

**Jack F. Matlock, Jr.**

## **PERESTROIKA AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR**

The idea that the Cold War ended with the break-up of the Soviet Union is one of the most widespread — and disorienting — misperceptions that have plagued international relations over the past quarter century. Equally damaging to a peaceful world order has been the claim and the perception that the Soviet Union, or “Russia,” lost the Cold War. In fact, the Cold War ended well before the Soviet Union shattered into independent countries in December, 1991; until then the Russian Federated Soviet Republic was not an independent state.

The competing philosophies that underlay the Cold War came to an end in 1988 when Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, discarded the Marxist concept of the “international class struggle” leading to a “dictatorship of the proletariat” as the guiding principle of Soviet foreign policy. Gorbachev replaced “class struggle” with regard for “the common interests of mankind,” a concept in total contradiction of the philosophy espoused by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, all of whom believed that only economic classes, not mankind as a whole, had common interests. A year later, as the East European countries asserted their independence, Gorbachev and President George H. W. Bush declared that their countries were no longer enemies.

The Cold War was over, to the advantage of both sides and the world as a whole. The victory was one of common sense, not of one side over the other. The subsequent break-up of the Soviet Union occurred as a result of internal tensions, not the pressure of external enemies. The first President Bush strongly endorsed Gorbachev’s proposal for a union treaty that would have united twelve of the union republics in a voluntary federation. Since the United States had never recognized the legality of the forced absorption of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the Soviet Union, it supported their insistence on a restoration of their independence. In fact, one of the last acts of the Soviet parliament elected as a result of perestroika recognized their independence.

Russians who today mourn the collapse of the Soviet state should be reminded that it was the elected leader of the RSFSR, Boris Yeltsin, who conspired with the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine to reject Gorbachev's proposed union treaty and replace it with the ineffectual Commonwealth of Independent States. This was not an outcome forced by Western pressure or the machinations of foreign enemies. It was a by-product of the failed coup attempt in August, 1991 — an attempt by those directly responsible for the security of the Soviet Union to replace perestroika with repression. Their attempt was an utter failure but gravely undermined the authority of the Soviet government.

All of the statements above seem crystal clear to me, having observed developments in the Soviet Union as American ambassador from 1987 to early August, 1991. Yet, it is obvious that most contemporary observers assume illogically that “Russia” “lost” the Cold War, which ended when the Soviet Union disappeared from the world stage. I have often asked myself why and how this mistaken belief took hold and still persists. There doubtless are many contributing factors, but several important ones come immediately to mind.

First, few Western journalists, scholars, or, for that matter, intelligence agencies, thought fundamental reform of the Soviet system was possible. They assumed that even if Gorbachev pursued limited reforms that threatened Communist Party control of the country, he would be removed, as indeed had happened to Nikita Khrushchev. Second, events moved so rapidly in the late 1980s through 1991 that even the best informed observers had trouble keeping up. Third, almost everyone concentrated attention primarily on geopolitical competition and the military balance or imbalance, rather than the underlying ideology. In my judgment, the arms race and geopolitical competition were artefacts of the Cold War, not its cause.

When Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, many American officials saw him as a greater threat than his predecessors. Arthur Hartman, then U.S. ambassador in Moscow, reported to President Ronald Reagan that Gorbachev was “a narrow

fellow, of set views”. The CIA judged that, though his methods had changed, his intent was to carry out traditional Soviet goals — the spread of communism throughout the world—more effectively than his predecessors had managed.

Fortunately, President Reagan paid more attention to the opinion of his friend, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, than to that of his own intelligence agencies. After meeting Gorbachev in December 1984, she had reported that Mikhail Gorbachev was “a man we can do business with.” Having already tried without success to arrange a meeting with Konstantin Chernenko, Reagan was eager to meet Gorbachev. He immediately prepared a letter to Gorbachev inviting him to Washington. Vice President George H.W. Bush delivered it directly when they met during the Chernenko funeral proceedings.

It took three summit meetings to produce a major agreement to reduce nuclear arms but each of the meetings helped put the United States and the Soviet Union on a course of negotiation and problem solving. Before the first meeting (Geneva, November 1985) there were extensive diplomatic contacts to find and define areas of cooperation and ways to expand contacts. The second meeting (Reykjavik, October, 1986) brought negotiations in several areas closer to closure although a world-shaking final agreement eluded them: the two leaders came very close to agreeing to eliminate their nuclear weapons by the end of the century. In their third meeting (Washington, December 1987) they agreed to eliminate a whole class of nuclear weapons with strict on-site inspection to verify compliance.

Implementation of the concepts of glasnost, new thinking, and perestroika in the Soviet Union greatly facilitated the Soviet Union’s rapprochement with the United States and its allies. The eventual rejection of the Marxist “class struggle” as the basis for Soviet foreign policy eliminated the root cause of the Cold War. By the end of 1991, Europe was free of the former iron curtain divide but nevertheless without agreement on a security structure that would keep the continent whole and free.

Today, as the world seems on the brink of a new nuclear arms race, grapples with a persisting pandemic, a rapidly deteriorating environment and large-scale

migration driven by conflict and poverty, international cooperation is more essential than ever if civilization as we know it is to survive. Nevertheless, instead of leading the world to deal collectively with the threats that face us all, the United States and its allies seem locked in an escalating revival of Cold War confrontations.

Gorbachev is surely justified in blaming unfounded triumphalism as a major factor that has undermined efforts to construct an inclusive system of international security. If the world is to manage peacefully the global challenges it faces, it must end the competition for control of territory and instead create a secure international environment for all. Gorbachev's ideas that helped end the Cold War are still relevant today.