**‘The importance of Mikhail Gorbachev in the end of the Cold War has been exaggerated.’ Discuss.**

In 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for “his leading role in the peace process” that led to the end of a 40-year hostility in relations. Was he fully deserving of this role, and just how much of his importance was inflated? This paper argues that although external circumstances were crucial in influencing Gorbachev’s actions, he was largely his own man in the bold initiatives and ceaseless accommodation that cemented the end of the Cold War.

The commonly accepted view states that the Cold War ended due to clear willingness on Gorbachev’s part to reform. Detractors, however, question the likelihood of one man revolutionizing the entire global order. As John Prados (2011) puts it, “the ship of state was a supertanker, not a sailboat, and responded to the tiller quite differently than a small craft.” In short, the entire global system was responsible for creating conditions conducive to ending the Cold War. This argument does have a strong factual basis on both domestic and international fronts. To begin with, Gorbachev had inherited a Soviet system on the brink of economic collapse—annual Gross Domestic Product growth oscillated around 2 percent (Prados, 2011), which was a clear indicator of economic stagnation. Soviet military spending approached 30 percent of GDP (Prados, 2011), rendering the system unsustainable in meeting its budget needs. Many hence argue that this necessitated pressing economic reform, meaning that Gorbachev’s introduction of Perestroika was merely a natural response to the ailing system.

On the international front, the Eastern Europeans were responsible for pulling down the ultimate Cold War symbol—the Berlin Wall—and hence their role in the ending of the War is absolutely crucial. According to Brown (2011), “good will was conspicuously lacking in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary”. As early as 1981, Martial Law had to be introduced in Poland following the unprecedented rise of mass-supported political opposition such as Solidarity. These showed that long before Gorbachev, dissent was already fermenting in Eastern Europe. On a deeper layer, the palpable success of the Western market economy posed as a stark contrast to the economic ruin of the Eastern Bloc, which was utterly incapable of providing for its people. This had an indirect but dangerous destabilizing force on the Soviet system—masses intuitively linked the success of the Western model with its democratic political systems (Brown, 2010), and hence it followed that the hermetic and authoritarian Soviet regime was the root cause of their suffering. Glasnost merely unleashed such visceral dissatisfaction, without which the Soviets would not have lost all their allies and Europe would not have been unified. Hence, Gorbachev did not create the desire for change—the people themselves did under the bleak Eastern environment.

Finally, proponents of the Right often accord a significant role to the Reagan administration for exerting pressure on Gorbachev and compelled him to capitulate. They postulate that Reagan’s military and ideological assertiveness forced the Soviets into an untenable situation. Militarily, the placing of Pershing missiles in Europe forced the USSR to respond with more SS20s at an unbearable cost. US support for the mujahideen in Afghanistan also ‘ratcheted up the costs of a Soviet endeavour that was already foundering’ (Wilson, 2008). Most importantly, the announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) shifted the nuclear power game and induced fear from the Soviets. According to Richard Perle, “it shook the confidence in the Soviet ability to prevail in the long term” and pushed them towards a more reconciliatory position on the question of nuclear armaments, as they realized that playing Russian Roulette with nuclear bombs would only get themselves shot. In this strand, it is likely that the consistently superior military build-up of the US threatened Gorbachev and made him reconsider what would best protect the USSR under such circumstances.

Hence, it seems as if external stimuli had overwhelming influence over Gorbachev’s actions. However, these arguments are based on a few key assumptions: First, that compromise was the sole option for Soviets to extract themselves from such unfavourable circumstances. Second, that the end of the Cold War was only defined by such symbolic gestures as the falling of the Berlin Wall.

On the first assumption, it is notable that the American policy of containment and rollback had existed right since 1947 but yielded vastly different outcomes. During Reagan’s most assertive first term, there was little indication that the USSR was buckling under pressure—After Reagan approved a programme which called for a 1.5 trillion defence-spending increase over the next 5 years, Brezhnev’s suspicions were severely deepened, which made “the prospect of reform and restraint increasingly difficult on the Soviet end” (Wilson, 2008). The USSR hence continued its armaments programme, kept its troops rooted to Afghanistan and showed almost no signs of impending domestic change. Not only does this debunk the view that Reagan pressurized the Soviets into capitulation, it shows that the warming up of relations in the late 1980s was likely due to significant changes of mind set in the highest echelons of Soviet leadership.

This paradigm shift came in the form of Mikhail Gorbachev. From the outset, he represented a new generation of leaders that harboured ideas of “New Thinking”. His main significance lies in the ideological restructuring of the Soviet Union. He was far from a renegade of Communism and totalitarianism, but he certainly did revolutionize the Soviet conception of security and society, directing both domestic and foreign policies in an astonishingly new direction. Domestically, Gorbachev vehemently denounced the CPSU’s nepotism, corruption and inefficiency. He firmly believed in the need for a more open model of socialism through the introduction of Glasnost, and allowed genuine criticism to be aired against the Soviet political system. In his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 1988, Gorbachev reiterated that the political elites of Central and Eastern Europe were free to transform their political system without fear of Soviet intervention. He then affirmed this through the announcement of significant troop withdrawals from the Warsaw Pact Allies. This clear signal of amenability to change is paramount to the ending of the Cold War—Gorbachev allowed dissent to breed and eventually recast the Soviet model from within.

More importantly, Gorbachev actively sought a new relationship with the United States following a changed conception of security. Security to Gorbachev was not amassed through territory as it had been under Stalin. Rather, he believed a stable global order to be the ultimate protection of Soviet interests. Regardless of the extent of influence the ailing Soviet system had cast on such a belief, Gorbachev was absolutely clear in his quest to seek improved relations with the United States. As early as in 1985, Gorbachev had already proposed withdrawing from Afghanistan, meeting strong objections from the military (Brown, 2010). Moreover in October 1986, Gorbachev reported on the progress made during the Reykjavik summit by stating, “the meeting has convinced us that the path we have chosen is correct and that a new mode of political thinking in the nuclear age is necessary and constructive.” Considering how nuclear armaments and territorial gains had been the foundation of Soviet security for the preceding decades, one could plausibly argue that such the new direction set by Gorbachev was unparalleled and required a great deal of determination and manoeuvring on his part.

Admittedly, Reagan’s anti-nuclearism was equally important in order for the two parties to truly converge. However, it is evident that Reagan was in fact more intransigent than Gorbachev—even in Reagan’s more accommodating second term, he was insistent on carrying on with SDI, which severely obstructed talks of nuclear disarmament. Gorbachev, however, worked to change the common CPSU stance on the issue and calmly accepted the US’ need for SDI. Only then did the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty finally materialize in 1987, mandating the removal of missiles from Europe. Hence, it is apparent that Gorbachev budged much more in reassuring the United States of Soviet willingness to cooperate, and acted to “break the Cold War’s ideological straitjacket” (Graebner, Burns and Siracusa, 2008). It was this thawing of relations, and not just symbolic gestures such as the falling of the wall, which really signified the end of the Cold War.

Undoubtedly, the end of the Cold War was not all within Gorbachev’s will and expectations. He did not expect Glasnost to precipitate such a deluge of criticisms; he probably had not foreseen such a vicious and swift fall of the Berlin Wall; he definitely had not wished for the complete failure of Perestroika in redeeming the Soviet economy. Nevertheless, his importance often lies in the unintended consequences of his actions as well—his choosing not to take action against an unintended wave of Eastern European revolutions was as crucial to the completion of the end as his willingness to engage the Americans. In conclusion, Gorbachev faced compelling circumstances, but was more compelled by personal conviction than external circumstance in taking the actions which ended the Cold War. This renders current assessments of his importance largely valid.

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