

Robert McMahon, *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), Kindle edition.

## Chapter 8

### The final phase, 1980–90

The late 1980s witnessed the most momentous changes in the overall structure of world politics since the 1940s, culminating with the sudden and wholly unexpected end of the ideological and geopolitical struggle that had defined international relations for 45 years. Those remarkable developments occurred in a manner and at a speed that almost no one expected, or even thought possible. Why did the Cold War end when it did? How does one make sense of a decade that opens with a rapidly intensifying Cold War and closes with a historic Soviet-American rapprochement, unprecedented arms control agreements, the withdrawal of Soviet power from Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and the peaceful reunification of Germany? This chapter addresses those questions by examining the wild oscillations of the Cold War's final phase.

#### Cold War redux

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan completed Jimmy Carter's improbable conversion to Cold War hardliner. Although the Russians considered their military intervention a defensive action aimed at preventing the emergence of a hostile regime on their border, the president and most of his leading foreign policy experts

viewed it, instead, as part of a bold geopolitical offensive. They were convinced that a confident, expansive-minded Soviet state was vying to seize the strategic initiative from an America weakened by Vietnam, Watergate, the Iranian hostage crisis, and various economic shocks, with the ultimate goal of dominating the Persian Gulf region and denying its oil to the West. In response, Carter authorized a massive increase in US defence spending; he called for \$1.2 trillion in military-related expenditures over the next five years. He also instituted a grain embargo against the Soviet Union, ordered a symbolic boycott of the 1980 summer Olympics scheduled to be held in Moscow, re-established military draft registration, and proclaimed a new 'Carter Doctrine' that promised to repel any effort by an outside power to gain control over the Persian Gulf 'by any means necessary, including military force'. The Carter administration applied additional pressure on the Soviets by strengthening the burgeoning US strategic partnership with China via the sale of advanced military hardware and technology. With vigorous American support, NATO also moved to implement a December 1979 decision to deploy new intermediate-range Pershing II and Cruise nuclear missiles in Western Europe to counter the Soviet SS-20s.

The Cold War mindset had returned to Washington policy circles with a vengeance, veritably burying any lingering memories of detente. 'Never since World War II has there been so far-reaching a militarization of thought and discourse in the capital,' observed an alarmed George F. Kennan in February 1980. 'An unsuspecting stranger, plunged into its midst, could only conclude that the last

## THE COLD WAR: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

hope of peaceful, non-military solutions had been exhausted – that from now on only weapons, however used, could count.’

Ronald Reagan, who overwhelmed the vulnerable Carter in the November 1980 presidential election, certainly stood four-square with those who believed that only military strength mattered in the ongoing superpower competition. During the campaign, the former screen actor and California governor insisted that the United States must rebuild its defences in order to close a ‘window of vulnerability’ opened by the Soviet military build-up of the 1970s.

The most conservative and most ideological of America’s post-World War II presidents, Reagan remained a diehard anti-communist with a visceral hatred for a regime that he considered as immoral as it was treacherous and untrustworthy. ‘Let’s not delude ourselves’, Reagan declared during one campaign stop. ‘The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren’t engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn’t be any hot spots in the world.’ He rejected out of hand the treat-the-Soviet-Union-as-an-ordinary-power ethos of the Nixon, Ford, and early Carter years. At his very first presidential press conference, Reagan set the tone for his first term by accusing Moscow of using detente as ‘a one-way street . . . to pursue its own aims’, including ‘the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state’. Soviet leaders, the new American chief executive charged, ‘reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that’.

Such inflammatory rhetoric became a hallmark of the renewed Cold War waged by the Reagan administration. Along with a huge military build-up and a concerted effort to roll back Soviet power through increased support and encouragement for anti-communist insurgencies across the globe, it constituted a central element of America’s reinvigorated containment strategy. Employing language that hearkened back to the Truman years, Reagan regularly berated both the Soviet state and the ideology that undergirded it. In 1982, he confidently proclaimed in a speech to the British Parliament that Marxism-Leninism was doomed ‘to the ash heap of history’. The next year, before the National Association of Evangelicals, in Orlando, Florida, Reagan described the Soviet Union as ‘the focus of evil in the modern world’. He implored his audience to resist ‘the aggressive impulses of an evil Empire’, emphasizing that the struggle against communism was at root a moral one ‘between right and wrong and good and evil’. That Manichean reformulation of the Cold War as a righteous battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness suggested that no quarter could be given, no detente era compromises risked.

Reagan was determined to expand the nation’s nuclear and conventional military capabilities before engaging in any serious negotiations with the Soviets. ‘Peace through strength’ became a favourite catchphrase of the president and his defence planners; that oft-repeated slogan also served to rationalize the administration’s initially desultory approach to arms control negotiations. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, the Republican president and his top foreign policy advisers were convinced that, over the previous

## THE COLD WAR: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

decade, American power had declined relative to that of the Soviet Union. Alexander M. Haig, Jr, Reagan's first secretary of state, claimed that when he assumed office in January 1981 the Soviet Union 'possessed greater military power than the United States, which had gone into a truly alarming military decline even before the withdrawal from Vietnam accelerated the weakening trend.'

To reverse that supposed weakening trend, Reagan set a five-year defence spending target of \$1.6 trillion, more than \$400 billion over the already substantial increase projected by Carter during his final year in the White House. It was the largest peacetime arms build-up in US history. 'Defense is not a budget item', Reagan told the Pentagon. 'Spend what you need.' Among other priorities, he revived the expensive B-1 bomber programme, approved development of the B-2 (Stealth) bomber, accelerated deployment of the controversial MX (Missile Experimental) and the sophisticated Trident submarine missile system, expanded the Navy from 450 to 600 ships, and pumped substantial new funds into the CIA to support an enhanced covert arm. Although Reagan presented his military expansion as a drive simply to regain America's 'margin of safety', it actually represented a bid to reestablish US strategic superiority – a status that Reagan and many fellow conservatives had never been willing to surrender in the first place.

Not surprisingly, Russia's rulers grew progressively more alarmed at the belligerent rhetoric and assertive behaviour of the most hostile US administration they had faced in at least two decades. Just as vigilant as the Americans in gauging both the capabilities and

intentions of their principal adversary, Soviet defence officials worried that the United States might be seeking to develop the potential for a devastating first strike against Soviet missile silos and industrial centres. Those suspicions multiplied after Reagan's unveiling of his Strategic Defense Initiative in March 1983. The president announced in a public speech that he was ordering 'a comprehensive and intensive effort' to 'search for ways to reduce the danger of nuclear war' through the development of a defensive missile shield. Reagan sketched a Utopian vision of a future free from nuclear danger: 'What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?'

Most experts considered a comprehensive missile shield technologically unfeasible. Nonetheless, the surprise initiative raised the spectre of more limited defensive systems that could eventually render the prevailing structure of mutual deterrence null and void, thereby destabilizing the Soviet-American strategic balance. No less an expert than former Secretary of Defense McNamara observed that the Soviets could be forgiven for believing that with SDI the United States was seeking a first strike capability. That is precisely what some did believe. Yuri Andropov, who became the Soviet leader after the death of Brezhnev in November 1982, exclaimed that the Reagan administration was embarking on 'an extremely dangerous path'. The former KGB chief condemned SDI as 'a bid to disarm the Soviet Union in the face of the U.S. nuclear threat'.

## THE COLD WAR: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

During the second half of 1983, US–Soviet relations reached a nadir. On 1 September 1983, Soviet air defences shot down a Korean civilian airliner en route from Anchorage, Alaska, that had inadvertently strayed into Russian airspace, killing all 269 passengers, including 61 Americans. The next day, Reagan went on national television to denounce what he termed the ‘Korean airline massacre’ as a completely unjustified ‘crime against humanity’. He called it ‘an act of barbarism, born of a society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life’. Unwarranted Soviet suspicions that the plane had been on an espionage mission and their failure to show much remorse for the tragic episode combined with the Reagan administration’s rhetorical overreaction to heighten tensions further. Andropov, in rapidly failing health at the time, complained about the ‘outrageous militarist psychosis’ prevalent in Washington. Then, in early November, NATO went ahead with a scheduled military exercise that so frightened Soviet intelligence specialists they suspected it might be a prelude to, and cover for, a full-scale nuclear strike against the Soviet Union. The Kremlin ordered a military alert, and US intelligence learned that nuclear-capable aircraft had been placed on stand-by at East German air bases. Soviet leaders had truly come to believe the Reagan administration capable of undertaking a pre-emptive nuclear war. In December, Soviet representatives withdrew from the ongoing, if largely unproductive, arms control negotiations at Geneva. They were protesting the recent deployment of the initial batch of US Pershing II and Cruise missiles in Western Europe. For the first time in 15 years, US and Soviet negotiators were no longer even talking to each other in any forum.

Yet for all its rhetorical and budgetary bluster, the Reagan administration took pains to avoid any direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union. The only major deployment of US armed forces against what was identified as a Soviet client state took place in tiny Grenada, in October 1983. The United States mounted a 7,000-man invasion force to topple an indigenous Marxist regime that had recently gained power in that Caribbean island via a bloody coup, and to save in the process several dozen supposedly endangered American medical students. US troops overwhelmed Grenada’s 600-man army and 636 Cuban construction workers – to clamorous public acclaim throughout the United States. More characteristic of Reagan’s approach, however, and of much greater significance to his Cold War strategy, was the stepped-up provision of assistance, often of a covert nature, to anti-communist guerrillas battling against Soviet-supported regimes throughout the Third World. In what came to be called the Reagan Doctrine, the United States vied to roll back Soviet power on the periphery through the use of indigenous, anti-leftist insurgents as proxy warriors – principally in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, and Cambodia. In his January 1985 state-of-the-union address Reagan proclaimed: ‘We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives – on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua – to defy Soviet-supported aggression.’ Yet, grandiloquent rhetoric aside, one of the most telling aspects of the American effort to challenge Soviet-backed governments in the Third World was the administration’s reluctance in so doing to risk either the lives of regular US military personnel or the possibility of a direct clash with the Soviet Union.



**12. Afghan mujaheddin rebels with captured Soviet weapons, near Matun, 1979.**

## Countervailing pressures

The Reagan administration's aggressive approach to the Cold War met with opposition not just from an unnerved Soviet ruling circle but from within the West as well. Key NATO allies recoiled from what some saw as an overly belligerent, and excessively dangerous, American stance. 'The first half of the 1980s saw a recurrent pattern' notes historian David Reynolds – 'the United States at odds with the Soviets *and* with its European allies as well'. Public opinion within Western Europe, and within the United States itself, registered deep unease about the sure-to-be catastrophic consequences of a nuclear war that suddenly appeared less unthinkable than it had been for nearly a generation. Allied and public pressure exerted powerful

countervailing pressures on the Reagan administration, pushing it back to the negotiating table by mid-decade, even before the advent of the Mikhail Gorbachev regime provided it with an eager and compliant negotiating partner.

Discord within the Atlantic alliance was nothing new, of course. Inter-allied disputes had wracked NATO since its earliest days – over decolonization, Suez, Vietnam, defence-sharing, and numerous issues of broad Cold War strategy. Yet the intensity of the clashes between the United States and its European partners reached unprecedented proportions during Reagan's first term in office. Poland served as one especially nettlesome source of conflict. In December 1981, the Soviet-backed government of General Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law on its restive citizens, cracking down on the independent, non-communist labour union *Solidarity*. America's European allies resisted Reagan's vigorous push for broad-based sanctions against Moscow as punishment for unleashing 'the forces of tyranny' against Poland. They confined themselves to a modest ban on new credits to the Warsaw government. Hardliners in the Reagan administration fumed; they privately castigated the Europeans as unprincipled appeasers who were unwilling to take any action that might jeopardize lucrative trade links with the Eastern bloc. To force the issue, the administration used the Polish crackdown as a pretext for subverting a planned natural gas pipeline deal between the Soviet Union and several Western European countries, thereby precipitating a far more serious European–American clash of interests.

Following West Germany's lead, several European countries had agreed to help construct a 3,500-mile pipeline that would connect Siberia's vast natural gas fields to Western European markets. The mammoth \$15 billion pipeline project would lessen European dependence on energy resources from the unstable Middle East while strengthening East–West trade links and providing needed jobs to a Europe mired in recession. Worried that the pipeline might lead some of its closest allies to become too reliant economically on the Soviet Union and hence vulnerable to a form of economic blackmail, Reagan announced a prohibition on the sale of US pipeline technology to the Soviet Union within weeks of Poland's martial law proclamation. In June 1982, the president applied even stronger pressure, ordering that any European firms utilizing US-licensed technology or equipment as well as any American subsidiaries operating in Europe must revoke all contracts for pipeline-related work. The abrupt US action infuriated European leaders. The French foreign minister charged that the United States had declared 'economic warfare on her allies' and warned that this could be 'the beginning of the end of the Atlantic Alliance'. With characteristic bluntness, West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt snapped: 'For all practical purposes, U.S. policy has taken on a form that suggests an end to friendship and partnership.' Even British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, America's most loyal ally and Europe's most anti-Soviet political leader, was outraged by Reagan's heavy-handedness. 'The question is whether one very powerful nation can prevent existing contracts from being fulfilled', she observed. 'I think it is wrong to do that.'

In the face of those vigorous protests, the Reagan administration backed off. In November 1982, after six months of testy negotiations, it jettisoned its policy of sanctions. The episode drove home to policy-makers in Washington the deep reluctance of Western Europeans to tear the fabric of the Euro-Soviet detente that had proven both popular and economically beneficial. Although Soviet–American detente had unravelled at the end of the 1970s, its European variant maintained its momentum. By the early 1980s, close to half a million West German jobs were tied to trade with the East; the pipeline deal, moreover, seemed a godsend to energy-dependent Western Europeans. Why renounce lucrative commercial transactions with the Soviet bloc, asked European diplomats, politicians, and businessmen, just to placate an ally that had itself recently resumed grain sales to the Soviet Union to honour a campaign promise made by Reagan to American farmers? US hypocrisy grated on European sensibilities nearly as much as US arrogance. And, in a still broader sense, European defence planners did not see the Soviet threat in the same apocalyptic terms as did their colleagues across the Atlantic.

The deployment of a new generation of US intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe proved the most contentious trans-Atlantic issue of all. It pitted not only the United States against certain European governments, but also pitted some of those same governments against their own people. The problem originated in 1977 with the Soviet deployment of its mobile, land-based SS-20s in European Russia, most of which were targeted at Germany. The Carter administration at first proposed countering the new Soviet

## THE COLD WAR: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

deployment with an enhanced radiation weapon, termed the neutron bomb. When Carter decided, in 1978, not to deploy the controversial neutron bomb, he angered Chancellor Schmidt who was already grumbling about American unreliability. NATO's decision, just two weeks before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, to dispatch 572 Pershing II and Cruise missiles to Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands grew out of the neutron bomb fiasco. Yet the decision was a contingent one since it was coupled with a commitment to press ahead simultaneously with new arms control talks with the Soviets aimed at achieving a stable balance of theatre nuclear weapons in Europe – the so-called 'dual track'. If successful, or so many Europeans hoped, those talks might foreclose the need to follow through with the promised US deployments. Upon assuming power, Reagan vowed to move forward expeditiously with the intermediate nuclear force (INF) deployments, but his publicly expressed disdain for arms control agreements meant that the continuing talks with the Soviets would almost certainly go nowhere.

The prospect of new US nuclear weapons on European soil, in conjunction with the pronounced chill in Soviet–American relations and the overheated anti-communist rhetoric emanating from the White House, prompted the deepest level of public concern about the nuclear arms race in decades. The imminent introduction of the Pershing II and Cruise missiles, as a result, helped trigger a massive, broad-based peace movement throughout Western Europe. In West Germany, the 'Krefeld Appeal' of November 1980, advanced by major religious and political groups, soon gained over 2.5 million

signatures in support of its central plank: 'atomic death threatens us all – no atomic weapons in Europe'. In October 1981, millions of Europeans joined mass protest rallies against American – and Soviet – missile deployments. Bonn, London, and Rome hosted rallies that each attracted over 250,000 demonstrators. The next month, 500,000 marched in Amsterdam in the biggest mass protest in Dutch history. Reagan had unwittingly added fuel to the fire when, just prior to the peace marches, he responded to a reporter's question by commenting that a battlefield exchange of nuclear weapons could occur without 'it bringing either one of the major powers to push the button'. The remark garnered sensational headlines in Europe – since Europe would of course be the 'battlefield' to which Reagan so casually alluded. When the American president visited France and West Germany in June 1982, he was greeted with more mass demonstrations, including a peaceful gathering of 350,000 anti-nuclear protestors along the banks of the Rhine River in Bonn and a boisterous crowd of over 100,000 in West Berlin. The latter assemblage gathered in defiance of a ban imposed against all demonstrations during the Reagan visit, touching off a major riot. In October 1983, several million more Europeans took to the streets of London, Rome, Bonn, Hamburg, Vienna, Brussels, The Hague, Stockholm, Paris, Dublin, Copenhagen, and other major cities in an impressive, albeit unsuccessful, final effort to block the INF deployments.

The European peace movement enjoyed broad support. From early 1983 onwards, the two leading opposition political parties in Great Britain and West Germany – Labour and the Social Democrats –

came out against the Pershing II and Cruise missiles. Trade union, church, and student groups throughout Western Europe also gravitated to the anti-nuclear cause. According to a 1982 poll, approval of the peace movement in the major NATO countries ranged from a low of 55% to a high of 81%. After reviewing the poll data, chief US arms negotiator Paul Nitze admitted at a State Department meeting: 'We have a political problem in Europe.'



**14. Anti-nuclear demonstrators in Brussels carry a mock effigy of President Reagan, October 1981.**

The Reagan administration faced a political problem at home as well, where growing public consciousness about the danger of nuclear war gave rise to the largest peace coalition since the Vietnam War. As in Western Europe, the churches proved instrumental to the movement. The influential World Council of Churches advocated a halt to the nuclear arms race, as did the ordinarily apolitical Roman

Catholic Bishops of the United States. In a 150-page pastoral letter of May 1983, the Catholic Bishops stressed: 'We are the first generation since Genesis with the power to virtually destroy God's creation.' They also proclaimed, in a direct repudiation of administration policy, that 'the quest for nuclear superiority must be rejected'. Medical and scientific voices joined the debate, emphasizing the calamitous human consequences of nuclear war. Some scientists talked of a 'nuclear winter' that would follow any major nuclear conflict, disastrously cooling the earth's temperature to the extent that much plant and animal life would be extinguished. To illustrate the impact upon a typical American city, Physicians for Social Responsibility publicized what a one-megaton nuclear bomb hitting central Boston would mean: more than 2 million deaths, with the downtown area obliterated, and the surrounding suburbs reeling from the explosion and its accompanying radiation effects. The *Detroit Free Press* superimposed a target over Detroit in a Sunday magazine supplement, with a related story about the frightening levels of death and devastation that a nuclear attack would visit on that city. Jonathan Schell's best-selling book *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) contained compendious, grisly details about the aftermath of nuclear war. And, most influential of all, ABC television broadcast 'The Day After', a show watched by 100 million Americans that vividly dramatized the aftermath of a nuclear attack in the city of Lawrence, Kansas. Reagan was sufficiently alarmed about the cultural impact of 'The Day After' that he had Secretary of State George P. Shultz appear on ABC immediately afterwards in an effort to help modulate the public reaction.





Next Page

**15. Anti-nuclear demonstration in New York City, 12 June 1982.**

The nuclear freeze movement, which peaked between 1982 and 1984, served as the chief political fruit of the growing anti-nuclear consciousness among the American populace. A 12 June 1982 demonstration in New York's Central Park drew close to one million people in support of a freeze on each of the superpowers' nuclear arsenals. It still ranks as the largest political demonstration in the nation's history. The movement garnered strong support within the

Congress as well. On 4 May 1983, in fact, the House of Representatives approved a nuclear freeze resolution by the decisive vote of 278 to 149. Public opinion polls registered approval ratings of no less than 70% for the nuclear freeze movement throughout these years. Polls also offer some of the strongest evidence for the general public unease with the military policies of the Reagan administration. According to one poll, 50% of a representative sample of American citizens believed that the nation would be safer if its leaders spent more time negotiating with the Soviets and less time building up military forces; only 22% disagreed. Similarly, a Gallup poll of December 1983 reported that 47% of Americans believed that the Reagan military build-up had brought the United States 'closer to war' rather than 'closer to peace', whereas only 28% disagreed.

In response to those political realities, Reagan deliberately softened his rhetoric as 1984 began. Some of his closest political advisers had persuaded the president that foreign policy issues loomed as his greatest potential liability with American voters in that year's presidential election and that a more conciliatory approach towards the Soviet Union would strengthen his bid for re-election. Secretary of State Shultz was also pushing strongly for re-engagement with the Russians. Consequently, in an important speech that January,

---

**Beware the bear**

**One of the most memorable television advertisements run**

**by the Reagan campaign during the 1984 election featured a large, menacing brown bear. As the bear crashed through a forest, the narrator solemnly explained: ‘There is a bear in the woods. For some people, the bear is easy to see. Others don’t see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it’s vicious, and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who’s right, isn’t it smart to be as strong as the bear – if there is a bear?’ The allegorical commercial was intended, quite obviously, to remind voters that Reagan remained unwilling to risk the nation’s security by dropping its guard at a time when the unpredictable Russian bear was still on the prowl.**

---

Reagan offered an olive branch to Moscow, calling 1984 ‘a year of opportunities for peace’ and declaring a willingness to renew negotiations. In the peroration to that speech, drafted by Reagan himself, the president sketched a vivid portrait of two ordinary American and Soviet couples – ‘Jim and Sally’ and ‘Ivan and Anya’ – who each longed for peace between their respective countries. On 24 September, in the midst of the election campaign, Reagan proposed before the UN General Assembly that a new Soviet–American negotiating framework be established that would combine under one umbrella three different nuclear arms talks: on intermediate nuclear forces (INF), on strategic arms limitations (START), and on anti-satellite weapons (ASAT).

Shortly after Reagan’s resounding re-election in November, Moscow

agreed to participate in negotiations under that framework. Constantin Chernenko, who had ascended to the position of first secretary of the Communist Party in February 1984, after Andropov’s death, approved the commencement of the new talks. They began in March 1985, but quickly bogged down; the main obstacle to progress proved Reagan’s coveted missile defence programme, an initiative the Soviets still considered dangerously destabilizing. The opening of the talks happened to coincide with an internal Soviet development of far greater import for the future: the replacement of the sickly Chernenko, after just over one year in power, with a dramatically different type of Soviet leader.

## **Gorbachev and the end of the Cold War**

The accession, in March 1985, of Mikhail S. Gorbachev to the position of general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party stands as the most critical turning point in the Cold War’s final phase – the one factor, above all others, that hastened the end of the Cold War and the radical transformation in Soviet–American relations that accompanied it. The dynamic, 54-year-old Gorbachev made virtually all of the major concessions that led to landmark arms reduction agreements in the late 1980s. Through a series of wholly unexpected, often unilateral, overtures and concessions, he succeeded in changing the entire tenor of the Soviet–American relationship, in the end depriving the United States of the enemy whose presumably expansionist designs it had been seeking to thwart for the past 45 years. Absent this remarkable individual, the

astonishing changes of the 1985–90 period become nearly inconceivable.

Gorbachev and his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, advanced dramatic new ideas about security, nuclear weapons, and the relationship of both to their highest priorities: domestic reform and the revitalization of socialism. Influenced by a changing intellectual milieu in the Soviet Union, shaped in part by Soviet scientists and foreign policy experts with broad exposure to the West and close contact with their Western counterparts, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze injected 'new thinking' into both the staid Kremlin leadership circle and the stalled Soviet–American dialogue. 'My impression is that he's really decided to end the arms race no matter what', Gorbachev's aide Anatoly Chernayev noted about his boss in early 1986: 'He is taking this 'risk' because, as he understands, it's no risk at all because nobody would attack us even if we disarmed completely. And in order to get the country out on solid ground, we have to relieve it of the burden of the arms race, which is a drain on more than just the economy.'\*

Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had reached the conclusion that the arms race was self-defeating; it added nothing to the nation's real security while burdening an already strapped economy. 'Traditional centuries-old notions of national security as the defense of the country from external military threat have been shaken by profound structural and qualitative shifts in human civilization,' insisted Shevardnadze, 'the result of the growing role of science and technology and the increasing political, economic, social, and

information interdependence of the world.'

True security, Gorbachev asserted, could only be provided 'by political means', not military means. Global 'interdependence', he emphasized, 'is such that all peoples are similar to climbers roped together on the mountainside. They either can climb together to the summit or fall together into the abyss.' Any 'striving for military superiority', he commented on another occasion, 'means chasing one's own tail.' Convinced that no rational person or state would use nuclear weapons, and that the Soviet Union possessed at any rate a sufficient nuclear arsenal for national self-protection, the new leaders thought the overarching goal of Soviet foreign policy should be to encourage a joint nuclear, and conventional, arms build-down with the United States. Doing so, they believed, would simultaneously foster a safer and more secure international environment and free up resources needed for long-overdue internal reforms of their deeply troubled economic system. Gorbachev's domestic push for *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) was thus intimately linked from the first with his determination to halt the arms race with the United States and to bring an abrupt end to the relationship of poisonous hostility that had developed between the superpowers since the end of detente.

The rapid-fire series of events that transpired between 1985 and 1990 stunned governmental decision-makers, foreign policy experts, and ordinary citizens alike across the world. Yet those epochal events, it is now evident, were preceded and conditioned by the new thinking about security, nuclear weapons, and domestic needs that

animated all of Gorbachev's dealings with the United States, Eastern Europe, and the world at large. Ronald Reagan, the most unequivocally anti-communist American leader of the entire Cold War era, suddenly found a Soviet leader saying yes to arms control faster than he could say no, moving to 'deideologize' Moscow's foreign policy, offering unilateral concessions on conventional armed forces, and vowing to remove Soviet troops from Afghanistan. To his great credit, Reagan proved willing first to moderate, and then to abandon, deeply held personal convictions about the malignant nature of communism, thereby permitting a genuine rapprochement to occur.

The two men met five separate times between 1985 and 1988, developing a stronger rapport with each summit. After a get-acquainted summit at Geneva in November 1985 that produced little of substance but markedly improved the atmospherics of the Soviet-American relationship, Gorbachev convinced Reagan to attend a hastily arranged meeting at Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986. There, the two leaders came remarkably close to a decision to eliminate all ballistic missiles. In the end, though, Reagan's insistence on continuing with his SDI initiative led the Soviet leader to withdraw the breathtaking proposals he had placed on the table. Yet the setback at Reykjavik proved but temporary. Shortly thereafter, Gorbachev dropped his insistence that America's abandonment of SDI must be a prerequisite for progress on all arms control matters, and moved to accept the 'zero option' first put forward by US negotiators back in 1981 – and then largely as a propaganda ploy since it so plainly favoured the American side.

Gorbachev's concessions led to the conclusion of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, signed at the December 1987 Washington summit. Reagan, in his public remarks, jocularly repeated what he called an old Russian maxim: '*doveryai no proveryai* – trust, but verify'. The Soviet ruler offered a more soaring vision. 'May December 8, 1987, become a date that will be inscribed in the history books,' he declared, 'a date that will mark the watershed separating the era of a mounting risk of nuclear war from the era of a demilitarization of human life.' The INF Treaty, rapidly ratified by the US Senate, led to the destruction of 1,846 Soviet nuclear weapons and 846 US weapons within three years, with each side allowing close, and unprecedented, inspection of the other side's nuclear sites. For the first time in the atomic era, an actual class of nuclear weapons was being not just limited but eliminated.

Reagan's trip to Moscow in the spring of 1988 testified even more powerfully to the ongoing transformation in Soviet-American relations – and the Cold War. The leaders of the two superpowers were now plainly treating each other more as friendly partners than as enemies. The American president even disavowed his previous depiction of the Soviet state as an evil empire. When asked by a reporter if he still thought of the Soviet Union in such terms, Reagan replied: 'No. I was talking about another time, another era.' In his public comments before departing Moscow, the man who had issued some of the harshest denunciations of the Soviet state since the Cold War's inception asked Gorbachev to 'tell the people of the Soviet Union of the deep feelings of friendship' that he, his wife Nancy, and the American people had towards them. He expressed 'hope for a

## THE COLD WAR: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

new era in human history, an era of peace between our nations and peoples'. Certainly the images of Reagan and Gorbachev amiably strolling arm-in-arm across Red Square and the American president speaking with his trademark avuncular charm to students at Moscow State University, in front of a huge bust of Lenin no less, spoke volumes about the remarkable metamorphosis that had taken place.



**13. Reagan and Gorbachev stroll together in Moscow's Red Square during Reagan's May 1988 visit to Moscow.**

In December 1988, Gorbachev made another visit to the United States to meet with Reagan, one last time, while also conducting discussions with – and sizing up – president-elect George Bush. That trip coincided with a major speech the Soviet leader delivered at the United Nations, in which he revealed his intention to reduce unilaterally Soviet military forces by 500,000 troops. 'Perhaps not since Woodrow Wilson presented his Fourteen Points in 1918 or since Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill promulgated the Atlantic Charter in 1941', gushed the *New York Times* in a lead editorial, 'has a world figure demonstrated the vision Mikhail Gorbachev displayed yesterday at the United Nations.'

Gorbachev's proposal led to a significant reduction of the Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe. It also signalled, as did a series of his public and private statements, that the Kremlin leadership was discarding the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine – the notion that the Soviet Union would use force, if necessary, to maintain rigid control over each of its Warsaw Pact allies. With the loosening of the Soviet grip, Eastern European dissidents exulted, old-line communist *apparatchiks* quaked. What followed with remarkable speed were popular democratic revolutions that swept out of power every communist regime in Eastern Europe, beginning with Poland in mid-1989, where the once-banned *Solidarity* formed a new government, and ending with the violent denouement of the Nicolae Ceausescu regime in Romania at year's close. The event that most powerfully symbolized the crumbling of the old order was the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November. That infamous 28-mile-long concrete barrier had come to signify not just the division of

## THE COLD WAR: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

Germany's former capital, but the division of Europe as a whole. As the wall disintegrated, so too did Europe's East–West divide. 'The total dismantling of socialism as a world phenomenon has been proceeding', Anatoly Chernayev wrote in his diary. 'And a common fellow from Stavropol set this process in motion.' To the delight of the Bush administration, which wisely chose not to exult at the repudiation of Eastern Europe's communist states, Gorbachev – that common fellow from Stavropol – simply let events run their course.

In many respects, the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the concomitant implosion not just of Eastern Europe's communist governments but of the entire Warsaw Pact alliance system meant the end of the Cold War. The ideological contest was now over. Neither communism nor the Soviet state any longer posed a serious threat to the security of the United States or its allies. Many observers have, accordingly, cited 1989 as the Cold War's terminal date. Yet, at that point, one crucial issue remained unresolved: the status of Germany. It was the very issue, moreover, whose importance and intractability first precipitated the Soviet–American breach in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl's West German government began pressing for reunification once the wall came down, presenting the Kremlin with a daunting strategic dilemma. Gorbachev had calculated that Soviet security no longer demanded the preservation of compliant, satellite regimes in Eastern Europe. But Germany was different. A divided Germany had formed a core element of Soviet security policy ever since Stalin's reign. 'We had paid an enormous price for it',

noted Shevardnadze, 'and to write it off was inconceivable. The memory of the war was stronger than the new concepts about the limits of security.' In the end, though, Gorbachev accepted by mid-1990 the inevitability of a reunified Germany. Unwilling to use force to thwart what seemed the near irresistible momentum towards unity, the Soviet leader took solace in Bush's assurances that Germany would remain enmeshed in the Western security system. Gorbachev's greatest fear was of an unharnessed, newly empowered Germany becoming a future menace to Russian security – the exact same fear, it bears emphasizing, that lay behind Stalin's approach to the German problem during and right after World War II. The record of over four decades of German democracy, however, served to dilute those fears. Coupled with the American insistence that Germany would



**16. The Berlin Wall comes down, November 1989.**

## THE COLD WAR: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

remain locked into, rather than independent from, NATO, that record of peace, stability, and democratic governance helped assuage Gorbachev's anxieties.

By the summer of 1990, the Soviets, Americans, British, French, and Germans agreed that the two Germanies would henceforth constitute a single, sovereign country that would remain anchored to the NATO alliance. With German power now fully co-opted in the Western coalition, one of the greatest Cold War worries of US officialdom – that of a unified, pro-Soviet Germany – disappeared. The succinct observation of Brent Scowcroft, Bush's National Security Adviser, that 'the Cold War ended when the Soviets accepted a united Germany in NATO' thus seems essentially correct. The year 1990, rather than 1989, truly marked the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, the product of forces set in motion by Gorbachev's reforms that he proved unable to control, stands as a critically important historical event in its own right, but an anti-climactic one insofar as the Cold War is concerned. By the time the Soviet Union disappeared, the Cold War itself was already history.

\* This and several of the following quotes, along with much of the line of analysis presented in this section, are drawn from an unpublished essay by Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Beginning and the End: Time, Context, and the Cold War," in *The Cold War in the 1980's*, ed. Olav Njolstad (London, forthcoming).