

## Western Policy and the Demise of the Soviet Union

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The West did not cause the collapse of the Soviet Union in any direct sense. I base this conclusion on three observations. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of numerous concurrent pressures. No one factor alone “caused” it. Second, if we assign priority of importance to any single underlying cause of the Soviet Union’s decline, it was the weakness and failing of the domestic economic system. Although the West may have increased the pressure on that system, the problems with the Soviet economy were truly internal, rooted in the Stalinist model of economic growth. Third, to the extent that Western policy did play a role in the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union, that role was made possible through the more immediate and direct internal causes. Western governments imposed constraints and offered opportunities that shaped not only Gorbachev’s choices, but the choices facing an increasingly diverse set of political players in the late 1980s. Thus, although the West did not *cause* the collapse of the Soviet Union, it did *contribute* to the decline of the Soviet Union in limited and specific ways and thereby played a role in the state’s collapse.

Before turning to the debate about the Western role, it is worth pointing out three difficulties in taking on this question from the standpoint of a scholar. First, it is a difficult question because it is not just a scholarly issue but one imbued with politics. Although American policy toward the Soviet Union in the immediate post–World War II period was largely bipartisan and free of extreme rancor, that changed with the Vietnam war in the 1960s, the advent of détente in the early 1970s, the collapse of détente in the late 1970s, and the explicitly anti-Soviet hardline foreign policy of the Reagan administration in the early 1980s. Explaining the collapse of the Soviet Union thus takes on a political cast, not least because the Reagan administration’s foreign policy was extremely costly, creating unprecedented government deficits, risking alliance relations, altering the role of arms control in U.S.-Soviet relations, and at

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times appearing to bring the world closer to nuclear confrontation. What is at issue in a broader debate is not just whether the West contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union but whether any such Western contribution was worth it.

The second reason this question is difficult for scholars is the meaning of causality in social science. To establish causation requires not merely showing association, but showing that a factor had an independent effect. “Independent effect” means that in the absence of a particular factor, the outcome would have been different. If Western policy contributed to the decline of the Soviet Union, it was by affecting other phenomena such as economic pressure, ethnic mobilization, and republic claims against the Soviet state. These factors most likely would have been sufficient to precipitate the collapse, regardless of what the West did.

Thus, the question of causality and “independent effects” is quite complex. There are two possibilities. First, we need to consider whether Western policies themselves created these more immediate problems. Did Western defense spending force the Soviet economy to compete and thereby cripple it? Did the West’s focus on human rights give impetus to the movements for republic autonomy and (ultimately) independence? Second, if the West did not create these problems, we need to consider whether Western policies exacerbated them. If the pathologies of the Soviet economy lie within the Soviet system itself, did the burden of competing with the West undermine an acceptable equilibrium of economic irrationality created under Josif Stalin? This complex causal relationship, combined with the multitude of immediate causes, means that my conclusions can be plausible, but not definitive.

The third problem in evaluating this question is related to the second: the importance of counterfactuals and the nature of “explaining” a single case. This article has to proceed via counterfactual reasoning: What would have been the case if things had been different? If Western policy had been different, either entirely or in some particular aspects, would the outcome have been different?<sup>1</sup> If the Reagan defense budget had not been implemented, if the Reagan doctrine had not been launched, if the Helsinki process had never been started, if the Bush administration had not held out the potential for economic assistance, and so on—would the Soviet Union have collapsed?

Ideally, of course, one could derive counterfactuals from the real world by studying multiple cases rather than a single case.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes that is not possi-

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1. James D. Fearon, “Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science,” *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (January 1991), pp. 169–195; Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

2. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in*

ble, however. Counterfactual analysis can evaluate causality through careful attention to alternative possibilities. Most importantly, good counterfactual analysis has to be based on information about the plausible alternatives available to those making choices and about the reasons for their choices. If we can show why Soviet officials acted as they did, it allows us to evaluate whether things would have been different in the absence of the policies adopted by the West.

This article is organized into four sections. The first explains Western policy toward the Soviet Union and the debate over the West's role in the demise of the USSR. The second section looks at the immediate or more direct causes of the Soviet collapse and shows how Western policies would or would not have played a role in these factors. The third section evaluates evidence on the specific questions and issues raised in the first two sections. It seeks to determine whether things would have been different if Western policies had been different. The fourth section offers an assessment of the questions posed and returns to the epistemological issues raised in this introduction.

### **Western Policy: The Debate**

In discussing whether Western policies contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union, this article does not engage in the debate about whether the mere presence of the West—as a rival great power—played a role in Soviet decline. Scholars working in the realist tradition have argued that features of the international system—primarily the condition of anarchy and the demands of the balance of power—contributed to the Soviet collapse. The mere existence of the West in a bipolar international system, according to this argument, meant that the Soviet Union had to compete to keep up. Without the defense build-ups under the Carter and Reagan administrations, without the implementation of the so-called Reagan Doctrine (entailing support for anti-Marxist insurgencies in the Third World), and without pressure on human rights via the Helsinki process, the Soviet Union would still have been constrained to compete in defense spending and in search of allies and clients throughout the world. It was this system-induced competition, realist theories tell us, that led to Soviet decline and collapse.<sup>3</sup>

*Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). For a comparative approach to Soviet imperial collapse, see Bruce Parrot and Karen Dawisha, eds., *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

3. William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/1995), pp. 91–129. For a critique of Wohlforth's argument, see Mark Kramer, "Ideology and the Cold War," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1999),

This explanation is flawed in several respects. For one thing, realist scholars did not predict the collapse of the Soviet Union; instead, they believed that the Soviet Union would balance against the United States. For another, systemic explanations cannot explain why the Soviet collapse happened when it did. Bipolarity was a constant from 1945, and the Soviet Union was no less powerful relative to the United States—in a systemic sense—in 1985–1991 than it was through the mid-1960s.

The more pertinent questions can be thought of in two categories.

First, did the West's long-term "negative" policies of containment and isolation of the Soviet Union establish constraints that undermined the Soviet system? Conversely, did the West's "positive" policies of détente, *Ostpolitik*, and the Helsinki process establish opportunities and incentives for Soviet reform? That is, we need to ask not only whether long-term Western policies struck at Soviet economic weakness, but whether they created the incentives for political reform.

Second, did more immediate Western policies (limiting ourselves to the 1980s) affect the constraints and opportunities facing the Soviet leadership, setting it on the path of economic reform, political change, retreat from the Third World and Eastern Europe, and ultimately the unraveling of the modern-day remnant of the Russian empire? Did such things as the increase in U.S. defense spending initiated by Jimmy Carter and vastly increased by Ronald Reagan, U.S. counteractions in the Third World (in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola) under the Reagan Doctrine, the prospect of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) launched by Reagan in 1983, the deployment of intermediate range nuclear forces (INF) in the mid-1980s, the refusal to recognize Soviet jurisdiction over the Baltic states, and the West's insistence on raising issues of human rights within the Soviet Union contribute to the choices made by the Soviet leadership? Did they lead to the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party and to Gorbachev's choices thereafter?

This debate is nicely framed by books published in the mid-1990s by Peter Schweizer and Raymond Garthoff.<sup>4</sup> Schweizer argues that the Soviet collapse was the direct result of Western pressure, in the form of a comprehensive and deliberate plan launched by Reagan and designed and implemented primarily by the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), William

pp. 539–578, esp. 563–573; and Mark Kramer, "Realism, Ideology, and the End of the Cold War," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (January 2001), pp. 119–133.

4. Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994); and Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994).

Casey. According to Schweizer, this comprehensive strategic offensive “attacked the very heart of the Soviet system” by funneling covert support to Solidarity and the Afghan resistance, driving down the price of Soviet oil, fueling fear and indecision within the Soviet leadership, restricting access to Western technology, and straining the Soviet economy through the American high-tech defense buildup.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Schweizer argues that this strategy was completely successful.

The Soviet Union did not collapse by osmosis nor because time was somehow on our side. Had the Kremlin not faced the cumulative effects of SDI and the defense buildup, geopolitical setbacks in Poland and Afghanistan, the loss of tens of billions of dollars in hard currency earnings from energy exports, and reduced access to technology, it is reasonable to believe that it could have weathered the storm. . . . American policies could and did alter the course of Soviet history.<sup>6</sup>

Garthoff reaches very different conclusions. His analysis of the evidence leads him to conclude that the end of the Cold War was the result of changes in Soviet thinking and that the collapse occurred because the system could not be reformed and had to be abandoned. Garthoff writes:

The West did not, as is widely believed, win the Cold War through geopolitical containment and military deterrence. Still less was the Cold War won by the Reagan military buildup and the Reagan Doctrine, as some have suggested. Instead, “victory” came when a new generation of Soviet leaders realized how badly their system at home and their policies abroad had failed. . . .

Gorbachev, to be sure, seriously underestimated the task of changing the Soviet Union, and this led to policy errors that contributed to the failure of his program for the transformation of Soviet society and polity. His vision of a resurrected socialism built on the foundation of successful perestroika and demokratizatsiya was never a realistic possibility. . . . The reasons for Gorbachev’s failure were primarily objective, not subjective; that is, they were real obstacles he was unable to overcome—internal opposition, powerful inertia, intractable problems of economic transformation, and the politically charged problem of redefining a democratic relationship between a traditional imperial center and the rest of the country.<sup>7</sup>

Garthoff’s view is that Gorbachev’s changes in foreign policy and his democratization of the Soviet political system were motivated by genuine conviction and were not simply intended to navigate around constraints. Garthoff notes that elements of the new thinking—nuclear disarmament,

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5. Schweizer, *Victory*, pp. xviii–xix.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 282.

7. Garthoff, *Great Transition*, pp. 753, 755.

mutual security, interdependence, political negotiation and compromise, and the shedding of the Leninist world view of capitalist-socialist opposing interests—were discernible in Gorbachev's policies as early as February 1986. These choices, he argues, were not constrained by Western policies, and therefore the West cannot have contributed to the Soviet collapse. As Garthoff sees it, the West neither caused the end of the Cold War nor led Gorbachev down the path of reform that helped precipitate the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

### **The Contours of Western Policy**

From the mid-1940s through the late 1980s Western policy toward the Soviet Union was essentially one of containment. The policy was based on the assumption that Western and Soviet interests were incompatible and that the Soviet Union, if left unchecked, would expand by direct or indirect means around the globe. Although containment initially was focused on Western Europe (after Eastern Europe fell under Soviet hegemony), it ultimately became a global policy with Western intervention in the Korean War, U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, and the establishment of additional U.S. alliances and security relationships in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Containment was primarily but not solely military. Although based on the deterrent force of American conventional and nuclear military capabilities, containment was also supported by political means (support for anti-Soviet regimes, public diplomacy programs, etc.), and economic instruments (strategic embargoes, export controls, and the exclusion of the USSR from major international economic organizations).<sup>8</sup> Containment, it should be noted, is distinct from the “rollback” policy that several administrations (those of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan) pursued along with containment. Containment is fundamentally reactive and defensive rather than active and aggressive.

One of the architects of containment, George Kennan, who also was a strong early proponent of rollback, had argued not only that containment was necessary for Western security but that it would have the effect of eventually undermining the Soviet Union, which (because of its internally repressive po-

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8. The Soviet Union itself decided not to take part in the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the Marshall Plan. Officially, all of these were open to Soviet participation, although in fact they were designed on the assumption that the Soviet Union would not take part. In contrast, there was no pretense about Soviet exclusion from the most important high-technology trade among leading economies via the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls, which was set up to deny key technologies (especially dual-use items) to the Soviet Union.

litical and economic system) had to expand to survive. In reality, despite the many failings of the Soviet Union, it achieved significant economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, and by the late 1960s it had acquired strategic nuclear forces on a par with those of the United States. The risks that became apparent during the Cuban missile crisis and other confrontations, and the advent of strategic nuclear parity, spurred the United States and the Soviet Union to embark on the path of détente in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although the United States did not abandon containment, it sought improvements in relations with the Soviet Union that might reduce the risks of conflict. Through cooperation in arms control and even in some political and economic matters, détente was meant to reduce the likelihood of war. This marked a notable shift from the height of the Cold War, but it was well short of a comprehensive reconciliation.

By contrast, West Germany's version of détente, *Ostpolitik*, was meant not only to reduce tension and conflict but to change the Soviet Union through a kind of benign subversion by engaging it in relations with the West. This was very much the focus of détente in Europe from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. The most tangible result was the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which in exchange for recognition of the postwar status quo in Europe (a Soviet demand) created a system for encouraging political, economic, and cultural exchange in Europe and established basic principles on human rights.

Although the West and the Soviet Union had agreed to pursue détente and the specific policies and agreements adopted within its framework, they had not agreed on what détente meant. For the West détente was supposed to induce the Soviet Union to cease its expansionist policies and its drive for superiority. For the Soviet leadership, détente signified the West's recognition that it could no longer thwart the natural progression of history (in favor of the Soviet system and influence) through military preponderance and threats. The incompatibility of these views, manifested by stepped-up competition in the Third World and continuing Soviet nuclear and conventional force modernization, ensured that the policy could not be sustained indefinitely.

During the final year of the Carter administration and the first term of the Reagan administration, U.S. policy shifted back to the simpler form of containment. The United States actively opposed Soviet influence in the Third World by imposing bilateral sanctions after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and by supporting groups that opposed Soviet influence and Soviet-backed governments. In addition, the United States sharply increased its defense spending and bolstered its global military presence, as with the deployment of INF in Europe in response to the Soviet deployment of SS-20s. In 1983 Reagan proposed SDI to create a ballistic-missile defense (BMD)

shield in space that would raise doubts about the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty, which had been one of the defining features of détente and a basis for strategic stability and limitation of the arms race. The Reagan administration also stepped up its rhetorical attacks on the Soviet Union, exemplified by the president's characterization of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire."

It would be incorrect, however, to leave the survey of American policies toward the Soviet Union there. By the mid-1980s, mainly for domestic political reasons, Reagan became more open to the possibility of an improvement in relations. The administration's new readiness to improve relations came at a serendipitous moment, coinciding with Gorbachev's accession to the post of General Secretary in March 1985. Summit meetings followed, leading to renewed arms negotiations on the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), discussions on a comprehensive nuclear disarmament treaty at Reykjavik in 1986, the INF Treaty in December 1987 (after a series of concessions by Gorbachev), and the resumption of conventional arms control negotiations. The cooperation expanded during the administration of George H. W. Bush to include negotiations on resolving conflicts in Afghanistan; Angola; Namibia; Nicaragua; and Cambodia; and ultimately, after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, a negotiated agreement on German unification.

Within this atmosphere of cooperation there were important limits to and conditions on Western cooperation. In particular, the United States and the West European countries continued to hold the Soviet Union to the standards set forth in the Helsinki Accords regarding political and human rights. Although Western policy did not (and could not) go so far as to threaten military action for violation of those standards, the development of good relations was conditional on Soviet actions, as U.S. officials frequently emphasized to Gorbachev and his associates. Furthermore, although the way appeared increasingly open for Western economic support and eventual Soviet entrance into the broader international economic system, these prospects were conditional on real economic reform. Western leaders made clear that financial resources would not be granted merely to enable the Soviet Union to avoid painful reform and cover the failings of its own economy.

These Western policies during the second Reagan administration and the administration of George H. W. Bush are important to bear in mind when evaluating whether the West contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. We should not limit ourselves to the causal importance of the hardline policies of the first Reagan administration; we also need to consider whether the more cooperative Western policies created incentives and opportunities that were important in Gorbachev's choices and affected the Soviet collapse. Although this slant on policy has been downplayed in the Western literature, it

was clear in some West European assumptions about relations with the Soviet Union under Gorbachev.<sup>9</sup>

### **Key Factors in the Soviet Collapse**

To understand how the West might have contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union, we need to consider the major factors that led to the collapse. As a security and foreign policy specialist, I long assumed that the most compelling reason both for long-term Soviet economic ills and for Gorbachev's immediate goals was the defense burden. The burden of defense spending on the Soviet economy was indeed great (estimates at the time placed it at about fifteen percent of the Soviet gross national product, and more recent figures have been considerably higher, though the precise level is still uncertain),<sup>10</sup> but studies of the Soviet economy and Gorbachev's intentions and strategies produce a different picture.

The Soviet economy had grown at substantial and, at times, even phenomenal rates through the 1950s, but beginning in the mid- to late 1960s it entered a period of stagnation (hence the common use of that term in the late 1980s as the defining feature of the Brezhnev era).<sup>11</sup> During the 1970s the Soviet economy briefly received a boost from increased export earnings (thanks to a surge of international prices for energy and gold), but by the late 1970s and early 1980s annual growth rates were in the range of two percent.<sup>12</sup> The problems of the Soviet economy were long-term and structural and did not suddenly result from Western policies in the 1980s.

At the same time, defense expenditures were growing at rates higher than even planned (let alone achieved) for growth in national income, rising at least 11 percent in 1979–1984 (while U.S. defense spending grew a total of

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9. For a German view at the time, see Michael Libal, "Reformpolitik und Systemkonkurrenz: Gorbatschows Haltung zum Westen. Ein Versuch," in Jürgen Heideking, Gerhard Hufnagel, and Franz Knipping, eds., *Wege in die Zeitgeschichte: Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Gerhard Schulz* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 497–515.

10. Gorbachev cites this higher figure in his memoirs. He writes: "of course we understood how heavily military expenditures weighed on our economy. But only when I became general secretary did I see the real scope of the militarization of the country. . . . It turned out, that military expenditures stood at not 16, but 40 (!) percent of the state budget, and its production not 6 but 20 percent of gross national product. Of 25 billion rubles of total expenditures for science, around 20 billion went to military-technical research and development." Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), Vol. 1, p. 334; parenthetical insertion in the original.

11. Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, "Overview," in Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Disintegration of the Soviet Economic System* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 8.

12. Kirsten Lundberg, "CIA and the Fall of the Soviet Empire: The Politics of 'Getting it Right,'" Kennedy School Case Program, C16–94–1251.0 (Cambridge, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1994), p. 9.

36 percent during the same period).<sup>13</sup> However, the picture is murkier than this figure would imply. Soviet defense spending slowed its growth in the mid-1970s and appeared to be leveling off by the early 1980s. The 1950s and especially the 1960s had been a period of substantial growth in the development and procurement of conventional and nuclear forces, and these investments led to further Soviet deployments in the 1970s. Lead times in Soviet planning, spending, and deployment of major weapons were substantial, from ten to fifteen years. Hence, much of the Soviet buildup of the 1970s was the result of decisions taken and resources allocated some time earlier.<sup>14</sup> By 1983 the CIA estimated that growth in Soviet defense spending had leveled off at around 2 percent a year.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, by the time Gorbachev came to power, Soviet military spending had been growing at only a relatively slow pace for some time, despite the sharp increases in U.S. defense budgets. The Soviet military establishment was “restive after a decade of spending restraint and what it perceived to be both quantitative and qualitative military challenges from the West.”<sup>16</sup> Even if Soviet military expenditures had been rising more rapidly to keep pace with U.S. advances, this would not necessarily have been relevant to the period when Gorbachev was in power. U.S. defense spending was actually declining in real terms from 1985 on, the very time when Gorbachev was Soviet leader. Western defense spending and the challenges it posed played a role in, but were not a direct cause of, the Soviet collapse.

Even if Western pressure inspired high Soviet defense spending, the military burden was not responsible for the slowdown of economic growth. If military spending had been the chief culprit, the freeing of resources tied up in defense spending could have spurred growth. This question turns on how productive Soviet investments were, and the answer to that question is clear: Extremely low factor productivity was the greatest defect in the Soviet economy from the 1970s, and it worsened in the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> This means that even if defense spending had been lower, the freed resources would not have contrib-

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13. Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, Vol. 1, p. 319; James Noren and Laurie Kurzweg, “The Soviet Economy Unravels: 1985–91,” in Richard F. Kaufman and John P. Hardt, eds., *The Former Soviet Union in Transition* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 20.

14. Michael K. McGwire, *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987).

15. Lundberg, “CIA and the Fall of the Soviet Empire,” p. 11, citing CIA sources.

16. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, Office of Soviet Analysis, “Soviet National Security Policy: Responses to the Changing Military and Economic Environment,” Intelligence Assessment SOV 88-10040CX, unpublished, June 1988, p. 12, stored in CIA collections of Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, Harvard University.

17. Gertrude Schroeder, “The Soviet Economy and the Fate of the USSR,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 2004), forthcoming.

uted much to broader economic growth. The implication is that, at least in the short to medium term, major reductions in military spending would not have helped the Soviet economy much. An econometric simulation shows that even if military spending had been frozen in 1980, the growth of the Soviet economy would have been only about 0.1 percent greater.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, there is little evidence that the Reagan administration's military buildup forced the Soviet Union to gear up its defense spending and that this extra defense spending in turn produced an economic crisis. As with the rest of the economy, the defense burden was a perennial problem and was not caused by Western policies. Western policies were cited by officials who wanted to spend more, but those policies did not determine the actual level of spending.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, despite the relatively heavy burden of defense spending in a floundering economy, the problem was not the misallocation of resources to defense per se but the Soviet economic system itself. The Soviet economy produced goods that no one other than the military wanted. Its agricultural system could not turn out enough food to feed the Soviet population, despite areas of rich agricultural land. For example, in Ukraine, the site of the richest farmland in the former Soviet Union, collective farms could not produce sufficient grain to feed Ukraine's own population. All this was due to the Soviet system of state-controlled agricultural management. The story was the same throughout the Soviet economy. The system itself was deeply flawed.

Furthermore, the economic system prevented the implementation of reforms. State control of the economy and party control of the state created a system of incentives that worked against efficiency and growth.<sup>20</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, the Soviet leadership tried a series of reforms, all of which failed. These measures did no more than make incremental changes around the edges of the system. The most dramatic change was détente, itself a policy of economic reform in the sense of seeking to improve Soviet economic conditions by increasing Soviet access to Western goods and technology.<sup>21</sup>

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18. Daniel Bond and Herbert Levine, "An Overview," in Abram Bergson and Herbert Levine, eds., *The Soviet Economy: Toward the Year 2000* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 1–33.

19. Celeste A. Wallander, "Opportunity, Incrementalism, and Learning in the Extension and Retraction of Soviet Global Commitments," *Security Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1992), pp. 514–542.

20. Timothy Colton, *The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1986); and Peter Rutland, *The Politics of Economic Stagnation in the Soviet Union: The Role of Local Party Organs in Economic Management* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

21. Thane Gustafson, *Crisis amid Plenty: The Politics of Soviet Energy under Brezhnev and Gorbachev* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Bruce Parrott, *Politics and Technology in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

In this respect the Soviet economy was verging on a crisis. But it is important to recognize that the crisis was one of comparative standing in the world not one of absolute performance. Although Soviet economic performance was not impressive, the economy nonetheless was growing and capable of producing at sufficient levels. As one retrospective analysis concludes:

Some have argued that the Soviet economy already was in decline as it entered the 1980s. Judged by its ability to produce goods and services, this was not the case. It was, however a failing economy in the sense that it had increasing difficulty in producing the assortment of goods and services desired by the population and that a rising proportion of increments to total production were accounted for by additions to the labor force and the capital stock rather than by gains in the productivity of labor and capital. Nonetheless the popular description of the economy as in a state of collapse cannot be supported from the statistics on production.<sup>22</sup>

The economy was troubled and chronically inefficient, but it was not in danger of grinding to a halt. The problem was that the status quo would leave the Soviet Union behind as other economies were deriving their growth from technological advances and increased rates of productivity from labor and capital inputs—the essence of “intensive” rather than “extensive” development. With flattening growth rates, the level of the Soviet Union’s national income—already half that of the United States—would fall further and further behind.<sup>23</sup> Although the Soviet defense economy did better than the civilian economy because of special management arrangements, extra commitments of resources, and special procurement rules, this model could not be extended to the rest of the economy. Furthermore, although the Soviet defense industries did a lot with little and often matched Western achievements through their own innovations, ultimately the Soviet defense economy would be constrained by the slowdown of the civilian economy.

Thus, although the defense burden is an important part of the story insofar as it weighed on an already troubled economy, a reduced defense burden alone could not have turned the economy around. In principle a reduced defense burden would have allowed for more allocation of resources to capital investment and consumption, but it would not have addressed the fundamental flaws in the Soviet economy, which lay in state control and management—the political institutions of the economy.

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22. Noren and Kurzweg, “Soviet Economy Unravels,” p. 23. See also Ellman and Kontorovich, “Overview,” p. 13.

23. For a more extensive analysis of this point, see Joseph S. Berliner, “The Longest Transition,” paper prepared for the “Conference on Pathways to Democracy,” John Tower Center for Political Studies, Southern Methodist University, 4–5 April 1997.

Nevertheless, a reduced defense burden might have allowed for resource reallocation and thereby eased the pressure for substantial reform that resulted in the Soviet leadership's choice of Gorbachev as General Secretary. In view of our question about the West's contribution to Soviet decline, then, we need to know (1) whether Gorbachev's path toward reform was forced by an inability to reallocate defense spending or would have proceeded even if he could have reduced defense spending; and (2) whether Gorbachev's inability to cut defense spending early in his reform program was due to Western spending and contributed to the failure of his program, hastening the Soviet collapse. To answer this, we need to understand Gorbachev's economic reform program. The first stage of his policies, from 1985 to 1987, sought reform in two areas: squeezing more out of workers and management, and investment in the industrial base. Squeezing more out of management and labor amounted to the policy of *"uskorenie"* (acceleration) and attacking alcohol consumption. Although industrial production improved in 1986–1988, the initial policy direction sowed the seeds of economic failure. The cut in alcohol sales led to lower government tax revenues. Since government spending did not decrease, the central budget deficit grew and was covered by an increase in the money supply, without a commensurate increase in national income. The result was inflation, in the form of shortages and longer lines. The decline in consumer conditions was exacerbated by limits on spending and production in the consumer sector of the economy. Because defense had not been cut and industrial investment increased, consumption had to fall. But this contradicted the attempt to get better productivity from workers, as was noted in CIA analyses at the time.<sup>24</sup>

Gorbachev had not entirely neglected the structural aspects of reform. From the beginning, he had addressed as well the system of management. He introduced measures to reduce and decentralize the bureaucracy, to increase enterprise autonomy, and to allow limited private enterprise, notably in the form of cooperatives.<sup>25</sup> But these were attempts to shift and sharpen the system, not to do away with it. Without far-reaching reform of the system of state and party control of the economy, these incremental changes were thwarted or simply ignored.

Hence, the crisis of survival of the Soviet economy by the late 1980s was, it is generally agreed, a crisis of Gorbachev's own making. Even if Gorbachev had not been around, the Soviet economy might not have been able to survive

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24. Lundberg, "CIA and the Fall of the Soviet Empire," p. 9.

25. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, Office of Soviet Analysis, "Gorbachev: Steering the USSR into the 1990s," Intelligence Assessment SOV 87-10036CX, unpublished, July 1987, pp. 4–8, stored in CIA collections of Harvard Project of Cold War Studies, Harvard University.

over the long term, but it certainly could have gone on for longer than it did.<sup>26</sup> The crisis of the Soviet economy that became increasingly apparent in the late 1980s was not directly caused by the heavy Soviet defense burden. Any Western policy contribution to the crisis was therefore extremely indirect.

Gorbachev's attempts at reform were inspired by his belief that the Soviet Union could be a vibrant and growing economy. Along with this came the prospect that greater industrial production and technological advances would facilitate increases in Soviet defense expenditures and the quality of weapons procured by Soviet forces. In this regard, the West played a role through the growth of its own economic and technological strength—the standard against which Soviet performance was measured. But this was not in itself a matter of Western policy; the mere existence of the West was what mattered. Even without the American defense buildup of the early 1980s, the Soviet economy needed real reform.

After initial tinkering with the economy produced meager results, Gorbachev changed course by emphasizing the need for revisions of Soviet military doctrine and reductions in military forces. Up to that point the Soviet military had supported the basic lines of economic reform because the defense sector would presumably benefit from a general increase in productivity. But by 1988 two problems could not be avoided. First was the government budget crisis. Something was going to have to be cut, and it could be neither industrial investment nor consumption. Reform, Gorbachev believed, required cuts in defense spending and military forces—a development that ran against the initial expectations of Soviet commanders.

Second was the problem that in 1988 the Soviet military was going to have to begin planning for the next generation of weapons.<sup>27</sup> It was at this point that the debate on “reasonable sufficiency” and “defensive defense” sharpened. Military analysts had accepted these concepts, but in practice their analyses implied a balance of military forces at still high levels and a doctrine still based on offensive operations. Civilian analysts began to argue that sufficiency and defensive orientation meant not only that lower levels of arms were possible, but that a strict balance with the United States did not need to be maintained for defense and security.<sup>28</sup>

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26. Noren and Kurzweg, “Soviet Economy Unravels”; and Russell Bova, “The Soviet Economy and International Politics,” in Ellman and Kontorovich, eds., *The Disintegration of the Soviet Economic System*, p. 47.

27. Lundberg, “CIA and the Fall of the Soviet Empire,” p. 10, citing CIA sources.

28. Vitalii Zhurkin, Sergei Karaganov, and Andrei Kortunov, “Vyzovy bezopasnosti—starye i novye,” *Kommunist* (Moscow), No. 1 (January 1988), pp. 42–50; and Andrei Kokoshin and Valentin Larionov, *Predotvraschenie voyny: Doktriny, kontseptsii, perspektivy* (Moscow: Progress, 1990).

The implications of this debate were extremely important. If the “balance” view held, arms reductions and limitations could be compatible with security, but only if restraint and reductions were mutual. If the “sufficiency” arguments won out, restraint and reductions through negotiations might be preferable, but they were hardly necessary, and unilateral reductions and restraints should be pursued even if the United States proved immovable.

As Coit Blacker writes:

The visible unraveling of the Soviet political and economic system between 1987 and 1990 made all the more urgent Gorbachev’s public, if equivocal, commitment to the reform of Soviet military doctrine and the restructuring of the country’s armed forces. Only by freeing up and reallocating significant additional resources, such as those devoted to the maintenance of the military, might the leadership be able to arrest the dramatic deterioration in economic conditions and thus begin to stabilize the political environment. While the option of downsizing the Soviet military in order to improve the prospects for economic reform had been available to Gorbachev since 1985, by the Soviet leader’s third year in power the merely attractive had become imperative. The issue, as always, was how to reduce military spending on a major scale, while also safeguarding the country’s security.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, it is not quite correct to hold that cutting the defense burden was crucial to Soviet reform, or that the obstacles to such cuts (including the internal obstacles of conservative and military opposition and the external constraints of stringent American terms for arms control) were central to the Soviet decline. The priority that Gorbachev gave to the prospect of defense spending reductions, disarmament, and arms control in his final few years was a product of his failed policies of 1985–1988 and the capacity of the Soviet political and economic system to resist changes that threatened the privileged.

It is clear that the prominence of “new thinking” on foreign policy and security in Soviet politics at this time was due to the need for a rationale to cut the Soviet military, perhaps even unilaterally or on terms that were more favorable to U.S. interests than Gorbachev’s more conservative compatriots would have liked. But it is not at all clear that new thinking was purely tactical and not genuinely accepted by Gorbachev and his supporters.

In this regard, it is important to remember that the Soviet retreat from Eastern Europe and eventual Soviet acceptance of German unification within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union by increasing conservative and military discontent with

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29. Coit D. Blacker, *Hostage to Revolution: Gorbachev and Soviet Security Policy, 1985–1991* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993), pp. 194–195.

the path on which Gorbachev's policies were taking the Soviet Union.<sup>30</sup> Although Gorbachev did not explicitly disavow the "Brezhnev Doctrine" (which justified Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968) until December 1989, repudiation of that doctrine was implicit in Gorbachev's statements on mutual security and a common European home and in the public abandonment of the "Lenin Doctrine" of capitalist-socialist enmity in the summer of 1987. More to the point, Gorbachev began stressing the need for reform in the East European countries, hinting that the Soviet Union was not eager to prop up regimes that could not survive on their own terms and that did not meet the needs of their countries.<sup>31</sup> In particular, as early as 1986 he implemented changes in intra-bloc trade procedures and encouraged experiments with reform. Although, as became clear in 1989, Gorbachev severely overestimated the durability of the Soviet-bloc countries without Soviet military backing, his decision to "restructure" relations among the socialist countries was not merely a response to the failure of the first stage of domestic reforms; nor was it derivative of any need to appease the West. The public pronouncements of 1988 and 1989 that swept away the justifications for Soviet military intervention stemmed from a policy course that had begun at least a couple of years before. The processes thus set in motion—particularly in Poland and Hungary and culminating in the collapse of the East German system in October–November 1989—contributed to the disintegration of the Soviet Union by increasing domestic conservative discontent with Gorbachev's trajectory.

Another change in Gorbachev's strategy in 1988 was the growing salience of political reform, which inadvertently accelerated the Soviet Union's decline. Confronted by resistance within the Communist Party and the government, Gorbachev began to rely on glasnost and democratization to dislodge entrenched opposition. At a Central Committee plenum in January 1987, Gorbachev proposed multicandidate elections for certain posts. At the 19th Party Conference in July 1988, he pushed through a system of partially free elections for a Congress of People's Deputies. The elections were held in March 1989, and despite rules that still favored the party, many Communist candidates were defeated and independent political figures, including Boris Yeltsin, were elected.

Although the new arrangement helped Gorbachev develop an alternative base of support, it also allowed for the airing of discontent and opposition to

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30. See Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 2004), forthcoming.

31. Gorbachev's discussion of these policies is found in Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, Vol. 2, pt. 4 ("Perestroika i sotsialisticheskiye strany"). Gorbachev clearly favored the more reform-minded leaders, such as János Kádár, and the more flexible ones, such as Wojciech Jaruzelski, and could barely hide his annoyance with the stubborn Erich Honecker.

Gorbachev. The complaints took three important forms: discontent with the worsening economic situation, resistance to the undemocratic political structures that were still in place, and demands by ethnic groups for autonomy and independence. Economic conditions were genuinely worse in 1990 and 1991, when the economy declined by 2.4 percent and 8.5 percent, respectively.<sup>32</sup> Economic decline combined with greater political freedom was a volatile combination, and it proved fatal. Perhaps if economic success had consolidated social support for Gorbachev against the old system, his fate would have been different. Instead, the new social demands for more radical reform made conservative forces all the more wary of reform.

Although much has been made of Yeltsin's resentment for his sacking and humiliation in October 1987 and of his use of partial democracy to make a comeback, he was just one of a broader movement of "reformers" and "democrats" who refused to embrace Gorbachev's strategy for incremental moves against the party and state establishment. Increasingly, what Gorbachev had hoped would be a loyal pro-reform democratic base of support turned its complaints (using the new political rules of openness and dissent) against Gorbachev's more moderate pace of reform.

At the same time that Gorbachev was being criticized by those he had hoped to mobilize against the old order, he had to cope with demands for republic autonomy and even independence. The signs of discontent had been clear, with riots in Kazakhstan in December 1986 and violence in Nagorno-Karabakh beginning in early 1988, but glasnost and democratization changed the game from one of protest and unfocused discontent to one of legitimate political participation and demands. By 1989, protests in the Baltic republics were being voiced not only by nationalist groups but also from within the political establishment by both party and state officials. By 1990, Gorbachev was increasingly confronted by demands for autonomy and independence from the union republics. These demands and Gorbachev's belated attempts to address them through a reconfigured Union treaty in the summer of 1991 precipitated the coup attempt in August 1991 that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union four months later.

### **Questions to Be Answered**

The extent to which Western policies contributed to the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union thus centers on a number of crucial points. For each of

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32. Noren and Kurtzweg, "Soviet Economy Unravels," p. 14.

these points, I will first indicate the relevant questions and then explain what the evidence shows.

## **Defense and Arms Control**

### **Question 1**

Was Gorbachev's path of economic reform in 1985–1986 forced by the inability to reallocate defense spending, or would it have proceeded in that manner even if he could have reduced defense spending?

There is little evidence that the path of reform chosen by Gorbachev was forced on him by Western policies. Even though Gorbachev may genuinely have believed that “we cannot go on living like this,” he initially sought to tinker with the Soviet economy and did not seek to cut defense spending. Indeed, the evidence is that in the beginning Soviet economic plans under Gorbachev provided for defense spending to rise even faster than consumption or investment.<sup>33</sup> This was clear not only in actual policies chosen and in public discussions but in private discussions among the highest officials. The transcript of an early Politburo meeting on the subject of planned reforms shows no indication that military cuts were deemed integral to the plans. Instead, Gorbachev merely spoke, as he did in public at the time, in terms of “*uskorenie*.”<sup>34</sup>

Strategic nuclear cuts were, nevertheless, a relatively early and, it would appear, genuinely held priority. The outlines of Gorbachev's strategic nuclear policies were clear in the proposals he advanced at the Reykjavik summit with Reagan in October 1986, and they did not change in any major way throughout his tenure (although the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty of July 1991 ultimately codified a series of compromises and fallbacks).<sup>35</sup> The Soviet leader pressed for drastic, 50 percent cuts in strategic nuclear arms with the stated goal of complete nuclear disarmament and the prevention of SDI. The sticking point in strategic nuclear arms negotiations was not the end goals per se, but how the American side under Reagan and Bush and the Soviet side under

33. Ed A. Hewett, “Gorbachev's Economic Strategy: A Preliminary Assessment,” in Ed A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston, eds., *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika: The Economy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1991), p. 10.

34. “Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS, 29 avgusta 1985 goda, rabochaya zapis’,” 29 August 1985 (Top Secret), in Rossiiskii Gosudarstrennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii, Fond (F.) 89, Opis’ (Op.) 36, Delo (D.)\_ 17, Listy (Ll.) 1–4.

35. I cannot recount the history of American-Soviet arms control here. For a detailed summary of these policies and the bilateral negotiations, see Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994).

Gorbachev sought to tie together the many facets of nuclear arms and deterrence in ways that would cut the other side's areas of advantage.

There is no evidence that drastic cuts in defense based on negotiated arms control or disarmament agreements were a necessary condition for Gorbachev's economic reforms. At least through 1987, the cuts obviously were not a precondition for reform at home, which was implemented even as military spending was still increasing. The first summit between Reagan and Gorbachev, in Geneva in November 1985, occurred eight months into Gorbachev's tenure, and the summit in Reykjavik did not come until nearly a year later, well after the initial reform policies had been implemented. Hence, the detailed arms reduction plan that Gorbachev presented in Reykjavik was not a prerequisite for his reforms at home.

Indeed, although the proposals at Reykjavik may have been dramatic, they were worked out by the entire Soviet leadership, which was still generally of a conservative bent. Gorbachev's subsequent directives clearly match up with Soviet proposals during the negotiations: a proposed 50 percent cut in strategic nuclear arms, including the Soviet SS-18s; the elimination of all Soviet and American INF, including Soviet missiles based east of the Urals, but without any link to French and British arms; a reduction of the proposed period of non-withdrawal from the ABM treaty from fifteen years to ten; and an offer to permit BMD research in laboratories to continue.<sup>36</sup>

Although Gorbachev's willingness to seek accords was doubted by the Reagan administration in 1985 and 1986, the evidence shows that this effort was genuine. The question is whether it was a position born of desperation by a Soviet leadership driven to competition in arms by U.S. policies, or a principled stand based, as Gorbachev claims, on the shift in Soviet foreign policy from confrontation to a policy based on mutual interests in avoiding a nuclear war—a war that, as agreed by Reagan and Gorbachev in Geneva in 1985, “cannot be won and must never be fought.”

In his memoirs, Gorbachev does not provide a straightforward statement that arms control was a necessary tactic for economic reform. But he does write:

It is hardly necessary to show, that perestroika, the fundamental reform in the economic and political system, would have been impossible without the accompanying changes in foreign policy and the promotion of favorable international conditions. From the beginning we had to at least clear away the snow drifts of

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36. For the Politburo directives, see A. S. Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym* (Moscow: Progress Press, 1993), pp. 110–111. For Gorbachev's presentation of the Soviet proposals, see “Iz arkhiva Gorbacheva (Besedy M. S. Gorbacheva s R. Reiganom v Reikyavike 11–12 oktyabrya 1986 g.),” *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* (Moscow), No. 4 (April 1993), pp. 83–85.

the “Cold War,” and to lessen the problem of our involvement in conflicts all over the world and our participation in the debilitating arms race. We had to understand that, in the international area, as inside our country, “it [was] impossible to continue to live like this.”<sup>37</sup>

Gorbachev argues that he had neither a sudden awareness of this connection nor a complete plan “in my briefcase” upon taking office. But, he writes, the main idea and directions were clear to him from the start.

Gorbachev’s foreign policy aide Anatolii Chernyaev, who attended and took notes at most Politburo meetings, offers a somewhat stronger sense that cuts in the nuclear arms race, and prevention of an arms race in space, were important in economic terms. Writing about the discussions in the Politburo before the Reykjavik summit, he contends that Gorbachev wanted to rein in the arms race by offering a radical arms-reduction proposal and other compromises to Reagan. “If we do not accomplish this,” Gorbachev said, “the danger to us will increase.” Gorbachev warned that it would be undesirable to be dragged further into an arms race because “this race already limits our possibilities.” Therefore, Chernyaev writes, the Politburo agreed that Soviet arms control proposals should have the goal of preventing a new stage of the arms race.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, in none of the discussions at Reykjavik did the Soviet side sound desperate for arms cuts for the sake of reducing the defense burden. Gorbachev’s increasingly annoyed and impatient complaints about SDI were based on the irrationality of jettisoning the ABM treaty in the face of huge cuts in strategic arms and the risks of extending the arms race to space. At the end of the final session of talks, the main sticking point became the difference between the Soviet proposal that research be restricted to the laboratory and Reagan’s insistence that it not be so limited. Reagan told Gorbachev that it was unrealistic to expect experts and researchers to be unduly limited in their work. At that point Gorbachev gave vent to his frustration:

And you understand me. The question of laboratory (research) is not a subject to be brushed aside out of thickheadedness; it is entirely serious. We will agree to deep cuts and the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. But the American side pushes us to allocate to it the right to create arms in space. For us that is unacceptable. If you agree to limiting research work to laboratories, without extension to space, then I am ready in two minutes to sign a comprehensive formulation and to accept the document.<sup>39</sup>

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37. Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, Vol. 2, p. 7.

38. Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*, pp. 112–113.

39. “Iz arkhiva Gorbacheva (Besedy M. S. Gorbacheva s R. Reiganom v Reikyavike 11–12

There is no doubt that Gorbachev was bitterly disappointed with the failure to agree and that the Soviet side had been ready to sign an agreement if the SDI issue could have been resolved. (It is important to note that Marshal Sergei Akhromeev, then the chief of the Soviet General Staff, was a member of the Soviet delegation and took an active part in the negotiations and movement toward compromise.) Nonetheless, although Gorbachev's comments at a Politburo meeting after the failure at Reykjavik reveal disappointment with Reagan's position, they certainly do not indicate that the failure doomed perestroika or Gorbachev's plans. Immediately after the failed summit, the United States announced the expulsion of a number of Soviet diplomats for spying, and this topic featured prominently at a Soviet Politburo meeting on 22 October 1986. Gorbachev, calling the U.S. government "bandits" and Reagan a "liar," observed that the recent events showed that the U.S. administration did not have a constructive program in place and sought the opportunity to tarnish diplomatic relations. He spoke of the need for "propaganda" to counter American actions and statements but then explained that this "propaganda" would clarify the Soviet position at Reykjavik for the American public and the world community.<sup>40</sup> Although these statements do not necessarily mean that Gorbachev's proposals were not meant to lighten the defense burden, they are indirect evidence that Gorbachev and his colleagues did not view the failure of those proposals as a crucial setback. Even Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who was one of the most conciliatory members of the Soviet delegation, expressed disgust with American policies.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, after Reykjavik, Gorbachev viewed the summit as a breakthrough in thinking insofar as it had opened the possibility for drastic cuts in arms. He repeated this claim often, and it was a primary theme of his meeting with George Shultz in October 1987, when the last push for a treaty on INF was nearly ready and the potential for an agreement on a 50-percent reduction in strategic arms was on the table. SDI was still the most important sticking point, and Gorbachev sought, without success, to ensure that the United States would abide by a restrictive interpretation of the ABM treaty (an interpretation that was in effect until the Reagan administration unilaterally altered it in 1983). Apparently counting on leverage with Reagan on the grounds that the U.S. president wanted to conclude an agreement on reducing nuclear arms before leaving office, Gorbachev emphasized that he wanted

oktyabrya 1986 g.)," *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* (Moscow), No. 8 (August 1993), p. 76.

40. "Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS, 22 oktyabrya 1986 goda: Rabochaya zapis'," 22 October 1986 (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 36, D. 21, Ll. 1–5.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

to conclude an agreement with the Reagan administration and that this was entirely possible, if only there could be an agreement to hold to a strict interpretation of the ABM treaty for ten years.<sup>42</sup>

The U.S. refusal to back down on SDI not only threatened Gorbachev's hopes for defense cuts and arms control agreements but also began to endanger Gorbachev's political standing. His opposition to SDI was so public, and the political capital he had invested in his stance was so great that a failure to obtain any movement would make him appear ineffective. At the October 1987 meeting with Shultz, Gorbachev made this surprisingly clear, at one point telling Shultz that the collective nature of the Soviet leadership would complicate the General Secretary's position if he emerged with nothing to show for his efforts.<sup>43</sup> Gorbachev cited the political importance of a summit meeting when he urged American movement on the SDI question and noted that it would be politically impossible for him to come to Washington for a summit without evidence of some progress on the outstanding issues. At one point a senior CPSU official, Anatolii Dobrynin (who had been a longtime Soviet ambassador to the United States), even intervened and pointed out (as if to reinforce Gorbachev's point about the constraints on the General Secretary) that it was clear in public discussions that the central goal was a strategic arms reduction treaty. Dobrynin noted that great expectations were placed on the proposed treaty, but that given the link to an agreement on the militarization of space (via SDI), a summit meeting in Washington would be impossible without evidence of progress. Dobrynin warned that a meeting in Washington, with all the expectations surrounding it, would be a "catastrophe" if it happened without clear progress.<sup>44</sup>

These statements were mainly a bargaining ploy—three days after the meeting with Shultz, Gorbachev sent Shevardnadze to Washington with an agreement to meet in Washington for a summit in December 1987 to sign the INF Treaty—but it is clear that some Soviet officials were disconcerted by Gorbachev's failure to move the United States to a compromise, and viewed the signing of the INF Treaty as an inadequate reason for a summit.

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42. "Iz arkhiva Gorbacheva (Besedy M. S. Gorbacheva s gosudarstvennym sekretarem SShA Dzh. Shultsem 23 oktyabrya 1987 g.)," *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* (Moscow), No. 10 (October 1993), pp. 69–81, esp. 77–78; and "Iz arkhiva Gorbacheva (Besedy M. S. Gorbachev s gosudarstvennym sekretarem SShA Dzh. Shultsem 23 oktyabrya 1987 g.)," *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* (Moscow), No. 11 (November 1993), pp. 73–84.

43. "Iz arkhiva Gorbacheva (Besedy M.S. Gorbacheva s gosudarstvennym sekretarem SShA Dzh. Shultsem 23 oktyabrya 1987 g.)," *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* (Moscow), No. 11 (November 1993), p. 80.

44. *Ibid.*, 82–83.

## Question 2

When the failures of the early reform approach became clear by 1988, did Gorbachev's inability to reach immediate deals on arms control agreements with the United States (aside from the INF Treaty) prevent him from being able to cut defense spending and to shift defense allocations in time to reinvigorate the economy?

Although Western policies did not force reforms on Gorbachev in 1985–1987 by preventing cuts in defense, they could have contributed in a different sense by denying Gorbachev the economic latitude he needed once the mistakes of the first round of reforms had become clear by late 1987. According to this argument, Gorbachev originally believed that he could achieve faster economic growth and innovation through his incremental changes, but by 1987–1988 it was clear that drastic measures would have to be taken. The most drastic of these—a measure needed to increase industrial investment and domestic consumption—would be to slash defense spending. But the West, the argument goes, continued to bargain hard and held firm on SDI, thus denying Gorbachev the opportunity to cut defense spending while there was still time to correct the course of economic reform. This in turn doomed the country's economy and Gorbachev's political chances.

It is certainly true that arms control was crucial to Gorbachev's ability to cut Soviet defense spending, because of the central role that parity and the "balance of power" played in Soviet military thinking. From the Soviet perspective U.S. policies were important insofar as reductions in nuclear arms could be made only if they were mutual and based on at least some sense of parity. Despite the ideas of "reasonable defense" and "sufficiency," there was never any indication that Soviet officials would be willing to accept highly asymmetrical cuts of strategic forces. Parity and a rough balance of nuclear forces lay at the heart of Soviet security thinking, and despite the political achievements of new thinking, this was something that Gorbachev could not abandon.

The emphasis on U.S.-Soviet nuclear parity is clear in documents on the reason for the original arms control treaties in the 1970s.<sup>45</sup> It is also clear in the great success story of Soviet-U.S. disarmament negotiations, the INF Treaty of 1987, which eliminated an entire class of nuclear missiles, but only on the basis of strict bilateral parity (at zero). It is equally apparent in Soviet negotiating instructions from as late as 1990, when the Soviet Union had already been forced to make several important concessions in the strategic arms

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45. "Kak nachinalis' peregovory ob ogranichenii strategicheskikh vooruzhenii s administratsiei Dzh. Kartera," *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn'*, (Moscow), No. 11 (November 1994), pp. 127–144.

negotiations (including negotiating over the terms of how SDI would be conducted, rather than being able to insist that it not be conducted). On questions of strategic arms control, conventional arms control, and, most important, the connection between German unification and NATO, Soviet Politburo guidelines adopted for May 1990 discussions with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker repeatedly use the phrases “balance of power,” “balance of forces,” and “strategic stability.”<sup>46</sup> A deal with the United States was crucial because reductions could not proceed unless they were in accordance with perceived military balances. Given Gorbachev’s stated beliefs about the nature of security and the military dimension of it, his reservations about unilateral nuclear reductions were not “objective” but political: Gorbachev was constrained by what the collective ethos would allow him and by what the United States would give him. The negotiating guidelines reveal not a Soviet leadership desperate for agreement at any price but one stubbornly continuing to bargain and negotiate on the details (one might say arcana) of nuclear arms, including verification of sea-based cruise missiles, the range and capabilities of Backfires bombers, and the procedures for taking account of American advantages in heavy bombers.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, even though Washington’s refusal to back down on SDI and other differences on issues of strategic arms delayed a START agreement until July 1991, this did not prevent Soviet defense spending cuts. Overall spending did not start going down until 1990, but defense procurement was cut by 29 percent from 1988 to 1991, and spending on military research and development was cut by 22 percent.<sup>48</sup> Although Gorbachev could not cut strategic arms unilaterally, he did cut conventional arms unilaterally in a dramatic and substantial manner. In his speech at the December 1988 United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York, Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union would cut a total of 500,000 troops, including six tank divisions based in Eastern Europe that together numbered 50,000 troops and 5,300 tanks.<sup>49</sup>

46. “O direktivakh dlya peregovorov s Gosudarstvennym sekretarem SShA Dzh. Beikerom v Moskve 16–19 maya 1990 g.,” Vypiska iz protokola no. 187 zasedaniya Politbyuro TsK KPSS, 16 May 1990, (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 10, D. 61, Ll. 1–7, esp. L. 5; “Direktivy dlya peregovorov s Gosudarstvennym sekretarem SShA Dzh. Beikerom 16–19 maya 1990 g.,” in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 10, D. 61, Ll. 8–51, esp. Ll. 10, 33; and “Ukazaniya dlya besedy ministra inostrannykh del SSSR s Prezidentom SShA Dzh. Bushem (Vashington. 6 aprelya 1990 goda),” in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 9, D. 100, Ll. 8–10, esp. L. 9.

47. To each of the general “*direktivy*” and “*ukazaniya*” were appended not only detailed points on arms proposals but also fallbacks in the form of “if Baker reacts negatively.”

48. Julian Cooper, *The Conversion of the Former Soviet Defence Industry* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1993), p. 4.

49. Garthoff, *Great Transition*, p. 366.

The Soviet Politburo discussed the unilateral military reduction in a meeting on 27–28 December 1988.<sup>50</sup> Gorbachev apparently had not received explicit Politburo approval in advance for the speech he delivered, and he felt the need to explain his rationale. His comments garnered wide support but were met with the evident displeasure of Egor Ligachev, a Politburo member who had gained a reputation as being wary of radical changes. On the other hand, the participation of Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov in the Politburo meeting showed that the professional military was willing to stand behind the reductions that Gorbachev announced.

Gorbachev opened his presentation by arguing that his speech pointed in the right direction. The Soviet Union, he argued, should no longer always wait for negotiations but should, if necessary, unilaterally do what was in its best interests:

Some say that by doing so we are giving away what should be given only in negotiations, but this is incorrect. Conservative circles in the United States do not want to disarm the fundamental nature of the Cold War, but if we want to build something new we have to do so, and this policy does it in deeds. This policy proves that new thinking is not merely words: our policy is open, and the Soviet Union needs to prove that its policy is as it says. Negotiations and pretty words have not gotten rid of a single tank. Our policy moves us to our own goals and demonstrates to the global community the reality of what we say.<sup>51</sup>

After defending the policy in terms of self-interest, taking the initiative, and undercutting American conservatives, Gorbachev noted that the Defense Ministry had already decided to reduce forces by 500,000 and had even discussed the possibility of cutting 600,000. Gorbachev then called upon Yazov to corroborate this. The defense minister confirmed the numbers, though he mentioned that only 65,000 rather than 100,000 additional troop cuts were under consideration. Yazov subsequently referred to meetings in the Ministry of Defense on 9 November that worked out plans for withdrawing forces from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. He mentioned the withdrawal of a tank division from East Germany and three divisions overall from Eastern Europe in the coming year, with another three the following year. He also claimed that in discussions following Gorbachev's speech at the United Nations (UN) no dissenting views were expressed, adding: "I think we are ready to report our plan to carry out the proposal enunciated at the UN."<sup>52</sup>

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50. "Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS 27–28 dekabrya 1988 goda: O prakticheskoi realizatsii i prakticheskom obespechenii itogov vizita t. Gorbacheva M. S. v OON," 27–28 December 1988 (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 42, D. 24, Ll. 1–34.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 16, 23.

Although Yazov expressed some annoyance with the plans, his objections were to Shevardnadze's position that the plans for reduction and reorganization in military affairs be first presented openly in the Supreme Soviet.

Ligachev was the only participant who raised direct criticisms of the cuts themselves. He conceded that military spending was a terrible burden on the economy, but he claimed that this was the case "not only in the socialist world, but also in the capitalist world." He agreed that disarmament was extremely important but emphasized that this did not mean "that we should weaken reasonable means for defense of the country."<sup>53</sup>

Aside from these muted objections, Gorbachev won support from all those who spoke. He did not answer all the specific points that were raised, but he stressed that only the poor and undeveloped countries were devoting half their budgets to the military (Shevardnadze interjected "Angola, for example" to Gorbachev's agreement) and added that "in the end, it all comes down to perestroika. It is the key to everything."<sup>54</sup>

Defense cuts were increasingly important as the economic failures of the early phase of perestroika began to mount, and the leeway for cuts was attenuated by American policy on SDI. Nonetheless, the U.S. stance on BMD did not make cuts impossible. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to see what the immediate gains—immediate enough to have prevented the crash of the Soviet economy by 1990—could have been. Strategic nuclear disarmament is extremely expensive, as is clear in post-Soviet Russia's difficulties in financing its obligations and the role that U.S. aid has played in the form of Cooperative Threat Reduction funding for dismantling of weapons. More likely, the contribution of U.S. policy vis-à-vis SDI was to give conservatives and opponents in the Soviet Union one more thing to blame on Gorbachev. But there is no evidence that this factor was decisive or was even among the most important factors in the summer and fall of 1991 that eventually led to the Soviet collapse.

### Question 3

When the failures of the early reform approach became clear by 1988, did Gorbachev's inability to obtain substantial concessions in the area of trade and economic relations prevent Soviet economic recovery?

The prospect of increasing economic ties with the West came to play a more central role in Gorbachev's plans as the failure of the first years of reform became clear. This effort was twofold: the pursuit of greater economic and

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53. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

trade ties, and cooperation on military conversion. Both objectives were supposed to produce resources that could fund the ambitions of reform. These efforts also reflected a shift in thinking based on expectations of the differences between Reagan and Bush as presidents. In December 1988 Gorbachev told the Politburo that he had greater hopes of achieving far-reaching arms control agreements with Bush than with Reagan because Bush was more of a centrist.<sup>55</sup> At that same meeting the Politburo discussed the obstacles to defense conversion and the possibility of obtaining Western cooperation and know-how.<sup>56</sup> By 1990, proposals to work out joint programs to study defense conversion were high on the list of priorities in the guidelines for discussions with Bush, ranking above joint efforts to settle regional conflicts.<sup>57</sup>

The failure of reform in its early stages also appears to have made some of the leaders aware of the limited ability of the Soviet system to adapt and change and to have created hopes that this defect could be remedied by contact with the West. In December 1988 one of Gorbachev's closest aides, Aleksandr Yakovlev, said that despite the Soviet Union's contributions to the end of the Cold War, "we need economic information" to set up a modern financial system.<sup>58</sup> By 1990, discussions of economic cooperation and American assistance in developing Soviet access to the international economy and its institutions were among the most prominent and consistent items on the agenda, along with arms control, German unification, and Soviet internal problems.<sup>59</sup>

By 1991 economic issues had become a major public theme of high-level meetings involving Bush, Baker, Shevardnadze, and Gorbachev. In July 1991, Gorbachev was invited to take part in discussions after the meeting in London of the Group of 7 (G7) major industrialized countries. So dominant was this focus in Gorbachev's strategy that he spent much of his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in June 1991 explaining why the Soviet economy should be integrated into the world economy and why the West owed the Soviet Union substantial assistance for its role in bringing an end to the Cold War.<sup>60</sup>

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55. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

57. "O direktivakh dlya peregovorov Ministra inostrannykh del SSSR s Prezidentom SSHA Dzh. Bushem i Gosudarstvennym sekretarem Dzh. Beikerom (Vashington, 4–6 aprelya 1990 g.)," in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 10, D. 61, L. 4.

58. "Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS 27–28 dekabrya 1988 goda" (cited in n. 50 above), L. 30.

59. "O direktivakh dlya peregovorov s Gosudarstvennym sekretarem Dzh. Beikerom v Moskve, 16–19 maya 1990 g.," 16–19 May 1990 (Special Dossier/Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 10, D. 61, L. 5; and "O direktivakh . . . 4–6 aprelya 1990g." (cited in n. 57 above), L. 5.

60. "Nobelevskaya lektsiya M. S. Gorbacheva," *Pravda* (Moscow), 6 June 1991, p. 4.

No such aid was forthcoming, however. The prevalent view in the West was that without radical economic reforms, which Gorbachev was still resisting, any substantial assistance would be wasted or, even if effective, would serve only to prop up aspects of the Soviet regime that Western leaders hoped would change.<sup>61</sup> Western countries did make some changes in trade policy and in launching discussions about Soviet participation in the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, but extensive assistance never materialized.

Even if large amounts of aid had been provided at this point in 1991, it is difficult to see that it would have improved matters enough to prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the economic effects of an infusion of assistance on the scale of a “grand bargain” might have made things better very quickly, the factors undermining the Soviet system in 1990–1991 appear to have been political: increasing disillusionment of both right and left with Gorbachev and the demands and growing confidence of ethnic nationalism. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that Western chariness played a major or direct role in the Soviet collapse.

Nevertheless, in one extremely important way Western policy regarding economic ties and assistance did play a role in the Soviet collapse. As Gorbachev increasingly focused on the economic dimension of relations with the West and pinned more of his economic hopes on the prospect of outside aid, he found himself increasingly constrained in his options of using force to quell dissent in the Soviet republics. By 1990, meetings “at the highest levels” were routinely addressing not only arms control but Soviet policies in the Baltic states. Soviet leaders offered assurances but also demanded that the West not interfere. The carrot of Western economic ties and assistance—held just out of reach in 1990–1991—enabled the West to play a role, at least inadvertently, in the Soviet collapse. This extra constraint on Gorbachev’s willingness to use force contributed, indirectly but perceptibly, to one of the immediate causes of that collapse-republic separatism.

### **Foreign Policy and New Thinking**

#### **Question 1**

Did active U.S. opposition in Third World conflicts force a humiliating retreat by the Soviet Union in a way that undermined political support for Gorbachev?

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61. Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).

Western (primarily U.S.) policies in aiding anti-Marxist opposition forces in Third World conflicts made the conflicts more costly for Soviet allies, especially in Afghanistan, where the United States (along with China, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia) provided huge amounts of weaponry and assistance to guerrillas fighting the Soviet Army. Even so, at the height of the Soviet troop presence in Afghanistan only about 2.1 percent of Soviet forces were deployed. Soviet casualty rates and losses actually declined after the United States supplied Stinger missiles, which were first deployed in 1986 and became effective in 1987, and Moscow continued to supply the Kabul government \$300 million a month even after Soviet troops had withdrawn in 1989.<sup>62</sup> U.S. support for the Afghan rebels certainly made life more difficult for the Soviet Army, and this in turn affected Soviet society's view of the strength of the state and the military forces that sustained it. Afghanistan also helped spur the rise of social movements and organized protest in the Soviet Union, notably the condemnations of the war by mothers of soldiers who were fighting in Afghanistan. Soviet leaders had no doubts about the depth of American involvement in Afghanistan and even saw the fighting as a direct manifestation of "American imperialism" on the USSR's border and urged Soviet forces "not to stumble" over this obstacle.<sup>63</sup>

But it is here that counterfactuals are crucial. Can we assume that without American policies the Soviet Union and Soviet clients would have had an easy time in knocking out opposition forces? Perhaps this would have been the case, but the evidence is that indigenous opposition to external interference was remarkably persistent during the Cold War and even for several years afterward. In surveying the evidence on the Soviet leadership's assessments of military operations in Afghanistan, Garthoff argues that as early as 1981 key Soviet defense officials had concluded that the war could not be won and that Soviet efforts could do no more than prevent the outright defeat of the Soviet client state.<sup>64</sup> This interpretation is not universally shared, but it is not wholly implausible. Sarah Mendelson also questions the apparent coincidence of escalating Western involvement in 1985–1987 and the Soviet decision to withdraw, arguing that many in the Soviet leadership had come to the realization before 1986 that the military option could not succeed.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that although Soviet leaders increasingly sensed that the costs of Third World conflicts were great, Ameri-

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62. Sarah E. Mendelson, *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 26–27.

63. "Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS, 10 marta 1983 goda," 10 March 1983 (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 42, D. 51, Ll. 1–4.

64. Garthoff, *Great Transition*, pp. 723–724.

65. Mendelson, *Changing Course*, ch. 4.

can military involvement or support was not a necessary condition for this perception. Quite early in the 1980s, Soviet analysts were beginning to write about the self-defeating nature of Soviet attempts to support revolutionary Leninist regimes in distant Third World countries, and were beginning to counsel greater emphasis on political and economic development, which did not fit nicely into Soviet theoretical categories or require Soviet military support.<sup>66</sup>

As Ted Hopf has shown, Soviet officials did not necessarily “learn” the lessons of deterrence that U.S. policies in the Third World were designed to teach. Leonid Brezhnev, for example, never had any doubts about American resolve. The reason he sent Soviet troops into the Third World was not that he underestimated U.S. resolve but that he believed in the value of “offensive détente.” The reason Gorbachev chose to withdraw the Soviet Union from Third World conflicts is not that he “learned” the lessons of American resolve and deterrence but that he realized U.S. policies were not unchangeable and could be altered by Soviet concessions. Because Gorbachev valued relations with the United States and was averse to trying to prop up failing allies, it was a policy choice he was willing to make.<sup>67</sup> There is no evidence in the available documentation that Soviet leaders during this period felt unduly pressed by U.S. involvement in Third World conflicts. A Politburo discussion of the problem of Afghanistan in March 1986 revealed high-level concern with the costs and intricacies of the war, but no particular concern with the implications or direct results of American policies.<sup>68</sup> In a speech to the Soviet Foreign Ministry in May 1986, Gorbachev emphasized that the United States must not be allowed to have bases on the Soviet Union’s southern borders, but he also declared that Soviet troops should not stay in Afghanistan for much longer. The solution, he argued, would be a change in the Afghan leadership combined with diplomacy to stop the flow of assistance through Pakistan.<sup>69</sup>

When Gorbachev discussed his December 1988 UN speech at a Soviet Politburo meeting at the end of 1988, he asserted that Soviet deeds were important in creating a positive view in the United States and in other countries of Soviet efforts to deescalate regional conflicts. He argued that the Soviet

66. Wallander, “Opportunity, Incrementalism, and Learning.”

67. Ted Hopf, “Peripheral Visions: Brezhnev and Gorbachev Meet the ‘Reagan Doctrine,’” in George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock, eds., *Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 589.

68. “Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS, 20 marta 1986 goda: Rabochaya zapis’,” 20 March 1986 (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 36, D. 18, Ll. 1–2.

69. Mikhail Gorbachev, “U perelomnoi cherty (vystuplenie na soveshchanii v MID SSSR),” in Mikhail Gorbachev, *Gody trudnykh reshenii* (Moscow: Alfa-Print, 1993), p. 49.

Union's role in resolving Third World disputes had created a positive image for the USSR because it was a concrete way of transforming words into reality. Citing Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, southern Africa, and the Middle East, he noted that all of these had involved "our participation in a positive, constructive way."<sup>70</sup> This was a constant theme in later Soviet Politburo directives for meetings with Bush and Baker as well, highlighting the resolution of regional conflicts as evidence of Soviet intentions and constructive policies in areas of mutual security.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, although Soviet leaders were mindful of the costs of Third World conflicts, the pressure generated by American counteractions was not the overriding factor in their decision to embark on the path of reform. The scaling back of international commitments was an integral part of Gorbachev's policy, at the nexus of perestroika and new thinking. Retreat from the Third World was called for by the principles and logic of new thinking, with its repudiation of Leninist internationalism and Brezhnev-era activism. It was also consistent with the priority on domestic reform and the determination to shed self-destructive and costly policies. To the extent that the Reagan Doctrine raised these costs, it played a role in the retreat.

However, some scholars have argued that the Reagan Doctrine, far from providing ammunition for those advocating withdrawal, made it more difficult for the members of Gorbachev's "new thinking" foreign policy team to implement their ideas about the futility of military involvement in Afghanistan. According to this argument, aggressive Western policies reinforced the views of those who believed that the United States must be opposed in Afghanistan because of the threat to Soviet borders. Under those circumstances, the argument goes, Gorbachev in 1985 decided to give the Soviet military a year to escalate the fighting and prove that victory was possible. The change in Soviet policy, Mendelson asserts, came about only after Gorbachev had enough time to change the institutional context of Soviet national security decision-making, enabling him to implement a new course in foreign policy, including the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988–1989.<sup>72</sup>

Regardless of whether U.S. policy played a dominant role in the Soviet withdrawal from Third World commitments, the relationship between Soviet withdrawals and Soviet collapse is difficult to see. These commitments were economically costly, but not on a scale that undermined the Soviet economy or that would have saved the economy had the resources been freed. The

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70. "Po samym," p. 142.

71. "Direktivy . . . 16–19 maya 1990 g." (cited in n. 46 above), L. 40.

72. Mendelson, *Changing Course*, ch. 5, esp. pp. 95–100.

conflicts were a source of hostility with the United States, and they needed to be resolved before relations could improve, but this had been true since the breakdown of d'étente in the 1970s and was not simply a result of the Reagan Doctrine. There is no evidence that the retreat from the Third World played an overwhelming role either in Gorbachev's determination to press ahead with reform or in his growing political problems. The most vocal and influential critic of Gorbachev's abandonment of Leninist principles—Egor Ligachev—was quickly and relatively easily dealt with by September 1988, and he played no part in the 1991 coup. The evidence does not support the counterfactual: Had the Reagan doctrine not been implemented, new thinking and its relation to domestic political economic reform would have remained the core of Gorbachev's programs and policies.

### **Question 2**

Did Western support for human rights in Eastern Europe contribute to the collapse of Soviet rule there and, in the process, undercut Gorbachev's political support at home?

In none of the documents, memoirs, or accounts now available is there much evidence that Soviet leaders were worried about Western interference in political developments in Eastern Europe that led to the collapse of Communist regimes, the breaching of the Berlin Wall, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. During the Polish crisis of 1980–1981, Soviet leaders did worry a great deal about Western involvement, countermeasures, and reactions, and this may have contributed to the decision to pursue martial law rather than to use direct Soviet intervention.<sup>73</sup> After martial law was imposed, the United States provided clandestine support for Solidarity and other East European opposition movements. There is little question that the continuing political activity of Solidarity and other political movements was central to the processes that resulted in Poland's peaceful transition from Communist rule, but this development in itself did not force change upon the Soviet leadership. As shown above, the political changes in Eastern Europe occurred a year after the Soviet leadership had already been planning for substantial military reductions there. Far from being forced to accept political and economic changes in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev actively encouraged the changes in the hope of reducing the economic and political expense of Soviet hegemony in the region.

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73. See the annotated transcripts of CPSU Politburo meetings from 10 December 1981, 2 April 1981, and 29 October 1981, all in Mark Kramer, *Soviet Deliberations During the Polish Crisis, 1980–1981*, Special Working Paper No. 1 (Washington: Cold War International History Project, 1999), pp. 92–102, 148–156, 157–170.

The changes soon far outstripped his expectations, but it was his choice to encourage them in the first place.<sup>74</sup>

Where Western policies—and in this instance more the policies of the West European countries than those of the United States—were important was in sustaining the hopes and processes of the Helsinki Final Act.<sup>75</sup> Helsinki established the legitimacy of human and minority rights in Europe and provided indirect support and inspiration to the political dissident movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia, allowing them to move forward once Gorbachev opened the possibilities of reform. These political groups and leaders were thus well-positioned and experienced to take the initiative when the opportunity finally arose.

### ***The Policies of Desperation, 1990–1991***

#### **Question 1**

Did the West's insistence on its terms for German unification cause problems of political support for Gorbachev at home?

The key question of whether Gorbachev surrendered too much on Germany—and whether in so doing he fatally alienated those who would launch the coup in August 1991—can be answered only by understanding the crux of the problem of German unification for the Soviet Union. Having conceded that each country must choose its own social system, Gorbachev could not rule out unification in principle, and by early 1990 he was not trying to block it.<sup>76</sup>

Instead, the apparently non-negotiable point was a unified Germany that would be a full member of NATO. The Soviet Union could accept that a democratic, unified Germany would not be the Germany of the past. It also could accept that a unified Germany would be capitalist: this was consistent with the emphasis in new thinking on moving away from class conflict. But a unified Germany within NATO had non-ideological implications for military balances, and this was the source of Soviet concerns. The Soviet position

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74. Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1)," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 178–256.

75. This factor was significant, but some analysts have given undue emphasis to it, suggesting that the Helsinki Accords were the dominant reason for the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. See, in particular, Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

76. The story of the evolution in Soviet policy in this period is told in Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), chs. 4–6.

was clear in the final negotiations leading to a U.S. and Soviet agreement in July 1990. Referring in harsh terms to the “Anschluss” of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Soviet Politburo approved instructions in April 1990 that called for a clear statement to Bush of the unacceptability of unified German membership in NATO because of the implications for European stability.<sup>77</sup> New guidelines from the following month were even more specific:

Emphasize once again that for us the inclusion of a united Germany in NATO is unacceptable, both politically and psychologically. We cannot agree to something that would undermine the balance of power, the balance of forces, and stability in Europe. It would create for us a dangerous military-strategic situation.<sup>78</sup>

For the Soviet Union, then, two things relating to the military balance in Europe were crucial to acceptance of German unification. The first was a change in NATO doctrine, announced in London in June 1990, that reduced the nuclear element in NATO strategy and called for partnership with the countries of the Warsaw Pact. The second was the promise that NATO forces would not be stationed permanently on the territory of the former GDR. Under these circumstances Gorbachev could accept unification and cope with his critics at home.<sup>79</sup> Although many in the Soviet Union disliked the arrangement, the terms were not unfavorable enough to prevent Gorbachev from sticking by his decision.<sup>80</sup> Western policy made life difficult for Gorbachev for some time, and in political terms the West struck a hard bargain (though the bargain was ameliorated by a substantial program of German economic assistance to the Soviet Union), but this concession in itself did not bring Gorbachev down. Although the collapse of Soviet influence in Germany did help rally action against Gorbachev, it was part of a package on European security that included the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty and the development of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe—developments in line with and celebrated as part of the contribution of new thinking to the ending of the Cold War.

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77. “Ukazaniya . . . 6 aprelya 1990 g.” (cited in n. 46 above), L. 9.

78. “O direktivakh . . . 16–19 maya 1990 g.” (cited in n. 46 above), L. 5.

79. Helmut Kohl understood that Gorbachev’s refusal to accept a unified Germany in NATO was genuine and not merely a bargaining ploy. The Soviet leader accepted it in the end only because it appeared there was no other way and because NATO’s London Declaration and the promised constraints on NATO forces in the former GDR met Moscow’s minimum demands. See Helmut Kohl (as told to Kai Diekmann and Ralf Georg Reuth), *Ich wollte Deutschlands Einheit* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1996), esp. pp. 421–441.

80. For further evidence, see Celeste A. Wallander, *Mortal Friends, Best Enemies: German-Russian Cooperation after the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

## Question 2

Did Western support for human rights within the Soviet Union, particularly in the Baltic republics, constrain Gorbachev's choice of policies to deal with separatism, and thereby contribute to the breakup of the union?

Because of the crucial role of ethnic and republic separatism in the demise of the Soviet Union, any evidence that the West encouraged such trends, whether directly or indirectly, would be important. On balance, what we find is that although Western countries were cautious and discreet, their consistent, high-level support for human and political rights in the Soviet Union did play a role in magnifying the constraints that Gorbachev faced and the policies he chose. From an early stage Gorbachev wanted to defuse American criticisms of Soviet internal policies. At a meeting in August 1985 the Soviet Politburo discussed the status of Andrei Sakharov and Yelena Bonner (both of whom were still in exile in Gorky), and the proposal that Bonner be allowed to travel abroad. The head of the State Security Committee (KGB), Viktor Chebrikov, raised the expected objections that Sakharov could not be allowed to travel abroad because of national security concerns, citing the possibility that he could bring his knowledge to the benefit of foreign governments. Others, including Nikolai Ryzhkov, Sergei Sokolov, Vasilii Kuznetsov, and Shevardnadze, all (reluctantly) argued that the risks of allowing Bonner to travel—albeit without Sakharov—must be taken because of the international attention surrounding this issue. It is clear that the decision was not a principled one and was simply motivated by a concern that the results of refusal would be worse than the risks of granting permission.<sup>81</sup>

There are other early hints of the constraints imposed by Western pressure on human rights. At a meeting in October 1987 with U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz in which the primary theme was SDI, Gorbachev suddenly began complaining that the United States was making his political life difficult. Alluding to a recent State Department publication on Soviet disinformation activities, Gorbachev said:

Do you want the Soviet Union to develop successfully, or not? Do you want the Soviet Union to develop in the direction of greater democracy, or its opposite? Do you want us to have stagnation, or to go forward? We want to develop deeper ties and seriously wish to change in order to develop our mutual relations

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81. "Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS, 29 avgusta 1985" (cited in n. 34 above), Ll. 1–4. A similar concern—one might say obsession—is evident at a 12 July 1984 Politburo meeting at which the subject of restoration of party membership for Molotov and Kaganovich was discussed in light of Khrushchev's policies, his damage to the party, and the impression such a restoration of membership would or would not have on international opinion and views of the Soviet Union—as if in the context of all that was going on in the real world of international relations such an issue could matter much at all. See "Zasedanie Politbyuro Ts KPSS, 12 iyulya 1984 goda: Rabochaya zapis'," 12 July 1984 (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 36, D. 16, L. 1–2.

in areas of trade and economics, but you hold up the “image of the enemy.” We do not consider the United States a threat, and we do not aspire to change your social system: this is a matter of old thinking and stereotypes.<sup>82</sup>

In July 1989 Gorbachev expressed a similar concern to U.S. ambassador Jack Matlock. Taking Matlock aside at a public function, the Soviet leader warned of “a very complex and difficult period” in which opposition would grow to his efforts to push through further reform. Gorbachev added that “certain statements coming from Washington” made his task more difficult. Matlock recalls that Gorbachev asked him to “tell the president . . . to please be a little more considerate. What he says has an effect here.”<sup>83</sup>

By 1990 the Soviet leadership was attuned to and upset by any evidence of U.S. involvement in Baltic separatism. Matlock recounts how he was suddenly asked to meet with Foreign Minister Shevardnadze on 7 March 1990. Matlock had an appointment later that day to meet with the leaders of the Lithuanian independence movement Sąjūdis, who wanted to report to him on the situation in Lithuania after the recent republic-level elections, which had resulted in an overwhelming victory for pro-independence candidates. Shevardnadze warned Matlock that the Soviet Union had reached a decisive moment. Economic troubles, he said, were manageable, but the nationalities problem was not. He warned that the situation was “explosive” and might bring civil war, especially in Lithuania. Shevardnadze claimed that if the drive toward independence could be held off until after Gorbachev had managed to establish a presidential system of government (a step that was taken later that month), these pressures could be defused. The foreign minister asked Matlock to postpone his meeting with Sąjūdis “to avoid any suspicion that the Lithuanians were acting on ‘instructions’ from the United States should they proceed to declare independence during the weekend as they were threatening to do.”<sup>84</sup>

To the extent that Gorbachev was restrained in cracking down on dissent in the Baltic republics, his restraint was not principled and was motivated instead by two other factors: recognition that a crackdown would be costly at home, and concern that it would undercut his efforts to cultivate good relations with the West. At the very time that Gorbachev was seeking to gain access to the international economic system and to obtain Western

82. “Iz arkhiva Gorbacheva (Besedy M.S. Gorbachev s gosudarstvennym sekretarem SShA Dzh. Shultsem 23 oktyabrya 1987 g.),” *Mirovaya ekonomika I mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, (Moscow), No. 11 (November 1993), pp. 74–76.

83. Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 198.

84. *Ibid.*, pp. 323–324. Matlock did not cancel the meeting but took Shevardnadze seriously, promising to convey these concerns to the United States and not to encourage action by the Lithuanians.

financial and economic assistance for reform, his dilemma in the Baltics was becoming more severe, and the pressure from hardliners to do something was increasing.<sup>85</sup>

Here it is useful to think about a counterfactual: If Western policy had not been consistent and strong in supporting human and political rights in the Soviet Union, if these concerns had not been a constant theme in meetings with Soviet leaders, and if Gorbachev had not been increasingly focused on the prospect of achieving substantial Western economic assistance and trade (goals that would be endangered if he used forceful means), would the Soviet leader have chosen differently? His own actions seem to indicate that he would have and that he most likely would have used stronger methods to quell dissent (though whether he would have been successful is another matter). Gorbachev made a distinction between the rights of the East European countries to choose their own paths and those of Soviet citizens, who could do so only under the very tightly constrained limits allowed by the Soviet Constitution, not to mention Soviet political realities.<sup>86</sup>

The strongest evidence for the importance of this issue and the constraints it imposed on Gorbachev was the prominent role it played in meetings “at the highest level” in 1990–1991. We might have expected that arms control, Germany, defense conversion, and economic relations would be among the five or so most important talking points for Gorbachev’s and Shevardnadze’s discussions with Bush and Baker in 1990. But among these matters of high diplomacy, sometimes in first or second place, were assurances about Soviet policies in the Baltic states mixed with warnings for the West not to interfere in the USSR’s internal affairs. When Shevardnadze was preparing for his meeting with Bush in Washington in April 1990, he was instructed to inform the Americans about the internal situation in the Soviet Union and to warn about separatism in the Baltic republics.<sup>87</sup> Shevardnadze was supposed to warn Bush against open encouragement of Baltic separatism, and to point out that the destruction of the unity of the Soviet Union would destabilize conditions in Europe and would not achieve the goals that the United States itself was seeking. The guidelines called on Shevardnadze to urge the United States to think about its long-term interests.<sup>88</sup>

This theme was repeated in the guidelines for the meetings in Moscow with Baker in May 1990. The opening point for Shevardnadze to raise was

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85. Matlock has a similar view of the increasing importance of Western opinion on Gorbachev’s behavior toward the Baltic states and the constraints it imposed on Gorbachev’s actions, given his hopes for economic relations with the West. See *ibid.*, p. 171.

86. Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism (Part 1),” pp. 178–256.

87. “O direktivakh . . . 4–6 aprelya 1990 g.” (cited in n. 57 above), L. 3.

88. “Ukazaniya . . . 6 aprelya 1990 goda” (cited in n. 46 above), Ll. 8–9.

the Baltic question. Baker was to be told that the United States had to be realistic and understand the importance of relations with the Soviet Union and to see that all sides “in the current complex situation bear a high degree of responsibility in these matters.”<sup>89</sup> Shevardnadze was supposed to emphasize, on the one hand, that the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet’s recent adoption of a declaration of independence was illegal but, on the other hand, that the Soviet government was interested in solving the situation through political dialogue. The guidelines stipulated that any solution would have to be based on the Soviet Constitution and on laws providing for the secession of union-republics from the USSR (laws that had not yet been adopted), but that “this is an internal matter of the Soviet Union” and any foreign attempts to exert pressure or to use discriminatory measures would be rebuffed.

High-level concerns in Moscow about this issue were also clear in the attention the Soviet Politburo paid to purported evidence of Western support for Baltic separatism. The Baltic governments were undoubtedly helped in their independence efforts by the Western policy of refusing to recognize the incorporation of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia into the Soviet Union in 1940. They also were aided by the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, which made human and minority rights a legitimate matter of international discussion, and they obviously welcomed the international attention to their efforts. Nonetheless, direct material aid was not forthcoming. Speaking for the United States, Ambassador Matlock repeatedly pointed out the limits of American policy, which not only excluded material assistance but also ruled out immediate diplomatic recognition of those states if they declared independence. Until the republics could exercise clear control over their own territory (a situation that would require at least tacit Soviet cooperation), formal recognition would be delayed.<sup>90</sup>

These U.S. assurances, however, did not allay Moscow’s concerns. In August 1990 and again in March 1991, high-ranking CPSU officials drafted reports about the purported involvement of Western broadcasters in inciting Baltic separatism. These broadcasts, according to the report, served the political purposes of Yeltsin and the Democratic Russia movement and should not be protected by the freedom of information provisions of the Helsinki documents and the 1989 London agreements on Informational Forms, which did not permit interference in internal affairs. The reports called for the Foreign Ministry to protest the West’s actions, a step that was duly carried out.<sup>91</sup> So-

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89. “Direktivy dlya peregovorov . . . 16–19 maya 1990 g.” (cited in n. 46 above), L. 9.

90. Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*.

91. “O nekotorykh merakh protivodeistviya podstrekatelskoi deyatelnosti zapadnykh radiostantsii,” Central Committee Doc. No. 02, 15 March 1991, in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 21, D. 67, Ll. 1–3; and

viet officials also voiced dismay about efforts in the U.S. Congress to provide 10 million dollars of humanitarian assistance to Lithuania, a measure that, if passed, would also constitute “interference in the USSR’s internal affairs.”<sup>92</sup>

The extent of high level Soviet attention to this sensitive and volatile issue—mixing warnings and assurances to the United States—is truly extraordinary and indicates the importance of the issue in Soviet relations with the West. This is not to say that Western policies forced Gorbachev to show restraint, but it does seem clear that he was very mindful of Western concerns and of the risks of taking more forceful action. Gorbachev tried to resist Western pressure, but he repeatedly found himself constrained in his choice of policies. These constraints, though perhaps not decisive, were crucial on an issue that played such a salient role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. By reducing Gorbachev’s leeway to use violent repression, the West contributed—indirectly but importantly—to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In this sense, George Kennan’s analysis underlying the containment policy was sound. Once the Soviet regime had done away with the “image of the enemy” as part of Gorbachev’s determination to reduce instability, to restructure Soviet foreign policy, and to reorient the Soviet economy, the loosening of political control of society was inevitable. Gorbachev’s pursuit of contacts, negotiations, and assistance with the West required him to open Soviet society to Western influence. The political liberalization under Gorbachev did not *create* dissent or political movements in the Soviet Union—such movements had existed at least since the Khrushchev years, albeit in the face of severe repression—but it certainly freed them. Andrei Sakharov was not created by glasnost and perestroika, but his voice, influence, and legitimacy could no longer be contained once Gorbachev made the real break with Stalinism.

## Conclusion

The connection between Western influence and the Soviet collapse is complex. The primary causes of the collapse (economic deterioration, ethnic separatism, political turmoil) were internal, and the West’s contribution to the collapse was mostly indirect. Our understanding of the Western role depends on our estimation of what “would have been different.” Although the West may have contributed through its policies of pressure and opportunity to the collapse of the Soviet Union, we do not know whether the pathologies of the

“Ministru inostrannykh del SSSR, tov. Bessmertnykh A. A.,” letter to Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh, Doc. 4–1–10/27, 28, March 1991, in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 21, D. 67, Ll. 4–7.

92. “K voprosu o gumanitarnoi pomoschi SSha Litve,” Central Committee Doc. No. 06/1-534c (Top Secret), 23 August 1990, in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 21, D. 23, Ll. 1–2.

Soviet economy and the political demands of the Soviet people would eventually have been sufficient on their own.

Nonetheless, the evidence that has begun to emerge from the Soviet archives—evidence that was never intended to be public and is therefore an invaluable independent source if used with caution—does allow us in some areas to reconstruct some of the important choices made. In particular, with regard to the two most important direct factors in the Soviet collapse—economic failure and internal political unrest—it leads to four conclusions.

First, the impetus and direction of the first stage of Gorbachev's reforms—reforms that destabilized the Soviet economy and sent it into free fall by 1991—did not result from an urgent need to cut defense spending. Soviet defense spending was high, but it had leveled off in real terms (as had American spending by 1985). Furthermore, the evidence is that the Soviet economy suffered from far more severe and fundamental defects than simply the misallocation of resources. In the absence of much more drastic reform, lower defense spending would not have produced substantially faster growth.

Second, Gorbachev did want to deescalate the nuclear arms race, but this was not a necessary condition for internal economic reform, and there is no evidence that the continuing prospect of SDI and the maintenance of high levels of strategic arms played a role in the failure of the first stages of reform. Similarly, although failures in Afghanistan and reversals elsewhere in the Third World spurred Soviet leaders to question the Leninist assumptions of Soviet foreign policy, there is no evidence that the financial costs of Third World complications undermined the Soviet economy or that Gorbachev's shift toward cooperation and away from support for Marxist regimes was a source of the regime's internal political problems.

Third, cutting defense did become a much more important priority in the second stage of Gorbachev's economic reforms, which were made necessary by his initial failures. In this regard, Western policies denied Gorbachev the opportunity to cut strategic arms and to base his plans on the assumption that SDI would not be deployed. It is unlikely that the slow progress of START denied Gorbachev short-term economic resources that could have been reallocated to investment and consumption to stave off economic collapse. Although the failure to get a START agreement undermined the logic behind "new thinking" and created political problems for Gorbachev, it did not prevent cuts in defense spending and unilateral reductions in conventional arms. The force cuts in 1989–1991 were quite substantial but did not help the Soviet economy. By then, the economy was in desperate straits, and political dissent was endangering Gorbachev's increasingly tenuous hold on the union.

Fourth, the West's refusal to pour money into the Soviet Union without evidence of structural reform, and Western leaders' maintenance of principled support for human and political rights, severely constrained Gorbachev's options in dealing with the increasing threat of republic separatism, the issue that ultimately brought the attempted coup and collapse in 1991. Western policies—including the long history going back to Helsinki, of cautious and responsible support of human rights activists—did not directly force Gorbachev's hand, but they did constrain his choices. This point is important to stress. All too often we focus only on whether Western pressure and military spending brought down the Soviet Union. Those means may have contributed, but the most important way that Western policies in 1991 played a role in the Soviet collapse was through their political and principled nature. That conclusion, one hopes, will inspire creative thinking about current Western policy toward Russia.

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