

## **Anglo-American Relations and Gorbachev's perestroika: a path of convergence or divergence? (1985-1991)**

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### ***Introduction***

This paper will look into the evolution of Western perception vis a vis the Soviet Union and the perestroika process from 1985 to 1991 through the lens of the Anglo-American relations.

The declassification of massive western archival materials which took place in the last years allowed the scholarly debate to assess the theme of the evolution of the Western perspective towards both the economic and political reforms promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev and their consequences on the East-West division.

"I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together". The famous remark by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, uttered in the aftermath of her first summit with the Soviet Leader in December 1984, before he was appointed as a Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, anticipated the rationale of the Anglo-Soviet relations in the second half of the 1980s. Indeed, the British government was at the forefront in the European effort to promote dialogue and cooperation with the new Soviet leadership, albeit with varying intensity over the years.

As for the United States, scholarly debate has outlined the rather inconsistent decision – making process of both the Reagan and Bush administration towards the Soviet issue in the Gorbachev years, mainly due to the inner rifts which characterized the US establishment towards the problem of the connection between domestic reforms and foreign policy of the USSR, as well as the impact of the Gorbachev's "new thinking" on East-West confrontation.

Taking into account motivations and features of both the UK and the US attitude towards the Soviet Union from the Gorbachev's rise to power until the demise of the USSR, the paper aims at tackling the issue whether convergence or divergence mostly characterized the US-UK special relationship in dealing with the Gorbachev-led Soviet Union.

### ***From (inconsistent) optimism to (hopeful) realism: the United States facing Gorbachev's USSR from Reagan to Bush sr.***

The evolution of the U.S. position toward the USSR during the Gorbachev years can be roughly divided into three different phases. The first period, which ran from 1985 to 1988, coincided with Gorbachev's rise to power and the first steps of the perestroika reforms and the second term of

the Reagan presidency. Intense bilateral dialogue characterized these years, although divisions within the Reagan administration over the assessment of the actual significance of the perestroika process and the overall handling of the Soviet question prevented the new climate of cooperation from translating into any concrete political results beyond the conclusion of the INF Treaty. The second phase coincides with 1989, when there was a drastic downsizing of bilateral ties, mainly due to the transfer of power from the Reagan to the Bush administration and the uncertain elaboration of a new U.S. strategic approach toward the USSR. The third and final period covers the years 1990 and 1991, in which first the waning of the USSR's control in East-Central Europe and then the crisis and collapse of the USSR itself prompted U.S. decision makers to gradually abandon the support granted so far to Mikhail Gorbachev and his system of power.

As far as the early phase is concerned, historiography has outlined the rather inconsistent decision – making process of the Reagan administration *vis a vis* the perestroika. Indeed, in the second half of the 1980s, U.S. policy circles appeared divided into two different camps. On the one side, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and the CIA were reading the perestroika process through the traditional Cold War lens, believing that it could pave the way for gradual openings in Soviet society, but could not lead to a political rethinking of the Soviet system or an overall revisiting of the fundamental logic of bipolar competition. On the other side, President Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz, as well as the US Ambassador to Moscow Matlock, attributed to Soviet reforms the potential to bring about systemic change, both in Russia's domestic and international sphere. In particular, the assessment of the impact of the political and economic reforms promoted by the new Soviet leadership on the USSR foreign and security policy led to profound divisions both within the Republican administration, as well as between the political and diplomatic circles and the intelligence service. On the one hand, the CIA and the "hawks" of the Reagan administration viewed the perestroika and glasnost reforms as merely tactical, aimed at enabling the Soviet regime to lift the country's difficult economic situation as well as reinvigorate the regime's grip on the population, the Kremlin's ultimate goal being the resumption of systemic competition between the two blocs. As assessed in a November 1987 CIA report, perestroika foreign policy was likely to be marked by continuity rather than change, being based on the traditional goals of Soviet international behavior (**quote**): “first and foremost enhancing the security of the Soviet homeland; expanding Soviet influence worldwide; advancing Communism at the expense of capitalism around the globe; improve Moscow's abilities to compete with the West, and more effectively advance Soviet influence in the global power arena”

On the other hand, president Reagan and his inner circle portrayed the new Soviet reform process as fueled by genuine considerations, both domestically and internationally. While the final

domestic outcome of the reforms was difficult to predict, ranging from superficial and minor modifications to the *status quo* to structural and systemic changes, the implications of the perestroika process on the bipolar system was likely to be extremely significant. In Reagan's view, "nations don't fear each other because they are armed; they arm because they fear each other". Therefore, the revision of the ideological pillars of the Soviet system, embodied in the reforms of the perestroika, could not but to lead to an easing of confrontation between the two blocs. As scholarly debate and the memoirs of key U.S. decisions-makers, as well as the release of new declassified archival materials have extensively highlighted, the political division within the US establishment over how to properly assess and to effectively manage the USSR issue, prevented the Reagan administration from seizing the innovative visions that were emerged in Moscow, both in terms of domestic reforms and foreign policy.

The first year of George H. W. Bush administration coincided with the historical 1989, and it was marked by a fundamental change in the U.S. posture towards Gorbachev's USSR. While as vice-president Bush was supportive of a position of dialogue and openness toward Moscow, the early months of his presidency were characterized by a rather cold attitude toward Gorbachev. The infamous pause in U.S. -USSR relations in 1989 was motivated by the internal needs of the new president to assume an independent profile from his predecessor, as well as by the rigid "realism" that inspired his foreign policy staff. According to James Baker and Dick Cheney, respectively Secretary of State and Secretary of the Defense of the new administration, the perestroika and glasnost reforms, regardless of their genuine or instrumental rationale, did not have the potential to impact on the bipolar structure of the international system. In this context, ambassador John Matlock continued to embody the Reagan's vision of the perestroika, namely a domestic process with inescapable long-term or even mid-term international consequences. It was the "geopolitical" revolution of the late 1989 and the demise of the Soviet external empire in Eastern Europe which triggered the resumption of a direct and intense dialogue between Washington and Moscow. In particular, the USSR's decision to refrain from the use of force to prevent the dismantling of its bloc, as well as the U.S. official stance of "non - interference" in the developments which were taking place in Europe, played a pivotal role in restoring a climate of mutual trust and understanding between the two superpowers.

In 1990-1991 two key assumptions shaped the U.S. policy towards USSR. Firstly, the belief that, especially in the aftermath of the December 1989 Malta summit, the post-Cold war era had begun, as structural changes in Eastern Europe eroded one of the fundamental paradigms of the bipolar confrontation, namely the division of the continent. Secondly, the extreme caution that inspired the Bush administration's stance towards the crisis of the Soviet state. The outbreak of the nationalities issue, hitherto a rather marginal aspect of the U.S. strategic assessments of the Soviet

question, caught Washington decision-makers by surprise. The concern about the consequences of the breakup of the Soviet Union, mainly in terms of European balance of power and control of nuclear weapons, was the most recurrent topic of the U.S. strategic debate vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. In particular, the risk of a USSR turned into a kind of “Yugoslavia with nuclear” represented the worst - case scenario in the Department of the State documents. Therefore, the Bush administration endeavored to backing the Gorbachev’s effort to preserve the unity of the country through a reformed federalist structure. However, U.S. support to the Kremlin was motivated much more by apprehension for the unpredictable outcome of the Soviet disintegration than by the reliance in Gorbachev’s capacity of managing the Soviet crisis. The events of late 1991 persuaded the United States to abandon their unconditional support to the perestroika’s leader and to consider the collapse of the Soviet state as the inevitable outcome of the crisis.

***The relevance of the “human factor”: Margaret Thatcher’s unconditional support for Gorbachev’s domestic reforms (far less for his foreign policy)***

The “special relationship” between Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher undoubtedly played an essential role in building mutual understanding between Moscow and European countries in the second half of 1980s. The British Prime Minister was the only Western leader who had the opportunity to meet the future Soviet General Secretary before his official appointment in March 1985. The first meeting between Margaret Thatcher and Mikhail Gorbachev, then chief ideologist of the Politburo (a kind of “new Suslov”) and Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Foreign Affairs Committee, took place in December 1984 and was extremely revealing of the logic of their future personal and political ties.

Although foreign policy represented the official purpose of the trip, both sides showed considerable interest in the issue of the domestic reform of the Soviet Union. As suggested by Anatoly Chernyaev, at the time deputy head of the Central Committee’s International Department and in charge for contacts with British left-wing political parties, who later become Gorbachev’s principal assistant for international affairs, the visit paid by Gorbachev to London could pave the way for placing additional emphasis on Soviet-European relations as well as for softening the anti-American hard line pursued by Gromyko-led Soviet diplomacy. For the British Prime Minister, holding the official meeting with the Soviet delegation at the beginning of his second term underscored the political and strategic goal of gaining greater autonomy for the British position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in the context of transatlantic relations. Indeed, while West Germany and France strove over the years to devise a distinct European strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet bloc (from the Gaullist "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals" formula to the FRG’s Ostpolitik pursued by Willy Brandt), British

diplomacy, especially during the Thatcher years, appeared to be largely subordinate to U.S. global strategy and insufficiently "European-minded." Foreign policy issues also seemed to be the dominant motif of the visit in several public speeches delivered in London. For example, addressing British parliamentarians, Gorbachev referred for the first time to a "common European home", although at that point it was still more of a metaphor than a political project. He also declared that "the nuclear age inevitably imposes new political thinking".

Yet, it became clear during their conversations that for both sides the main interest of the trip lay elsewhere, in the realm of internal policy and especially in the international-domestic nexus. In Gorbachev's view, only the easing of international tensions, the slowing of the arms race and the reduction of Soviet power projection worldwide would enable the USSR to overcome the growing development gap separating the country from the West, and to raise the standard of living of the population. As far as Margaret Thatcher is concerned, since the inception of Gorbachev's era she was extremely persuaded that the issue of the domestic reform and its future perspectives was the crucial point in the supposed new age of the Cold War. The spreading of a liberal model in the Soviet Union could have had a far greater impact on East-West relations than some specific foreign policy initiatives or even an ideological revision of the USSR's traditional foreign policy concepts.

Therefore, the first official meeting between Thatcher and Gorbachev in December 1984 cannot but be considered emblematic of the nature of the relationship between the two leaders which unfolded in the second half of the decade. A personal chemistry, grounded on a striking similarity of character despite all the ideological difference, as well as the Gorbachev's straightforwardness which made him so different from the **(quote)** "wooden ventriloquism of the average Soviet apparatchik", coupled with a shared strategic vision which regarded the reforms of perestroika and glasnost as the pivotal and the inescapable aspects of the new era.

Thatcher's positive assessment of Gorbachev, both personally and politically, had a fundamental impact in shaping Ronald Reagan's view of the new Soviet leader. As US Secretary of State George Shultz recalled, Reagan **(quote)** "had immense confidence in her and her opinions carried great weight". In the words of Reagan himself, **(quote)** "she told me that Gorbachev was different from any of the other Kremlin leaders. She believed that there was a chance for a great opening. Of course, she was proven exactly right".

Unlike the Reagan and Bush administrations, Margaret Thatcher paid much more attention to Gorbachev's domestic perestroika than to his new thinking on foreign affairs. The British Prime Minister was betting on an eventual triumph of liberal values in the Soviet economy and politics that, in the long run, would totally transform Russia, bringing it back to Europe and linking it to the West.

Until her resignation in November 1990 and even thereafter, she remained one of the most attentive observers and enthusiastic supporter of Gorbachev's project of perestroika. Paradoxically, on a number of occasions she was much more supportive of Gorbachev's domestic strategies than of his foreign policy. For example, she was skeptical or openly critical of the INF Treaty, the exceptional and unexpected proposal of abolition of nuclear weapons, as well of his not-so-consistent approach to German unification. It was the long-standing continuity and consistency of her support for Gorbachev's domestic project that prompted Chernyaev to declare that **(quote)** "Thatcher's position on perestroika set the pace for our recognition by the West". Gorbachev himself acknowledged that Thatcher "had honestly tried to help us by mobilizing the West's help for perestroika". Therefore, an interesting and original aspect of Thatcher's bond with Gorbachev was that she realized that for the Soviet leader himself, his innovative foreign policy was, if not secondary, certainly subordinate to his main project of internal political reform. This, in turn, meant that the overall, strategic and long-term advantage for the West in dealing with Gorbachev would derive not so much from some concrete, practical and ultimately short-term successful gains in the field of foreign policy, but rather from the long-term results of his ambitious plans for the internal transformation and modernization of his country, its society and its political system. These are the reasons why, as Archie Brown wrote in his recent book *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War*, 2020 **(quote)** "Margaret Thatcher was able to become a more important partner of the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other, than any British Prime Minister since Churchill".

The official meetings between Thatcher and Gorbachev which took place in the second half of the decade held a great importance in the unfolding of the relations between the Western bloc and Moscow. Thatcher's visit to Moscow in March 1987 was the richest in political and even emotional content. Indeed, it was during these talks that, amidst what appeared to be a ritual Cold War exchange focused on mutual blaming for Soviet expansionism and Western passivity on nuclear disarmament, Gorbachev introduced a crucial argument of his nascent philosophy of new thinking: freedom of choice. Suggesting that they end the ideological debate, Gorbachev proposed they agree that both capitalism and socialism were existing realities and that every people had to make its own choice between these alternatives. By this time, as Chernyaev observes, Gorbachev already felt **(quote)** "the contradiction between the logic of perestroika and the logic of the system he was defending". It could be argued that Thatcher actually helped Gorbachev to arrive at his own subsequent conclusion, that in order to go beyond peaceful coexistence and achieve cooperation with the West, the Soviet Union would have to change radically. Another consequence of the visit was that Gorbachev turned his attention to Western Europe. He said to his advisors **(quote)**: "We have to plan our European policy seriously. Maybe we should set up a European Research Center. And remember: Western Europe is

our basic partner". Indeed, in the aftermath of the London summit, Gorbachev became increasingly interested in European affairs and, deploring Soviet lack of knowledge about the European Community, emphasized the need to study the organization, its functioning and decision-making process. Summarising his assessment of Thatcher's visit, Gorbachev emphasised the strategic place of Britain (**quote**): "Thatcher is important not only in herself but also stands for both the US and the European direction which for us has a key significance. The increase of Britain's role corresponds to our interests".

In April 1989, the Soviet leader paid an official visit to London. The practical importance of this 1989 meeting lay not so much in the rapprochement of their respective positions on disarmament and regional affairs, but in the fact that Thatcher, together with Kohl and later Mitterrand, did much to ease Gorbachev's suspicions that the new US President Bush would deviate from the course set by him and Reagan. At the time, Gorbachev complained to Thatcher about the 'pause for meditation' taken by the US administration to formulate its position towards Soviet perestroika and its leader. Recalling Thatcher's role in establishing his contacts with Reagan, he tried to use her as an intermediary to convey a message to the American president. Reporting to the Politburo on 13 April 1989 about his visit to the UK, Gorbachev said: (**quote**) "I like Thatcher's independence. Whenever we argue vehemently about nuclear weapons she is forced to react. She feels the flaws in her position. She realistically assesses the situation that perestroika has created in the world. And he does not hesitate to confirm that they 'need' our perestroika. Here we can observe the real turning point in people's minds'."

Even after leaving office, Thatcher did not abandon her efforts to assist Gorbachev in his reform project, seeing it as a historic opportunity for both Russia and the world. As witnessed by Jack Matlock, US ambassador to Moscow, in the summer of 1991 Thatcher, during a private visit to Moscow, complained about the Bush administration's alleged cold support for Gorbachev's reforms. In July of the same year, during the G-7 summit in London, the former British prime minister expressed concern about the West's attitude towards Gorbachev, pointing out that (**quote**) 'How could they (Western leaders) not understand that what is most important at the moment is really to support Gorbachev and to take important steps to consolidate what you have started in the USSR'.

### ***Conclusions***

A combination of divergence and convergence characterized the trajectory of U.S. – Britain relations over the Soviet Union issue during the years of Gorbachev's leadership. In sum, divergence in assessment was accompanied by convergence in policy. Broadly speaking, while the U.S. policy towards the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s unfolded on a rather inconsistent path, first

due to the rifts in the Reagan administration and then to the tricky elaboration of a renewed Soviet policy under the Bush presidency, the Thatcher government showed a steady support for the Soviet leadership and its political project over the years. The assessment of the Gorbachev phenomenon seemed to be a divisive factor in the relationship between Washington and London in some circumstances, the General Secretary being consistently regarded by Whitehall as 'a man we can do business with' and portrayed by US decision-makers alternately as a reliable man or an old-fashioned communist.

Moreover, while both the Reagan and the Bush administrations provided fluctuating evaluations of perestroika, ranging from cosmetic and instrumental reform to systemic and structural change, Margaret Thatcher was deeply convinced since Gorbachev's rise to power of the sincere motivations of his domestic reform design, as well as of its likely relevant impact on USSR's political and economic structure and on the bipolar confrontation. Finally, while the US handling of the Soviet issue was primarily inspired by foreign policy considerations, Britain looked at the Soviet Union essentially in terms of the internal changes that were taking place under Gorbachev and of the desirable spreading of the liberal model in the Soviet state.

However, the divergent assessments did not lead to a significant political divide between Washington and London over relations with Moscow. The logic of the special relationship, as well as Cold War constraints, prevailed over the different readings of perestroika and Gorbachev that were emerging. Indeed, the Thatcher factor was decisive in shaping Reagan's positive view of Gorbachev, as well as in bridging the gap between Moscow and Washington D.C. at the beginning of the Bush administration. It was only the heated issue of the German reunification which disclosed a strategic split between Washington and Moscow, highlighting what has been called in the recent book by Luca Ratti a "not-so-special relationship" over the German question. However, the debates on the future perspectives of the German issue went beyond the theme of the relationship between the Western world and the Soviet Union, as it included more general aspects of European security in the transition from the Cold war to the post-bipolar order.