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Mikhail Gorbachev «*The New Russia*»

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When the Soviet Union came apart at the end of 1991, the nuclear arms race between the U.S. and USSR had ended, a negotiated peace that benefitted all parties had replaced the Cold War, and the iron curtain that divided Europe had vanished. We seemed to be on the threshold of a new Europe. President George Herbert Walker Bush called it “a Europe whole and free.” President Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev called it “our common European home.” Bush went further as he assembled a coalition to oppose Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, proposing nothing less than “a new world order.”

Now, a quarter-century later, rhetoric emanating from Moscow and Washington resembles that of the Cold War. Government officials and armchair strategists in both capitals speak of geopolitical competition in terms that were once reserved for the struggle between “Communist slavery” and the “Free World.” They seem to ignore the fact that Russia is no longer Communist and is, in most respects, a totally different state than was the Soviet Union.

Anyone puzzled by the way the unity and hope of the early 1990s has morphed to the division and fear we are experiencing today will benefit from reading and pondering Mikhail Gorbachev’s latest book, *The New Russia*. Its contents cover more than its English title suggests: while it does give the reader a running account of events in Russia after it shed the other fourteen republics of the Soviet Union, it contains much more. The Russian title, *Posle Kremlya* (After the Kremlin), is more apt since the book presents important thoughts regarding history, democracy, international relations, and the external events that influenced Russia’s revival of authoritarianism.

These themes are worked into an account of Gorbachev’s own activity from 1992. Being the object of vilification by Stalinist forces who accuse him of destroying the Soviet Union to please the “West,” he makes a vigorous effort to defend his record. His account, it must be said, rings true while his accusers’ charges are vicious invention. After all, it was his nemesis, Boris Yeltsin, who

conspired to destroy the Soviet Union while Gorbachev was trying, with the moral and political support of the United States, to turn it into a democratic federation. And it was Boris Yeltsin who first appointed the current president, Vladimir Putin, to the post.

Gorbachev is unsparing in his criticism of President Putin's actions that undermine democratic institutions and inhibit the political habits that make democracy work, but he does not make the mistake of calling it a retreat from democracy. Gorbachev knows well that Russia has never had democracy; what he achieved with the reforms he championed was the *possibility* of developing democratic institutions. What Russia had in the 1990s was more akin to crime-infested anarchy than true democracy. The myth in the "West" that Russia was "democratizing" under Yeltsin survived even his military attack on an elected legislature in 1993 and the patently fraudulent presidential election of 1996. For most Russians, if conditions of the 1990s could be attributed to democracy, then democracy was not what they wanted. The potty mouthed pronounce the Russian word *demokratiya* as *dermokratia* (shitocracy).

For diplomats, particularly American diplomats, Gorbachev's description of the impact U.S. policy had on internal Russian developments and Russian external behavior is instructive. Gorbachev feels betrayed not only by Boris Yeltsin and those who broke up a democratizing Soviet Union, but also by the successors of those Western leaders with whom he cooperated to end the Cold War. The Western leaders of his political generation gave him broad assurances in the transformative years 1989 and 1990 that they would not "take advantage" of a liberated Eastern Europe, that, in the words of Secretary of State James Baker III, "NATO jurisdiction would not move to the East, not one inch," if a united Germany was allowed to stay in the NATO alliance. This was not a legally binding obligation, and the subsequent expansion of NATO was not a bad idea because it was a broken promise. It was a bad idea period, if the goal was a Europe whole and free. Europe would inevitably stay divided unless Russia were embedded in a system that united the continent rather than perpetuating division.

The progressive expansion of NATO to the east was only part of the problem. The Bush-Cheney administration withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty that had served as the foundation for U.S.-Soviet negotiations to

reduce nuclear weaponry. That, along with other willful and sometimes illegal acts, such as the invasion of Iraq without UN sanction, convinced most attentive Russians that the United States was determined to treat their country as a defeated enemy.

“We won the Cold War!” triumphalism particularly rankles with Gorbachev. The fact is that every agreement he made with the United States and its NATO allies was in the interest of the USSR, which needed nothing so much as an end to the arms race. Even more distorted is the widespread conviction that the Cold War ended with the demise of the Soviet Union. It was over ideologically by the end of 1988, and in most other respects by the end of 1989, the *anno mirabilis* of East European liberation. The Soviet Union disintegrated *despite* the end of the Cold War, not because of it. It was not a “Western” victory, though it did demonstrate that the Communist rule of the USSR was not viable in world without external enemies.

Eight years ago, after war broke out between Russia and Georgia, Gorbachev commented, “The reality is that, in recent years, Russia has been confronted with one *fait accompli* after another: this is what we are doing about Kosovo; now we are withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and deploying anti-missile systems in your neighboring countries; now we are continuing to endlessly expand NATO. Live with it! ... There are calls now for a review of relations with Russia. I think the first thing in need of review is this way of talking down to Russia, ignoring her views and interests.”

Well, after a brief respite when the new Obama administration initiated a “reset”—mistranslated by the Secretary of State’s advisers with the Russian word (in Latin characters yet!) for “overload,” the mistranslation proved to be a Freudian slip. The policy combined incompatible elements: efforts to cooperate when it was in the U.S. interest joined with policies designed to influence domestic politics in Russia itself. Equally threatening from the Russian standpoint, was what seemed to Russians a calculated effort to alienate Russia’s most important neighbor, one that had been part of the same country for more than two centuries. While the reset had important positive results, the New START treaty in particular, President Obama’s policy was doomed in other respects even before civil war broke out in Ukraine.

As Gorbachev pointed out, Russians have been reacting to what they perceive as a persistent American effort to put them down, isolate them, and to dominate the world by exercising a global hegemony. The Russian reaction has been damaging to Russia's own interests and future, but, Russian patriots will argue, what proud nation, when pressed, will not push back?

Gorbachev's comment highlights a crucial psychological point. A diplomat should understand that nothing is to be gained by publicly humiliating another country or its leaders, even if their policies are problematic. Deal with the policy with at least public respect for the politician. President Reagan condemned communism but never made slighting personal remarks about the specific Soviet leaders he dealt with. When he met a Soviet leader, his first words were usually, "We hold the peace of the world in our hands." They did, and he and Gorbachev achieved a world-transforming feat in reversing the upward spiral of the arms race. Their joint declaration that "a nuclear war cannot be won, and must never be fought, which means there can be no war between us" is as valid today as it was in November, 1985, when Reagan and Gorbachev met for the first time. Unfortunately that important truism seems to be ignored now by the leaders and "policy elite" in both our countries.

As we await the inauguration of a new president, our diplomats would be well advised to read Mikhail Gorbachev's testimony. They may not agree with everything he writes, but his account will give them insight into the sort of advice they should not be giving our next president.

In all of the global challenges we face, Russia is going to be either part of the solution or part of the problem. Mikhail Gorbachev has called attention to those actions and policies by the United States and its allies that have encouraged Russia to be a problem. Gorbachev has also written nostalgically about his relationship with Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. A study of the interaction of those two American presidents with the president of the Soviet Union would provide important lessons for a diplomacy designed to transcend differences and concentrate on those issues that are vital to the future of both countries.

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