

Commentary :

David Holloway : *Moving to
Globalization*

THE YEARS FROM 1985 to 1991 were an extraordinary period in the history of international politics. A breakthrough in U.S.-Soviet relations ended the cold war and the nuclear arms race; Soviet domination of Eastern Europe collapsed, allowing the countries of that region to choose their own paths of development; Germany was reunified; and the Soviet Union was dissolved at the end of 1991. It was clear at the time, and it is no less clear in retrospect, that these profound changes constituted an historic moment in international relations comparable to the re-configurations of the international system caused by World Wars I and II. Moreover, these changes took place more peacefully than it would have been possible to imagine ten years earlier.

Mikhail Gorbachev was a key figure in this great transformation. It is inevitable that his role should be widely debated, especially in Russia, where there are many who deplore the results of his policies, most notably the breakup of the Soviet Union. In the West, where the transformation is regarded with overwhelming approval, the debated issues have more to do with Gorbachev's role in ending the cold war: How much credit does he deserve, and how much was he forced to do because of pressure from the West, and especially from the United States?

As Gorbachev's foreign policy adviser, Anatoli Cherniaev was especially well placed to provide insight into Gorbachev's policies. He ascribes a central role to the "new thinking," the main points of which he summarizes clearly. Cherniaev's essay raises three questions: Where did the new thinking come from? What was the

relationship of ideas to power in Gorbachev's policies? And do these ideas have a continuing effect on international relations?

First, as Cherniaev points out, Gorbachev's post-Stalin predecessors understood that nuclear weapons made it necessary for them to be cautious in pursuing their rivalry with the West. But Gorbachev went far beyond that prudent conclusion. The new thinking rested on two key premises: that nuclear weapons necessitated a new approach to international politics and that such basic human interests as peace had primacy over the interests of any particular class. The new thinking marked a fundamental shift in the Soviet view of international relations.

The precepts of the new thinking were not novel in themselves. The idea that in the nuclear age security has to be mutual, for example, was widely, though not universally, shared throughout the world. But taken together, the principles of the new thinking did have profound implications for Soviet policy and world politics. The most important innovation in the Soviet context was abandonment of the Leninist analysis of imperialism, which placed the struggle between capital and labor at the center of international relations. The new thinking ultimately signaled that the Soviet Union no longer aimed to maintain an alternative system of international relations but instead wished to be integrated into a global system.

Gorbachev did not have a clear formulation of the new thinking in mind when he became general secretary. He developed his thinking in the course of his efforts to deal with the problems that faced the Soviet Union. In 1985 the Soviet Union appeared to be more powerful in military terms than ever before, but its economy was stagnant, its technology lagged, it was fighting a fruitless war in Afghanistan, and it was engaged in an apparently endless arms race with an economically stronger rival. The buildup of Soviet armed forces in the 1960s and 1970s had not created the more favorable international environment that Soviet leaders had hoped for but had led to more tense and hostile relations with the West and with China. Gorbachev developed his ideas as he sought to extricate the Soviet Union from this difficult situation.

What led Gorbachev to the new thinking, according to Cherniaev, was a combination of pragmatic and moral considerations. The pragmatic element was an understanding of the danger of nuclear confrontation, and the moral element was empathy for Soviet citizens and the suffering and deprivation they had endured. Gorbachev had not had formal responsibility for foreign policy before becoming general secretary, but he was of course aware of the dangerously high level of tension in East-West relations in the early 1980s and the heavy burden that the arms race imposed on the Soviet Union. As the Central Committee secretary responsible for agriculture, he had been concerned about the resources allocated to the military-industrial complex.¹

Cherniaev stresses the importance of Gorbachev's meetings with foreign political leaders, which have received less attention than they deserve.² These conversations not only helped to shape Gorbachev's views on foreign affairs but also moved him toward a more social-democratic concept of socialism. They helped to persuade him that it would indeed be possible to end the cold war and to move international relations onto a different footing. But Gorbachev's serious conversations with foreign leaders began only in 1983, when he was already a prospective candidate for general secretary. This leaves open the question of why he was predisposed to pursue the line that he did, in fact, follow.

Some party and government officials in the early 1980s were critical of Soviet foreign policy and open to new approaches. Cherniaev himself was one of them; so, too, was Georgi Shakhnazarov, who also came to play an important role as an adviser to Gorbachev.³ An even more important figure, perhaps, was Aleksandr Yakovlev, whom Gorbachev met during a 1983 visit to Canada, where

1. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, kniga 1 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 207.

2. But see Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 115–117.

3. Anatoli Cherniaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym* (Moscow: Kul'tura, 1993); Georgi Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody* [The Price of Freedom] (Moscow: Rossika Zevs, 1993).

Yakovlev was ambassador. Gorbachev soon brought him back to Moscow to head IMEMO, the leading international affairs institute in the Academy of Sciences. Eduard Shevardnadze, too, was an important ally and influence, especially after his appointment as foreign minister in July 1985. Of course, these advisers did not determine the policy that Gorbachev followed, but they did help to define the direction of foreign policy in conceptual and practical terms. Besides, the presence of such people in the party and state apparatus indicates that the capacity for policy innovation existed. In other words, there were those who, like Gorbachev, understood the need for change not only at home but also in the Soviet Union's relations with the rest of the world.

Cherniaev plays down the role of the Academy of Sciences institutes in formulating the new thinking. He is right to criticize the emphasis that some scholars have put on the role of the *institut-chiki*. The institutes, which were closely tied to the Central Committee apparatus and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, did not provide Gorbachev with a clearly formulated set of ideas when he became general secretary. But the institutes had on their staffs knowledgeable specialists who had developed ideas on global issues and had views that were not always identical to those of official policy (though they were, of course, restricted in what they could say publicly). Some of these specialists took advantage of the political space Gorbachev opened up to elaborate elements of the new thinking. They were part of the international affairs community Gorbachev could draw on in developing his ideas about foreign and defense policy.

Cherniaev's essay raises a second question: What was the role of ideas in this great transformation in international politics? There are those who argue that Gorbachev did only what he was forced to do by the realities of power, by the decrepit state of the Soviet economy, and by pressure from the Reagan administration. Others, who have argued that Gorbachev's policies show that ideas do play an important role in world politics, have used the end of the

cold war to critique the realist approach with its emphasis on the primacy of power in international relations.

Gorbachev was indeed responding to the difficult domestic and international circumstances in which the Soviet Union found itself in the mid-1980s. He understood that the Soviet Union had to craft a new relationship with the rest of the world, and the new thinking provided the intellectual framework—the guidelines and the justification—for doing just that. By the latter years of Gorbachev's rule, this framework had evolved into a radical revision of the premises of Soviet foreign policy, matching the transformation that was taking place inside the country. It marked a fundamental change in the Soviet Union's concept of the world and of its own place in it.

But Gorbachev's policy was not the only possible one. Other leaders might have made other choices. As Shakhnazarov has written, "Suppose that in March 1985 the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee had elected as General Secretary Grishin, Romanov, or someone else from the 'old guard.' It is possible to imagine that in that case the reforms would have followed the 'Chinese variant,' and the Soviet Union, as well as the bipolar system of international relations, would have been preserved."⁴ The nuclear arms race would have continued, writes Shakhnazarov, and the missile confrontation in Europe would have become more intense. It is open to debate whether someone other than Gorbachev might have become general secretary, but Shakhnazarov is surely right that there were different courses of action possible in 1985. Gorbachev's choices were therefore important, and so, too, were his ideas, insofar as they guided his policies.

It took some time for Western leaders to understand that Gorbachev was prepared to be much more radical than had been apparent in 1985. He did not have a detailed foreign policy plan or a fully elaborated theoretical framework when he became general secre-

4. Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, 579.

tary. His immediate goals—to end the war in Afghanistan and to reduce the nuclear danger, for example—could be interpreted as prudent rather than visionary. But as it developed in the late 1980s, the new thinking pointed the way to a far-reaching transformation of the international system. Conceptual innovation is important in politics, especially in societies with an official ideology. This was not immediately understood in the West, where suspicion of Gorbachev's motives persisted for a long time. The event that achieved the final breakthrough was Gorbachev's remarkable speech to the United Nations in December 1988, when he made one of his most cogent statements on the new thinking and announced deep unilateral cuts in Soviet forces, thereby removing the 40-year-old Soviet military threat to Western Europe.

The U.S. debate about the role of ideas in foreign policy is unnecessarily polarized in suggesting that explanations in terms of power are distinct from explanations that pay attention to ideas. The new thinking did not arise in a political vacuum and was indeed formulated as a way of dealing with the problems that the Soviet Union faced. But that does not mean that Gorbachev's ideas were unimportant. Ideas can provide a guide to action, they can help to create political support by giving a rationale for policy, and they can reassure other states by providing a context in which a state's policies can be understood. The new thinking played all of these roles in the Gorbachev years.

A third question is prompted by Cherniaev's essay: What legacy has the new thinking left? This question can be broken into two parts: the long-term impact of the changes that Gorbachev helped to bring about and the continuing influence of the new thinking as a set of ideas about international relations.

The legacy is enormous if we look at the effect of the transformation brought about by Gorbachev's policies. Of course, Gorbachev did not bring about these changes on his own; he had collaborators inside and outside the Soviet Union. Nor did Gorbachev intend everything that transpired; he desperately wanted to prevent the breakup of the Soviet Union, for example. Indeed,

events went beyond his control. But what is striking is that this transformation took place much more peacefully than could have been envisaged 10 or 20 years earlier. The new thinking provided a vision of the Soviet Union's place in the world that reassured the Soviet public as well as foreign leaders and publics. It thereby exercised a calming influence on the process of change. In that sense, the new thinking had a lasting effect in making it easier for the cold war to end in a relatively peaceful manner.

The answer is much less clear if we ask whether the new thinking, understood as a set of ideas, continues to influence international politics. In Russia the term is hardly used at all, except to refer to Gorbachev's policies. Since many people judge his policies to have been a catastrophic failure, that association does not help to perpetuate the influence of his ideas. Gorbachev's policies came under increasing criticism while he was still in office, not because he had abandoned Leninism but because he was believed to be paying insufficient attention to the national interest. Putin is now stressing the need to strengthen the Russian state and pursue the Russian national interest with vigor. The emphasis of Putin's policy is very different from that of Gorbachev's policy and is more akin to traditional *realpolitik*. Yet, key elements of the new thinking continue to serve as premises of Russian policy, even though the term is rarely used today. Russian leaders, for example, have not resuscitated the class approach to international relations, they view security in the nuclear age as mutual, and they aim to secure for Russia what they regard as its rightful place in the global system.

In the West, the new thinking, as a set of ideas, is associated with Gorbachev and the specific circumstances of his time. Even in that context, most Western analysts ascribe only secondary importance to the role of ideas in shaping Gorbachev's policy. They put more weight on U.S. policy and on the defects of the Soviet system in limiting the options that Gorbachev had available to him. The starkest version of this approach is the one that credits Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative with bringing the cold war to an end

and causing the collapse of the Soviet Union. In that interpretation, ideas play a very small part in Gorbachev's policies. The popularity of this interpretation (which is quite misleading, in my opinion) helps to explain why some analysts relegate the new thinking to history and regard it as irrelevant today. Moreover, some of the tenets of the new thinking that appeared unshakable—notably the mutuality of security—have come under strain in the United States, where a unilateralist approach to national security has gained strength since the mid-1990s.

It would be wrong, however, to dismiss the new thinking as no more than a set of ideas associated with Gorbachev and the policies he pursued. The emphasis on global human values was the anti-thesis of the idea of socialism in one country or even in one system of states. By virtue of the role it played in Gorbachev's policies, the new thinking contributed to the breakdown of the alternative system of international relations that the Soviet Union had constructed among the Socialist countries. Gorbachev's policies gave a powerful impetus to the globalization that now characterizes the international state system. During the cold war, international politics revolved around the rivalry of two antagonistic systems. Now we have a single global system in which the key issues are who defines the rules of the game, who has influence in the system, who benefits from the system, and who does not. In our preoccupation with current politics, we sometimes forget Gorbachev's role in bringing this about. Moreover, in this new context, the premises of the new thinking are still relevant for international politics and are indeed growing in importance. The processes of globalization reinforce the need for a global perspective on world politics. The cold war may be over, but nuclear weapons are still with us, and the need for a new approach to international relations has not lost its urgency.