed that a return to détente without a reversal of the INF deployments, a repudiation in the United States of SDI, or other radical changes would have been a foreign policy defeat for the Soviet Union.

By 1985, the Western leaders were pressing for summits and a return to business as usual. Having "won" the INF battle, the NATO countries were now anxious to show that East-West relations had not suffered, that the economic and cultural ties valued by Western countries still held, and that there was no truth behind the alarmist scenarios spread by the peace movement and the political left. Gorbachev had good reasons for wanting a return to détente, but at the same time to be careful not to be seen as bending to Western pressures and accepting a post-INF, post-SDI détente on Western terms. Thus, he began to speak of the need to go "beyond détente". Gorbachev proclaimed his interest in a new political order "beyond détente" in radical form in his 15 January 1986 statement, in which he proposed the complete elimination of nuclear weapons by the year 2000. In this statement, he claimed that "mankind is at a crucial state in the new space era. It is time to abandon stone age ways of thinking, when the main preoccupations was to provide oneself with a bigger club or a heavier rock."[12] A month later, in his report to the party congress, Gorbachev explained the concept of "new thinking" by calling for the establishment of a new "comprehensive system of international security." Such a system could, in Gorbachev's opinion, be realised as a result of actions in four fields: political, military, economic and humanitarian.[13]

The new "comprehensive" system had three main themes, namely: first, the mutuality of security in the nuclear age; second, the inverse relation between security and the level of nuclear and conventional weaponry; third, the interdependence of the world. Each of these themes departed completely from both traditional Soviet practice and Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Marxism-Leninism had always instructed that the Soviet Union had to provide unilaterally for its own security, and not rely on mutual

[12] *Izvestia,* 16 January 1986.

[13] *Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy,* McNair Papers, Number 7, National Defense University, The Institute for National Strategic Studies, Washington D. C., 1990, p. 11.

arrangements with the unrelenting class enemy. Where global problems were concerned, traditional Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy purported that their only cause was capitalist exploitation. Nevertheless, many of the themes in the "new political thinking" had antecedents in Soviet doctrine and policy. For example, in the 1950s the USSR had acknowledged that mutual deterrence was the actual, if not ideal, state of affairs. It had been engaged in multilateral and bilateral arms control negotiations since the 1950s, and had talked more and more as if weapons were an evil in themselves. The mergence of these antecedents during Gorbachev's period to produce a "new thinking" is probably the result of three factors: first, the tactical requirements of Soviet foreign policy; second, the contributions of certain Soviet intellectuals; and third, the personal tendencies and interests of Gorbachev. Undoubtedly, these ushered in Gorbachev's "new political thinking", by enabling him to make any sudden and possibly dangerous, in terms of domestic politics, break with the past.

The tactical modification of Soviet doctrinal pronouncements dated back to the late 1970s, a period referred to as the "era of stagnation" by some Soviet writers. By 1976, they had begun to realize the adverse effect of their academic and political writings had on Western assessments of Soviet policy. Indeed, Soviet military and political writings had come under increasing scrutiny from Western analysts at that time.

The tactical requirements of anti-INF struggle also had a role to play in doctrinal change. NATO's December 1979 decision to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe jolted the whole Soviet establishment. In June 1980, the Soviets responded by adopting a resolution, which stated, "the adventuristic actions of the United States and its accomplices have increased the danger of nuclear war." This pronouncement was a complete turnaround from the previous stance, which since

early 1970s had argued that détente was a favourable global trend. Utilising the theme of increased war danger to create the basis for common action, the Soviet leadership reached out to Western opponents of the INF deployments, who were looking for arguments to thwart these deployments and to assert the primacy of East-West détente over NATO's self-defined deterrence requirements. This interaction proved to be a valuable learning experience for the Soviet elite, because it was in this way that the concept of "mutual security" first made an appearance in Soviet discourse.

The concept of a security partnership was not entirely unsimilar to the traditional Soviet concepts of "collective security", and soon enough the Soviets began to echo the "mutual security" and "security partnership" discourse to the European sympathisers. In the early 1980s, this "grafting on" was only a tactical device used by Soviet propagandists to undermine Western support for the INF deployments. However, after 1985 Gorbachev raised this tactical device to the status of the general Soviet political line.

Nevertheless, it was more likely that the main reason for Gorbachev's increased interest in mutual security had less to do with European issues than with the Soviet campaign against SDI. By early 1985, and Gorbachev's rise to power, SDI had become the main Soviet arms control priority. Indeed, "mutual security" was more in line with an anti-SDI campaign than it was to the struggle against intermediate range nuclear forces. The linchpin of the Soviet campaign against INF was always "equal" rather than "mutual" security. The Soviet Union focused its argument on the apparent inequity, and danger, of any security arrangement that permitted the United States to target the USSR from third countries, but that denied the USSR either the ability or the right to take similar action against the United States, as it had happened in Cuba in 1962. Thus, there was a tension, to say the

least, between the concept of "mutual security" and the focus of the Soviet anti-INF campaign. However, the campaign against SDI entailed that it was easier to make the claim that it was the United States which was demanding a special status for itself at the expense of third countries.

To balance this threat, the Soviets could have welcomed nuclear deterrence based on mutual assured destruction and strategic stability. However, they did not adopt that approach. Rather, they reemphasized the line of discourse that deterrence was unacceptable and had to be overcome politically rather than technologically. Some Soviet writers and academics, for example, Alexsandr Bovin, Ivan Frolov, Zagladin, Shakhnazarov[14], and Aleksandr Yakovlev, began to develop more comprehensive explanations of international developments. These explanations lent tactical support to the policies of Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko, and foretold Gorbachev's new political thinking. According to Shakhnazarov, one implication of the new thinking was the need to acknowledge that security could no longer be individual or national, but had to be strictly "mutual". In January 1986, Gorbachev adopted this expression in his official pronouncements.

Another intellectual trend that contributed to Gorbachev's new political thinking was the development in the early 1970s of the field of globalists. Under the leadership of writers such as Zagladin, Frolov and Inozemtsev, the globalists addressed "all human" problems, including environmental pollution, hunger, illiteracy, underdevelopment, and disease. They did not openly challenge the long held Soviet view that capitalism caused all

[14] One of the more notable Works to presage Gorbachev's new Political thinking was Shakhnazarov's "The Logic of Political thinking in the Nuclear Age", which appeared in 1984 in *Soviet Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1986). In this article, Shakhnazarov argued that because of the development of nuclear weapons, traditional concepts of national security were obsolete, hence the need to think in a new way.

these problems, and that, consequently, the USSR could not be expected to contribute to their solution.[15]

By the early 1980s, writers such as Shakhnazarov advanced these arguments. Although they continued to blame capitalism for the persistence of "all human" problems, these writers argued that the USSR had to contribute to the mitigation of these problems as part of its own declared policy of doing everything possible to avoid a nuclear war. Gorbachev was to adopt this line and incorporate it into his new political thinking. By 1985, these writers together with foreign policy makers who were in search of a new way to counter the SDI and INF problems, had well prepared the groundwork for the new political thinking. However, a real breakthrough could not occur without a dynamic new leader who would be able to repackage all the dissimilar pieces in a coherent form, push it forward as the new orthodoxy, and begin selling it on the international arena. It was, of course, the election of Gorbachev, his gradual consolidation of power in the Soviet Unions, and his self-education in the field of foreign and defence policy, that was to make all this possible.

Traditionally, Soviet leaders had a great freedom to shape the overall direction of Soviet foreign policy, and Gorbachev was no exception. Brezhnev had established a tradition that the Party leader unveiled an extensive new foreign policy program at the party congress. At the 24th (1971), the 25th (1976), and the 26th (1981) Party Congresses, Brezhnev presented successive versions of his "peace program" in which he praised past achievements and laid the way for the party's future tasks. Thus, in 1986, Gorbachev probably felt obliged to prepare a comprehensive foreign policy statement of his own.

[15] See Erik P. Hoffman and Frederic J. Fleron, *The Conduct of Soviet Foreign Policy,* New York: Aldine, 1980.

Gorbachev gave the impression of being exceptionally intelligent, a quick thinker with a personality that could easily dominate in personal and group settings. In contrast to some of his predecessors, who were actually more “cultured” than they appeared, Gorbachev seemed to be the opposite - a pseudo-intellectual who exaggerated his own learnings. He enjoyed being in the company of artists and intellectuals, and was fond of using profound, albeit cliché, phrases in his speeches.

Despite the superficiality and pretentiousness of this image, some in the West were impressed, and it was probably Gorbachev’s desire to be taken seriously as a thinker, not only on technical, economic and political issues, but also on broader human concerns. Undoubtedly, Gorbachev’s wish to take the role of a major theoretician of global problems made a significant, but hard to define contribution to the “new political thinking”. It encouraged him both to systematize and encode his “philosophy”, and to present it to domestic and international audiences as something innovative and profound.

Thus, three factors, namely: the tactical requirements of Soviet foreign policy; a certain degree of intellectual incitement in the 1970s and 1980s; and Gorbachev’s own intellect and personality, contributed to the “new political thinking”. Although the content of his thinking was new, at least in the Soviet context, its proclamation in the mid-1980s was in line with earlier doctrinal shifts in Soviet history. Aware of the gap between ideology and reality, Soviet leaders often tried to narrow this gap by removing elements in the Marxist-Leninist doctrine which had become ideological and political liabilities. In this way, they pushed Communist victory into the more remote future and further outside the realm of everyday foreign policy. However, simultaneously, they also preserved the ultimate credibility of Marxist-Leninism and the reason for existence of the party by renewing the claim of the Soviet Union to a special relationship to

the forces of history. Gorbachev fitted neatly into this pattern. Although he deemphasised elements in classical Marxist-Leninism, the role of class conflict in international relations in particular, he reasserted the centrality of the Soviet Union, its ruling party, and the party's general secretary to the major issues of that time.

5. Conclusion

Gorbachev did not modify the fundamental Marxist-Leninist tenet that imperialism was the sole potential source of war. As he stated in his report to the party congress: "Imperialism is prompted by its intrinsic mainsprings and very socioeconomic essence to translate the competition of the two systems into the language of military confrontation. By dint of its social nature, imperialism ceaselessly generates aggressive, adventurist policy."[16] In Perestroika, he implicitly endorsed a Brezhnevian view of East-West relations, although he criticized Brezhnev's domestic policies. Gorbachev's apparent faithfulness to the fundamental Marxist-Leninist tenet that "socialism" by nature was peace-loving, while "imperialism" was inherently warlike put all his statements about war, its antecedents and consequences in a special light. Gorbachev also continued to reject the Western concept of stable mutual deterrence. Again, Gorbachev's opinions on this issue were not a mere acknowledgement of orthodoxy and tradition, but a matter of firm conviction. Finally, like his predecessors, Gorbachev continued to use the threat of war as a tool for mobilization. He took on an ambiguous stance that allowed the Soviet Union great tactical flexibility: namely, the danger of war was great, but it could be repelled by active "struggle" (specifically, support for Soviet foreign policy). This position was designed to ensure that the "forces of peace" in the West avoided the extremes of complacency and despair.

[16] *Pravda,* 26 February 1986.

Against this background, Gorbachev made a potentially important change in Soviet teaching about the nature of East-West coexistence. Unlike previous Soviet leaders, Gorbachev proclaimed the possibility of creating a "non-violent and non-nuclear world" even before the global victory of "socialism". By making this possibility a key theme in the "new political thinking", Gorbachev built upon Khrushchev's claim that it would be possible to "exclude world war from the life of society even before the complete triumph of socialism, even with capitalism existing in the part of the world".[17] However, Gorbachev went far beyond Khrushchev. Khrushchev referred only to "world" (i.e. global nuclear) war, but not to all wars and all international "violence." Moreover, he strongly implied that the "banishing" of world war would result from growing Soviet and general socialist superiority over the West. That is, they would impose, through peace, superior Soviet strength. In contrast, Gorbachev talked of achieving a "non-violent, non-nuclear world" by starting from the existing state of equivalence and preserving it at ever-lower levels of force on both sides.

A final aspect of Soviet doctrine that did not change was one of style rather than substance. Although Soviet propaganda and diplomacy had become more flexible, open and attractive, the style with which they presented the "new political thinking" to the international arena displayed a number of familiar traits. Specifically, the Soviet Union continued to be almost intolerably self-righteous in its pronouncement on international affairs. Gorbachev repeatedly compared the Soviet plan to move from the nuclear to the post-nuclear age to earlier historical transitions, such as those from the Middle Age to the Renaissance and Enlightenment.

[17] See *Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy,* McNair Papers, Number 7, National Defense University, The Institute for National Strategic Studies, Washington D. C., 1990.

Although there were gaps and inconsistencies in the Soviet new thinking, from the Soviet perspective it had already had an overwhelmingly positive influence on the USSR's standing in the world. A masterful politician, Gorbachev sensed that new slogans, new mandates were obligatory if the USSR was to regain the initiative in world politics that it had lost in the early 1980s. He believed that the "new political thinking" would help him seize and retain this initiative. Under this directive, the Soviet leader called for joint efforts to create a "non-nuclear, non-violent world." In its own way, the new rhetoric was nearly as utopian as earlier Soviet rhetoric about fighting and winning a nuclear war, and just as belligerent in its relationship to world "imperialism". Thus, it was expected that the "new political thinking" would mean a more active and diplomatically flexible Soviet leadership, although it was unlikely to end the conflicting relationship between the Soviet Union and the outside world that had dominated since 1917.

Undeniably, Gorbachev started off a process that was essential for East-West relations, and thus for the whole world, in trying to avoid exploiting the West's old impulses. By conspicuously rejecting the use of force, he showed that the West could try to reduce the weight of arms in the conflicts between states, both large and small, that were inevitable on the international scene. Moreover, he achieved this against the will of both the Soviet military establishment and the public opinion.

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