

Gorbachev's New Thinking in Soviet Foreign Policy : Utopia or pragmatism?

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In his December 7, 1988 speech at the United Nations, Mikhail Gorbachev expressed the desire that “[the] joint efforts [of the UN] to put an end to the era of wars, confrontation and regional conflicts, aggression against nature, the terror of hunger and poverty as well as political terrorism [would] be comparable with our hopes.”¹ This sentence is emblematic of the “New Political Thinking” which was the framework of Gorbachev’s foreign policy. Some scholars have argued that this theoretical basis was the foundation for the collapse of the Soviet Union, to such extent that A. Tsygankov accuses it of being “naïve and divorced from power considerations.”² However, Gorbachev originally designed this policy as an ambitious project for the USSR and the world : how can we then assess the balance between pragmatism and idealism in Gorbachev’s “New Political Thinking”? In order to answer this question, we will first give some details about the content of this political thought ; then we will analyze its pragmatic aspects ; and finish by showing how its idealistic component took the upper hand in its implementation.

First of all, what is “New Thinking”? Its name refers to “Old Thinking”, that had been the theoretical basis of Soviet foreign policy since the 1920s.³ In his article published in 1989⁴, Robert Levgold, then head of Columbia's Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union, calls Gorbachev’s program “a revolution in Soviet foreign policy”, for several reasons. Indeed, as R. Levgold explains, “New Thinking” acknowledges the insufficiency of military power to guarantee national security — it should be mainly defensive, and should be completed by narrow international (bilateral as well as multilateral) cooperation. Secondly, it states that the USSR will not intervene in the Third World, as it used to according to the former model. The USSR also wishes to let the Eastern European countries free to choose their economic model. This program renounces key Soviet principles such as socialist internationalism, world revolution, but also the concept of capitalism as leading to imperialism and war. Thus we see why this political thought could be described as “revolutionary”.

It was idealistic, as we could read it previously in Gorbachev’s sentence claiming a desire to end war. However, one could say that it was at least partly pragmatic, and that it was so until it

¹ Gorbachev, M. S. (1988). Excerpts of Address to 43rd U.N. General Assembly Session. December 7th

² Tsygankov, A.P. (2010). The Cold War Crisis and the Soviet New Thinking. In *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. Rowman & Littlefield

³ see Wohlworth, W.C. (1993) *The Elusive Balance, Power and perception during the Cold War*, chapter 3, “The origins of Old Thinking”, Cornell University Press

⁴ Larson, D. W., & Shevchenko, A. (2003). Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy. *International Organization*, 57(1). MIT Press

failed. Indeed, firstly, it appealed to the Soviet middle and political classes.⁵ It could have built a consensus between different Soviet schools of foreign policy — and, in the beginning of Gorbachev's term, it did. Westernizers appreciated the idea of reforms and convergence with the West, statist liked the one of a new *détente*, and the offer of a “*new way of capitalizing on socialist values*” lured the civilizationists. This broad consensus really matched the necessities of the moment — reforms — it was pragmatic and held on for a few years, but then rapidly disintegrated.

Mr. Gorbachev's political thinking was pragmatic in another aspect. The Soviet leader, while implementing “New Thinking” in Soviet foreign policy, was aiming to make the USSR a forerunner of the changes in international relations that were doomed to happen after the end of the Cold War. The USSR could have taken the lead in this evolution, but this action required an adaptation of its foreign policy discourse : “*Gorbachev and the other new thinkers sought a new domain in which to compete with the United States — promoting new international norms and ideas.*”⁶ The new rhetoric used by the Soviet leader had to participate in this process by improving the brand image of the Soviet Union and thus prompt other States to support this new Soviet leadership — and some commentators even called this new political discourse “propaganda” aimed at assuaging suspicions from the West.⁷ And indeed, in his 1989 article, Robert Levgold detects this “danger” for the leadership of the US in tomorrow's world. Although, in 1989, the West seems to have won the Cold War, it should not be fooled by Soviet foreign policy, because “*if Moscow finally established itself in the eyes of the world (...) as the leadership with the greater vision and the more compelling foreign policy values*” — and that is what “New Thinking” is all about, as shown previously — then “*[the West is] in danger of ending [the Cold War] on Soviet terms.*” From this viewpoint, one can say that Gorbachev's foreign policy has been pragmatic and even visionary, in the sense that it was adapted to the reality of international relations and anticipating their evolution.

However, the political coalition built by Gorbachev around his “New Thinking” started to fall apart from 1988. First of all, the worsening of the domestic conditions (economic crisis, bad living standards, separatism in the USSR) affected political support provided to the founder of “New Thinking” . In this respect, “New Thinking” had been idealistic : it neglected urgent domestic issues in order to launch an ambitious foreign policy. Lessons learnt, for A. P. Tsygankov : “*a foreign policy must match domestic needs and have strong roots at home*”. Then, 1989 was the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Both difficulties — domestic and external — triggered much criticism and led to the collapse of the political coalition. Besides, the implementation of this “New Thinking” required Western cooperation : Gorbachev took numerous initiatives to prompt the West to cooperate in the construction of a new world order on the basis of multilateralism and nuclear arms reduction, but Western leaders never met these efforts with enthusiastic reciprocity. The reliance of Gorbachev's policy on foreign factors was idealistic, as well as many of the leader's

⁵ Tsygankov, A.P., op.cit.

⁶ Larson, D. W., & Shevchenko, A., op. cit.

⁷ Hollaway D., 1988, Gorbachev's New Thinking, *Foreign Affairs*

hopes : the hope for global demilitarization, the hope for stability in Eastern countries freed from the USSR framework, the hope for strengthening of the United Nations.⁸

In conclusion, we can assume that “New Thinking” failed maybe because it was too much ahead of its time, offering to move to a phase of multilateral cooperation while Cold War mistrust still imbued international relations. Gorbachev’s idealism, and the lack of vision from Western countries, led to the failure of this new political thought. According to Andrei Grachev, strong supporter of Gorbachev’s policy, *“the West missed its chance to help the one who could become its unique ally in the construction a new world order, more predictable and safer.”*⁹

However, in a realist perspective, did this Soviet project correspond to everybody’s interest, as Gorbachev claimed it? For the United States, which had the upper end after the end of the Cold War, it was not necessarily interesting to adopt Gorbachev’s project, and especially to let the USSR take the initiative in a new world order. In the 1989 State of the Union Address, President George Bush Sr reacted to President Gorbachev’s offers : *“let us take the new openness seriously, but let's also be realistic. And let's always be strong”*

⁸ Tsygankov A.P., op. cit.

⁹ Grachev, A. (1992), L'histoire vraie de la fin de l'URSS, le naufrage de Gorbatchev, éditions du Rocher, my translation