

Reagan, Gorbachev and the emergence of ‘New Political Thinking’

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Abstract. This article contends that the interaction between domestic circumstances in the USSR and the radical change in the international environment occasioned by the advent of the first Reagan administration played a substantial part in the early emergence of ‘New Political Thinking’ in the Soviet Union. That process had begun shortly after Brezhnev’s death. The Reagan factor loomed large in an internal Soviet debate over the direction of Soviet foreign policy. Four types of causal association are identified. While the Reagan administration was not the sole cause of the Soviet crisis that brought new thinking to the fore, it certainly contributed to a climate that strengthened the position of advocates of this perspective within the Soviet ruling elite.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s New Political Thinking (NPT)—the foreign policy counterpart of domestic restructuring or *perestroika*—was a baby that arrived unexpectedly in 1985. Very quickly however, a long line began to form of those claiming paternity. As Nikolai Shishlin, Chief Consultant to the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee 1972–82, noted in a 1994 interview: ‘Today, many claim to be the parent of these changes’.¹ Yet it is important to emphasize that Gorbachev’s foreign policy revolution was an incremental one that gathered impetus with the passage of time. The unfolding of the NPT fell into two broadly, discernible phases. Between 1985 and late 1987, it marched under the banner of socialist renewal or acceleration (*uskorenie*); the second and more radical phase from late 1987 to 1991, was marked by the rejection of Marxist-Leninist ideology as a guide to the making of Soviet foreign policy. Underpinning NPT however, was a Gorbachevian desire to establish a closer linkage between the USSR’s internal priorities and its foreign policy.²

New Political Thinking started life as a top-down effort to revitalise Soviet foreign policy along Leninist lines. Convinced the USSR’s ‘international prestige and influence’³ had been damaged by the global over-extension, militarization and diplomatic isolationism of the later Brezhnev years, Gorbachev’s new government quickly sought to improve relations with the technologically advanced West and a rapidly modernizing China. But NPT was more than just a reaction to past foreign

¹ Nikolai Shishlin interviewed in ‘Messengers from Moscow’, A Barraclough Casey Production in association with Thirteen/WNET and PACEM Productions Inc. for BBC Bristol, Post-Production Script, 1994. Produced and directed by Daniel Wolf, p. 31.

² Alex Pravda ‘Introduction: Linkages between Soviet Domestic and Foreign Policy under Gorbachev’ in Tsuyoshi Hasegawa and Alex Pravda (eds.), *Perestroika: Soviet Domestic and Foreign Policies* (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 1–25.

³ A. Bovin, ‘The Policy of Reform and the Destiny of Socialism’, *Asia and Africa Today*, 1, 1988, p. 18; A. Karpychev, ‘Revolution Means Action . . .’, *New Times*, 46 (1987), p. 5.

policy failures. It was also part of a bold attempt to modernize the Soviet system and make Moscow more economically and politically competitive in the world. By launching a 'peace offensive' on capitalism worldwide, *perestroika's* founding fathers anticipated, in the words of the CPSU's Twenty-Seventh Congress in February 1986, 'the inevitable moral and political isolation of US imperialism, widening the abyss between it and the rest of humanity'.⁴ Originally, therefore, NPT was prompted by short-term anxiety and driven by long-term ambition to shift 'world public opinion in favour of socialism'.⁵

At the risk of oversimplification and some foreshortening, three rival explanations can be identified for the emergence of Moscow's new international thinking. First, the pivotal role of Gorbachev's leadership. According to this view, Gorbachev's policies and personality after 1985 were the single biggest factor behind the overall reform process. It is claimed that Gorbachev 'encouraged and (in important respects) initiated fundamental rethinking about [Soviet] politics'.⁶ This personalised interpretation of great historical change has found particular favour in a number of academic publications and media commentaries. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine that Moscow would have pursued the same path had the likes of Victor Grishin or Grigori Romanov succeeded Konstantin Chernenko as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in March 1985. But while Gorbachev was undoubtedly a key player in reshaping Moscow's foreign relations, it is dangerously misleading to presume that he did so single handedly. Indeed, the slim Politburo majority which voted Gorbachev in as leader did so precisely because they recognised a need for some reform.⁷

A second type of explanation asserted that NPT was the cumulative result of the degeneration of the Marxist-Leninist political system. The process had its roots in Stalin's decisions of the early 1930s to impose a rigid command economy in the USSR. This did not reward individual or collective effort; absolved Soviet producers from the discipline of the market; gave excessive power to officials who could not be held accountable to consumers; and generally contributed to wasteful investment practices in the economy. At the same time, the political legitimacy of the Soviet system was dealt a severe blow by Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech at the Twentieth Congress in 1956. That speech not only conceded the falsity of the Stalinist system, but also cracked the monolithic ideological mould of international communism by fostering 'polycentrism'. From then on, the Stalinist-Brezhnevite system fought a losing battle with the increasing demands for intensive economic development from a new generation of Soviet citizens that were both better educated and less exposed to the stultifying atmosphere of Stalinism. As a result, by the early 1980s there was a general recognition within Soviet society that reforms were necessary.⁸ Thus, it was not so much that Gorbachev initiated change but 'uncorked'

⁴ *Soviet Weekly*, 13 June 1991.

⁵ A. Bovin, 'The Policy of Reform and the Destiny of Socialism', p. 19.

⁶ Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 317.

⁷ Martin Walker, *The Cold War* (London: Vintage, 1994); 'Enter Gorbachev', *The Second Russian Revolution*, BBC TV Series, Part I, 1991.

⁸ For a discussion of the emerging Soviet crisis see Stephen White 'Rethinking the Transition: 1991 and Beyond', in Michael Cox (ed.), *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse* (London: Pinter 1998), pp. 135–49; also Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein, 'Reagan and the Russians', *Atlantic Monthly*, 273:2 (1994), pp. 35–9.

it.⁹ While this explanation avoids some of the simplicities of the Gorbachev as the Great Man of History approach, it sheds little light on how long-term pressures for change suddenly metamorphosed into the Second Russian Revolution. Why was it that the Soviet leadership recognised the domestic and foreign policy deficiencies of their system in the mid-1980s rather than, say, the mid-1970s?

The third interpretation contends the main stimulus for NPT came from President Reagan's militant policy toward Moscow between 1981 and 1984. Convinced the USSR was an immoral and expansionist power, the Reagan administration deliberately applied heavy pressure on a declining Soviet system by investing 'in a broad programme of military renewal'.¹⁰ This confronted the Soviet leadership with a stark choice: either continuing an arms race with a technologically superior adversary or accommodation. In his autobiography, Reagan noted that Gorbachev 'had to know that we could outspend the Soviets in weapons as long as we wanted to'.¹¹ Faced with the prospect of 'Imperial Overstretch', the Soviet leadership had little option but to seek improved relations with the West and radical reform at home. This thesis has the merit of seeking to explain the timing of NPT by establishing a direct connection between Soviet developments and Reagan's policies. But the nature of that connection remains problematical. While Soviet military spending increased during the Reagan military build-up, the main thrust of the Soviet military burden was already in place before Reagan came to office. That, in turn, raises a question whether the Reagan administration was entirely responsible for Moscow's declining economic situation in the early 1980s. Without supporting evidence, the peace-through-strength argument resembles, in Robert McMahon's view, a logical fallacy whereby it is presumed 'that an event [the adoption of NPT] that follows another event [Reagan's military build-up] occurs as a necessary result of the previous event'.¹²

These three explanations are largely based on mutually exclusive approaches—either NPT was in the case of the first two perspectives, internally determined or, in the instance of the peace-through-strength view, externally generated. Yet, it is important to consider the interaction between the domestic circumstances in the USSR and the radical change in the international environment that was occasioned by the advent of the first Reagan administration. In this article, I will argue that the uncompromising stance of the Reagan administration towards Moscow intersected with the long term pressures of political and economic decline to create a window of opportunity for reformist elements or 'system modernizers' inside the ruling CPSU structure to advance a new foreign policy agenda.¹³ That is, NPT did not suddenly appear in 1985 with the accession of Gorbachev to power. Indeed, the process of reassessing Soviet foreign policy began in late 1982. But there was nothing inevitable about this. According to Sergei Chugrov, deputy Editor in Chief, *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnyye Otnosheniya* (World Economics and International

⁹ Elizabeth Teague 'Current Developments in the Soviet Empire', a lecture given at the 11th International Summer Course, Institute of Security Studies, Christian-Albrechts University, Kiel, Germany, 28 July–16 August 1991.

¹⁰ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp. 548–9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

¹² Robert J. McMahon, 'Making Sense of American Foreign Policy during the Reagan Years', *Diplomatic History*, 19:2 (Spring 1995), p. 372.

¹³ A related but nevertheless distinctive explanation can be found in Jeff Checkel, 'Ideas, Institutions, and the Gorbachev Foreign Policy Revolution', *World Politics*, 45, January 1993, pp. 271–300.

Relations) the Soviet system in its Brezhnevite form could have probably staggered on for ten years or so if such a challenging adversary as Reagan had not appeared in the White House in January 1981.¹⁴ It took specific developments during Reagan's first term to crystallise the fears and frustrations that the 'system modernizers' felt about existing Soviet policy, especially the persistent technological lag in relation to the West, and led them to perceive that a new radically different path was a pressing necessity if Moscow was to remain competitive in the Cold War.

Reagan's policy toward Moscow

The policy of the first Reagan Administration towards the USSR was striking because, unlike most previous administrations since Harry Truman's, it made an almost immediate difference. In the space of four years, America under Reagan's leadership reasserted itself on the international stage and presided over a major shift in the global balance of power at Moscow's expense. It was a remarkable turnaround.

When Reagan entered the White House, the position of the US appeared to be at an all-time low. Domestically, the US was still recovering from the trauma of Vietnam—an experience which, in conjunction with other humiliations in the 1970s, had contributed to a crisis of confidence and self-doubt. Externally, America's principal rival, the Soviet Union, had apparently become increasingly menacing. Throughout the 1970s an impressive Soviet military build-up in both the strategic and conventional spheres was matched by a persistent and unprecedented effort by Moscow to expand its influence in the Third World. This culminated in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

For Reagan and his political supporters, however, the idea of American decline was not preordained. Having successfully campaigned on a stridently anti-Soviet ticket in the 1980 Presidential campaign against Jimmy Carter, Reagan believed the root of America's foreign policy problems lay in a lack of political will and an unwillingness to stand up to a clear and expansionist enemy, to promote the political and economic values that distinguished the US, and a refusal to use military power to secure US interests and values.¹⁵ The Reagan administration set itself the task of reversing these perceived deficiencies. What was the strategy for achieving these goals? The answer was an ambitious political-military perspective known as 'containment plus'.¹⁶ George Shultz, the US Secretary of State 1982–88, defined the new Reagan strategy by stating that while 'it was once our goal to contain the Soviet presence within the limits of the immediate post-war reach, now our goal must be to advance our own objectives where possible'.¹⁷ The Reagan strategy, therefore, not only consisted of a renewed willingness to contain Soviet expansion but also

¹⁴ Interview with Sergei Chugrov, Deputy Editor in Chief, *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnyye Otnosheniya*, London, 11 April 1995.

¹⁵ David Mervin, *Ronald Reagan and the American Presidency* (London: Longman, 1990), pp. 165–6.

¹⁶ Stanley J. Michalak, Jr (ed.), *Competing Conceptions of American Foreign Policy: Worldviews in Conflict* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 59.

¹⁷ George Shultz, in Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991), p. 36.

envisaged an ambitious policy of confronting and perhaps even reversing Soviet gains on a worldwide scale. This approach sought to explode the myth that history was on the side of an implacably hostile Soviet Union. Indeed, Reagan himself was convinced that reinvigorated superpower competition would prove the USSR was weak rather than strong. In a speech at Notre Dame University in May 1981, Reagan asserted that 'the West will not contain communism; it will transcend communism' and dismissed the whole communist experiment as a 'sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written'.¹⁸

In practice, Reagan's 'containment plus' strategy, which formally heralded the end of detente, consisted of two key elements. The first was the rearmament of America to a point where in Reagan's own words 'no enemy will dare threaten the US'. His military buildup was the largest in the peacetime history of the US. Defence expenditure was raised to 7 per cent of GNP to facilitate what was an across-the-board revamp. The MX ICBM, the Trident II D-5 SLBM, the B-1 bomber, the Pershing II IRBM were rapidly developed along with a 600 ship navy, and a general programme of weapons modernisation and ammunition replenishment in the Navy, Army, Air Force and Marine Corps.¹⁹ In addition, on 23 March 1983, Reagan announced the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), a research project to develop an anti-missile defence system based both in space and on the ground. Dubbed Star Wars, SDI appeared to be an abandonment of the deterrence doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) which had kept the peace between the nuclear powers for nearly forty years. If successful, SDI would nullify the Soviets nuclear arsenal and hence give Washington a potential first-strike capability in relation to Moscow. At the same time, Reagan and his West European NATO counterparts pushed ahead with decisions designed to counter Moscow's perceived military superiority in the European theatre. In spite of bitter political reactions by the peace movement in Europe, NATO stuck to its commitment in December 1983 to deploy 572 Pershing and Tomahawk cruise missiles in Western Europe after the Soviets refused to withdraw their SS-20 missiles.

The military buildup was accompanied by a demonstrated resolve on the part of the Reagan administration to use force where necessary to defend Western interests. In August 1981, US fighter-planes shot down two planes of Libya's Colonel Gaddafi, an ally of Moscow, during a US naval exercise in the Gulf of Sidra. In July 1982, the Reagan government responded to a Soviet-backed Ethiopian incursion into Somalia by airlifting military aid to Somalia to shore up the regime of Siad Barre.²⁰ Then, in October 1983, US troops invaded Grenada and overthrew the Marxist-Leninist regime on that island. Moreover, the Reagan government reinvigorated the CIA and provided it with expanded military and financial means to directly or indirectly subvert the Soviet Union. In 1982, CIA Director William Casey persuaded the government of Saudi Arabia to cooperate with the US in lowering oil prices on the world market.²¹ This move helped to slash Soviet hard

¹⁸ Ronald Reagan's speech at Notre Dame University, 17 May 1981, *Reagan Public Papers 1981*, p. 434.

¹⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, The Soviet Union and the United States*, 2nd edn. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1990), pp. 315–16; Martin Walker, *The Cold War*, p. 266.

²⁰ Robert G. Patman, *The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa: The Diplomacy of Intervention and Disengagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 262.

²¹ Richard Pipes, 'Misinterpreting the Cold War: The Hard-Liners Had it Right', *Foreign Affairs* 74:1, January-February 1995, p. 159.

currency earnings, which relied heavily on energy exports. The CIA also extended covert aid to Solidarity in Poland after the 1981 declaration of martial law and actively backed anti-communist guerrillas in a number of Third World countries such as Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, and Cambodia.²²

A second major feature of Reagan's strategy was a sustained ideological offensive against the Kremlin. From the outset, the Reagan administration attacked the USSR with the same rhetorical fervour that Moscow had always reserved for its own attacks on the West. In his first press conference as President, Reagan accused the Soviet leadership of reserving 'the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat' in order to attain 'a one-world Socialist or Communist state'.²³ That alarmist and strident treatment of Moscow continued throughout much of Reagan's first term. Such strong language signalled that the administration rejected in principle the perpetuation of the possible co-existence of a free world and a communist world. Reagan made it clear that, unlike most previous presidents, his opposition was not confined to aspects of Moscow's external behaviour but centred on the Soviet system itself.²⁴ While Reagan tempered his 'evil empire' rhetoric in the election year of 1984, he made no apologies for this anti-Soviet message. It was linked to the imperative of negotiating from strength. 'This candour made clear to the Soviets the resilience and strength of the West: it made them understand the lack of illusions on our part about them or their system. We learned long ago that the Soviets get down to serious negotiations only after they are convinced that their counterparts are determined to stand firm'.²⁵

To be sure, there were divisions within the Reagan administration over the issue of negotiating with the Soviets. One camp, the 'pragmatists', led by US Secretary of State, George Shultz, and including from early 1983, President Reagan, emphasised the need to use America's new military strength as diplomatic leverage with Moscow. The other camp, the 'true believers', which included National Security adviser, Bill Clark, and Casper Weinberger, the Secretary of Defence, expressed scepticism whether it was in US interests to negotiate with Moscow.²⁶ But such differences of opinion did not undermine the basic coherence of the Reagan administration's approach to the USSR.²⁷ There was general agreement within the Reagan administration that the Cold War was a conflict of philosophies as well as of interests based on power. Renewed military strength was necessary to close the West's 'window of vulnerability'²⁸ but only the uncompromising assertion of Western values and the

²² Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: the Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: Scribners, 1994), p. 265.

²³ Ronald Reagan in Michael Turner 'Foreign Policy and the Reagan Administration', in John D. Lees and Michael Turner (eds.), *Reagan's First Four Years: A New Beginning?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 127; John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, The Soviet Union and the United States*, p. 314.

²⁴ Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 234.

²⁵ Ronald Reagan, in Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991), p. 285.

²⁶ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner, 1993), p. 508.

²⁷ See Michael Cox, 'Radical Theory and the New Cold War', in Mike Bowker and Robin Brown (eds.), *From Cold War to Collapse: Theory and World Politics in the 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 47.

²⁸ Ronald Reagan, in John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, The Soviet Union and the United States*, p. 325.

complete denial of the moral legitimacy of the Soviet system would turn the global contest in the West's favour at a time of perceived Soviet vulnerability.

The Soviet Union's systemic crisis

Ronald Reagan's approach to the USSR was of course designed to exploit a pre-existing systemic crisis in the USSR. During the early 1980s, the USSR, in the words of Mikhail Gorbachev, 'lost momentum'²⁹ and sustained setbacks on almost every front of its domestic and foreign policy. Economically, the country had been in decline for nearly two decades. According to official statistics, growth had averaged 7.8 per cent under the eighth Five Year Plan (1966–70); 5.7 per cent under the ninth Five Year Plan (1971–75); 4.3 per cent under the tenth Five Year Plan (1976–80); and 2.5 per cent under the eleventh Five Year Plan (1981–85).³⁰ However, CIA estimates put Soviet economic growth as low as 1.9 per cent for the period 1981–85.³¹ But even according to the official figures, the downward trend in economic growth was clear. Far from catching up with US levels of production, the USSR had been falling further behind. The situation in Soviet agriculture was particularly disastrous. From 1979, the Soviet Union had a succession of very poor grain harvests requiring the government to import food in order to feed the population. And even with large-scale imports there were frequent shortages of food in various parts of the country. Partly because of this, and poor medical care, the USSR witnessed an increase in infant mortality in the 1970s.³²

A number of factors magnified the impact of Soviet economic woes at this time. First, the Soviet military—industrial complex commandeered an ever increasing proportion of the country's diminishing industrial resources. Some Russian assessments put the military allocation in excess of 25 per cent of Soviet GNP.³³ According to General Anatoly Gribkov, Chief of Staff of the Warsaw Pact Forces, and Georgi Arbatov, such high military expenditure indicated that the military 'had completely escaped political control'.³⁴ While the political leadership formally made the decisions about resource allocations, such decision-making was largely framed by military priorities. Thus, KGB General Nikolai Leonov noted that having attained rough nuclear parity with the US around 1970, the Soviet military-industrial complex 'probably inspired . . . the impossible goal' of the Andropov government 'that the Soviet Union should have the same military potential as the entire

²⁹ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (London: Fontana, revised edn., 1988), p. 18.

³⁰ *Narodnoye Khozyaistvo SSSR 1922–1972 gg* (Moscow: Statistika, 1972); *Narodnoye Khozyaistvo SSSR za let* (Moscow: Finansy i statistika, 1987).

³¹ CIA estimate, in Philip Hanson, 'Gorbachev's Economic Policies after Four Years', in Tsyoshi Hasegawa and Alex Pravda (eds.), *Perestroika: Soviet Domestic and Foreign Policies* (London: Sage, 1990), p. 110.

³² Gail W. Lapidus 'State and Society: Toward the Emergence of Civil Society in the Soviet Union', in Alexander Dallin and Gail W. Lapidus (eds.), *The Soviet System: From Crisis to Collapse* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), p. 130.

³³ A. Isaev, in Martin Walker, *The Cold War*, p. 215; 'Messenger from Moscow', p. 17.

³⁴ George Arbatov, *The System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Times Books, 1993), p. 194.

NATO bloc plus China'.³⁵ Second, the Soviet economy experienced a savage reduction in hard currency earnings following the fall in world oil prices. Third, the ailing Soviet economy faced a fresh challenge from international capitalism in the form of the Third Industrial Revolution. From the late 1970s, virtually all capitalist countries underwent a scientific revolution in micro-electronic technology. This opened up previously unimaginable possibilities for the expansion of information, retrieval and exchange. Such a development sharply widened the technological gap between the Soviet Union and the advanced capitalist countries.³⁶

The economic dimension of the Soviet crisis was compounded by a profound socio-political malaise in the country. In essence, Soviet society during the post-Stalin period had been transformed by urbanization and a dramatic increase in educational levels, but such changes had occurred in a political order that remained largely Stalinist in character.³⁷ The uneven nature of these changes had dysfunctional consequences. For some Soviet citizens, the desire for a better standard of living found expression in a burgeoning black economy. For others, material dissatisfaction and frustration with limited upward mobility led to low labour productivity, absenteeism and rising alcoholism.³⁸ And official corruption, extending to Brezhnev's own family, became rampant in a political system that rewarded power rather than performance. Moreover, the Soviet media was widely distrusted because it portrayed events so much at variance with what the public knew to be true. Few people in the country, perhaps except some members of the top leadership, believed the upbeat accounts of Soviet life appearing in the official media.³⁹ Fundamentally, the Soviet people were alienated from their government. That alienation peaked during the virtual immobilism of the late Brezhnev years and the seeming paralysis of the ensuing political interregnum when Brezhnev was succeeded by the already-ill Yury Andropov, who himself died in February 1984, and by the death in turn of his equally frail successor, Konstantin Chernenko in March 1985.

The virulence of the Soviet domestic crisis constrained the Kremlin's ability to effectively respond to a challenging international environment. Signs of Soviet decline proliferated in the 1980s. In Afghanistan, the Soviet army was ensnared in a costly Vietnam-style quagmire which united the Muslim and Western worlds against the Soviet Union. In Poland, the rise of the Solidarity trade union movement and the subsequent declaration of martial law showed the fragility of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. The Helsinki monitoring groups continued to highlight human rights abuse in the Soviet bloc countries. In Western Europe, Moscow's decision to target the region with SS-20 missiles backfired when NATO went ahead with the aforementioned intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) deployment. Then, in a textbook example of diplomatic and military ineptitude, Soviet air defence forces shot down the Korean airliner, KAL-007, in September 1983. Soviet ineffectiveness

³⁵ Gen. Nikolai Leonov, Chief KGB Analysis Department 1973–83, interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', p. 17.

³⁶ Ghita Ionescu, *Leadership in an Interdependent World: the Statesmanship of Adenauer, De Gaulle, Thatcher, Reagan and Gorbachev* (Harlow: Longman, 1991), pp. 11–12; Georgi Arbatov, *The System*, p. 155.

³⁷ Gail W. Lapidus 'State and Society: Toward the Emergence of Civil Society in the Soviet Union', in Alexander Dallin and Gail W. Lapidus (eds.), *The Soviet System*, pp. 129–30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁹ Andrei Grachev, Head of Planning International Propaganda Central Committee 1978–86, interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', pp. 29–30.

was also apparent in Grenada where a new leftist regime, established following the murder of former leader Maurice Bishop, was attacked and overthrown by a US-Caribbean invasion force in October 1983 and also in the Middle East with the humiliation of Soviet-made weapons in the Lebanon war of 1982. Meanwhile, Japan overtook the USSR as the world's second largest producer of goods and services, and China, Moscow's main rival in the Communist world, became an agricultural exporter in what was a comprehensive modernisation programme.⁴⁰

More generally, the Soviet Union found itself over-extended in the Third World. Spectacular advances during the 1970s had become expensive burdens in the 1980s.⁴¹ Indigenous resistance to Communist-oriented rule developed in virtually all of Moscow's new Third World friends—Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Cambodia. The absence of new Soviet gains in the Third World during this period indicated that Soviet Third World policy was running out of steam. And to complete what was a gloomy international picture for Moscow, the American announcement concerning SDI threatened the Kremlin with a new arms race in space, a prospect which heightened Moscow's sense of vulnerability.

The causal association

So to what extent was there a connection between Ronald Reagan's hardline approach and the USSR's systemic crisis? Advocates of the Gorbachev as Great Man of History or the 'internalist' interpretation dispute any links. Observers like Archie Brown and Raymond Garthoff argue that the Reagan administration had very little or no impact on the domestic circumstances that shaped the advent of New Political Thinking.⁴² Rather, it is claimed the NPT was prompted by a generational change of Soviet leadership in 1985. Unlike previous Soviet leaders, Gorbachev climbed up the political ladder in the post-Stalin years and he was therefore able to bring a fresh perspective on Soviet foreign policy when he came to power. It was simply the good fortune or the 'dumb luck' of President Reagan to be around at this time of great historical change.⁴³

Furthermore, analysts like Michael MccGwire, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein maintain the Reagan administration not only did not influence New Political Thinking but actively hindered its emergence.⁴⁴ According to Michael MccGwire, 'the policies of the first Reagan administration did provoke a Soviet reaction, but it was the opposite of what American advocates of a confrontational policy claim it to be. It did prompt a shift in Soviet policy, but the shift was toward greater intransigence, not in the favourable direction that emerged three years later [in 1987]

⁴⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, The Soviet Union and the United States*, p. 322; Michael Turner, 'Foreign Policy and the Reagan Administration', pp. 142–3.

⁴¹ Margot Light (ed.), *Troubled Friendships: Moscow's Third World Ventures*, (London: British Academic Press, 1993), pp. 11–15; Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 265.

⁴² Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, p. 230; Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*, p. 753.

⁴³ David Mervin, *Ronald Reagan and the American Presidency* (Harlow: Longman, 1990), p. 162.

⁴⁴ Michael MccGwire, *Perestroika and Soviet National Security* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), pp. 381–92; Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein, 'Reagan and the Russians', pp. 35–9.

under Gorbachev'. The eventual re-orientation of Soviet policy in the direction of conciliation in 1987, it is argued, can be largely attributed 'to deficiencies in the Soviet system and not to Western initiatives'.⁴⁵

However, these two interpretations are susceptible to several criticisms. First, by stressing the primacy of internal factors, they seem to neglect the precedents of the past when Russian history had been radically shaped by its international environment.⁴⁶ It happened in the mid-nineteenth century after Russia was defeated in the Crimean War; in 1905 when the military defeat by the Japanese increased political opposition to the Tsarist regime; and in 1917 when the Russian revolution was linked to the First World War. Second, with respect to the claim that the tension engineered by the Reagan administration only served to impede the emergence of New Political Thinking, there are empirical and logical difficulties. Empirically, there is little evidence to support the view that Soviet policy toward the US moved toward 'greater intransigence' during the period from 1984 to 1987.⁴⁷ As we shall see, the early phase of NPT brought steady but measured progress in the superpower relationship. Logically, it is not altogether clear why the Gorbachev government, confronted with an unyielding Reagan administration, would suddenly decide in January 1987 that the US was no longer a military threat. Third, these perspectives shed little light on why a 'system moderniser' like Gorbachev rose to the top after four years of Reagan's relentlessly anti-Soviet policies. Why did the USSR not respond in kind and appoint a similarly hardline, belligerent leader in March 1985?

Yet if we concede the possibility of a connection between Reagan's militant policies and the Soviet crisis a major issue remains: how did this relationship contribute to the formation of NPT? To be plausible, the hypothesis must be substantiated. It cannot be simply asserted or assumed. For the remainder of this article, four types of causal association between Reagan's first term and the beginnings of NPT are identified.

Consistency of association

New Political Thinking did not suddenly appear in 1985 out of a clear blue sky. The new Soviet foreign policy outlook began to take shape in the period between Brezhnev's death in November 1982 and Gorbachev's formal accession to power in March 1985. During this period, the belief matured amongst significant elements in the CPSU ruling elite that Soviet foreign and domestic policy had reached an impasse and required revision.⁴⁸ The reappraisal of policy occurred at a time when the succession struggle in the Kremlin was intensifying and, as is so often the case, the contest for power and policy substantially overlapped.

Beneath the grimly immovable image the USSR had been presenting to the world during the early years of the Reagan administration, a fundamental debate was developing about the direction of Soviet foreign policy. Two opposed camps

⁴⁵ Michael McGwire, *Perestroika and the Soviet National Security*, pp. 382–3.

⁴⁶ Stephen Sestanovich, 'Did the West Undo the East?', *The National Interest*, Spring 1993, p. 27.

⁴⁷ Michael McGwire, *Perestroika and Soviet National Security*, p. 383.

⁴⁸ Georgi Arbatov, *The System*, pp. 228–9; Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 80–1; Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, pp. 18–19.

developed within the CPSU ruling elite.⁴⁹ The hardline view was that decision-making in Washington was dominated by those with an abiding enmity toward the USSR and socialism. In view of this, negotiations on arms control and other matters were not in the Soviet interest since the combination of American bad faith and the unpredictable US political system meant that the USSR would always emerge worse off. In contrast, the view of the 'system modernisers', drawn from elements in the KGB, the military and Party, was that assertive Soviet behaviour, both in the Third World and in respect to Soviet security requirements during the late 1970s, had provided aggressive circles in the US with the opportunity to sabotage superpower détente.⁵⁰ Indeed, what was novel about this perspective in the Soviet context was the recognition that such Soviet behaviour had contributed to a right-wing backlash in the US with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and the adoption of American policies that undercut and threatened to nullify the military achievements of the Brezhnev period. The 'system modernisers' believed, however, there were sober-minded forces in the Reagan administration led by George Shultz, the US Secretary of State, whose influence over US policy would be strengthened by more conciliatory Soviet behaviour.

Both Soviet viewpoints took the danger of world war extremely seriously, but they differed in their prescriptions. Hardliners like Grigory Romanov and Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the Chief of the General Staff, were convinced that national security could best be achieved by military means, and that the Soviet Union must be actively prepared for the worst case of world war which, despite nuclear weapons, could be fought and must not be lost. The 'loyal opposition', which included people like Georgi Arbatov, Oleg Bogomolov, Gorbachev and Alexander Yakovlev within its ranks, believed the idea of waging war in the nuclear age was nonsensical and that political and economic rather than military means were increasingly important to safeguarding national security.⁵¹ Moreover, the militarization of Soviet policy in the name of the international class struggle was actually undermining Moscow's competitive position in relation to capitalism generally by reducing it to the status of a one-dimensional superpower.⁵²

It must be stressed that Yuri Andropov's period of rule marked the resurgence, not the birth, of the reformist wing of the CPSU. The intellectual roots of the NPT can be traced back to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956. According to Yakovlev, a group of reformers continued to exist inside the Brezhnev administration after Khrushchev's fall from power in 1964.⁵³ In the 1970s, many reform-minded communists gathered around the figure of Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB from 1967. At various times, Andropov's entourage consisted of 'system modernisers' like Fedor Burlatsky, Georgi Arbatov, Oleg Bogomolov, Georgi Shakhazarov and Aleksandr Bovin. By the late 1970s, a significant number of the

⁴⁹ 'Enter Gorbachev'. *The Second Russian Revolution*, BBC TV Series, Part 1, 1991; the Reagan administration was certainly aware of divisions within the Kremlin after late 1982. See George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 273 and p. 358.

⁵⁰ Georgi Arbatov, *The System*, p. 203.

⁵¹ Alexander Yakovlev interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow' p. 36; 'Enter Gorbachev', *The Second Russian Revolution*, Part 1, 1991; George Arbatov, *The System* pp. 266–72.

⁵² Mikhail Gorbachev's Nobel Peace Prize lecture, *Soviet Weekly*, 13 June 1991.

⁵³ Alexander Yakovlev in Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina vanden Heuvel (eds.), *Voices of Glasnost* (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 41.

reformers had become disillusioned with what they saw as the incompetent and unimaginative policies of the ageing Brezhnev leadership.⁵⁴

After the death of Brezhnev, the growth of reformism manifested itself in several ways. First, coded criticism of the Brezhnevite foreign policy line began to surface, particularly with respect to the Third World. In June 1983, Yuri Andropov made a significant statement on Soviet ties with socialist-oriented countries: 'It is one thing to proclaim socialism as one's goal, and it is quite another to build it'. Andropov added that the fate of progressive states fundamentally depended on 'work by their own people, and of a correct policy on the part of their leadership'.⁵⁵ Writing in 1984, Karen Brutents, the CPSU Central Committee International Department's expert on Asian and African countries observed: 'One can hardly regard as valid the sort of approach encountered in some published studies in which, as if ignoring the big moves and changes that have taken place in the liberated countries, they carry on as before'.⁵⁶ A new factor in the Third World, noted Brutents, was the advent of the Reagan administration in America. Unlike the 'more flexible' Carter government, the Reagan leadership 'wholly rejects the recognition of any kind of independence and self-determination of the national liberation movement and passes it off as a result of "the subversive activity" of the Soviet Union'. This 'universal anti-Soviet strategy' of the Reagan administration has consisted of 'from a position of strength policy towards the socialist countries' and a corresponding readiness to use a 'crude element of force' against 'unwelcome regimes' in the Third World. Such developments, according to Brutents, indicated that 'there is no guaranteed 'automatic' revolutionary potential there [in the Third World]'.⁵⁷ That assessment was a far cry from the late 1970s when it was believed in Moscow with regard to the Third World situation 'the contemporary balance of forces favours progress, peace and socialism'.⁵⁸

There were other signs of change. In 1984, Anatoly Gromyko, the son of the Soviet Foreign Minister and head of the Africa Institute, co-authored with Vladimir Lomeiko a book entitled *New Thinking in the Nuclear Age*. This went some way to publicly questioning for the first time the decision of the Brezhnev regime to install SS-20 missiles in Europe.⁵⁹ At the same time, Yevgeny Velikhov, who was to become Gorbachev's personal scientific adviser, established a private study group in the Academy of Services which in 1984 advanced a bold proposal for both the US and USSR to reduce their nuclear arsenals to a minimum deterrent force of some 500 mobile missiles each.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Georgi Shakhazarov, a member of the CPSU Central Committee and destined to become a key Gorbachev aide, published an article in May 1984 which de-emphasised the 'class approach' to international relations and argued 'political ends do not exist which would justify the use of means liable to lead to nuclear war'.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Mike Bowker 'Explaining Soviet Foreign Policy Behaviour in the 1980s', in Mike Bowker and Robin Brown (eds.), *From Cold War to Collapse*, p. 101.

⁵⁵ *Pravda*, 12 July 1983.

⁵⁶ Karen Brutents, 'Osvobodivshiesya strany v nachale 80-kh godov', *Kommunist*, 3 (1984), pp. 103–7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–7.

⁵⁸ *Soviet News*, no. 5881, (10 May 1977), p. 158.

⁵⁹ Anatoly Gromyko and Vladimir Lomeiko, *Novoye Myshlenniye v Yadernity Vek* (Moscow: Progress, 1984).

⁶⁰ Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina vanden Heuvel (eds.), *Voices of Glasnost* (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 158–60.

⁶¹ George Shakhazarov, in Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, p. 101.

Second, the revision of Soviet international thinking began to be expressed in policy terms. In February 1983, Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to the US, held a secret meeting with President Reagan on improving the Soviet-American relationship. This meeting began what Shultz called a 'halting dialogue' between the two countries.⁶² An almost immediate result was the resolution of a human rights problem concerning a small group of Pentecostal Christians from Siberia who had taken refuge in the US embassy since 1978. In late June 1983, Moscow announced its willingness to allow all of the 'Siberian Seven' to leave the Soviet Union after they had left the US embassy.⁶³ Meanwhile, in midsummer 1983, the USSR and the US concluded the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Madrid by signing a document that included human rights provisions for free trade unions and family reunification.⁶⁴ At around the same time, Yury Andropov sent Reagan a private letter expressing a Soviet interest in reducing the nuclear threat. The President responded positively in his reply of 11 July 1983 and called for 'private and candid' communication between the two governments on this issue.⁶⁵ On 15 July 1983, the USSR and the US agreed to commence talks on a new cultural-exchange agreement and on the opening of consulates in Kiev and New York. On 28 July 1983, the two countries concluded a long-term grain deal under which the USSR agreed to purchase 9 to 12 billion metric tons of grain in each of the next five years.⁶⁶ Several weeks later, on 18 August 1983, Soviet leader Yury Andropov met with a delegation of US Senators in the Kremlin. By January 1984, Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister, told Shultz at the Conference on Disarmament in Europe (CDE) in Stockholm that it was 'high time' for Soviet-American discussions on bilateral issues.⁶⁷

Faced with the prospect of a second Reagan administration after November 1984, the new Chernenko government moved steadily toward an accommodation with Washington. In July 1984, there was an agreement to modernise the Moscow-Washington 'hot-line'.⁶⁸ In September, Foreign Minister Gromyko took advantage of a United Nations General Assembly meeting to hold 'intensive' talks with President Reagan at the White House.⁶⁹ This in turn paved the way for an agreement between Secretary of State Shultz and Gromyko to continue the dialogue. Within a month, the Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko was hopeful 'the constructive development of Soviet-American relations' would enable the two sides to co-operate 'in solving the global problems which trouble mankind today'.⁷⁰ On 22 November 1984, the USSR and US announced that Shultz and Gromyko would meet on 7 and 8 January 1985, to discuss 'reaching mutually acceptable agreements on the whole range of questions concerning nuclear and outer space arms'.⁷¹ The process of superpower rapprochement was gathering pace.

⁶² George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 265.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 168–171.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 358–361.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

⁶⁸ Joseph L. Nogee and Robert H. Donaldson, *Soviet Foreign Policy Since World War II*, 4th edn. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), p. 352.

⁶⁹ *Pravda*, 1 October 1984; George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, pp. 480–4.

⁷⁰ *Pravda*, 18 October 1984.

⁷¹ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 500.

A third development was the weakening of conservative forces inside the Soviet political leadership. Gorbachev, designated by a dying Andropov to be his successor, began to gather around him reform minded elements within the party apparatus. While political machinations denied Gorbachev the top job after Andropov's death, he effectively became the number two person in the government led by Konstantin Chernenko.⁷² Not only did Gorbachev chair Politburo meetings during Chernenko's frequent absences from work, he also used his prominent position to expand contacts and support policy initiatives. In 1983, Gorbachev led a Soviet delegation to Canada where he had a crucial meeting with a future ally, Alexander Yakovlev, who was then the Soviet ambassador in that country. Evidently, Yakovlev's own political views had been partly shaped by his time in Ottawa.⁷³ In a subsequent interview, Yakovlev related how he and Gorbachev agreed that the current course of the USSR threatened to 'end up in social, political and economic collapse'.⁷⁴ Yakovlev asked to return to Moscow and Gorbachev helped to quickly facilitate that move with Yakovlev being appointed Director of the Institute of World Economics and International Relations (IMEMO). Thereafter, Yakovlev used his new position to advance radical ideas on Soviet foreign policy—ideas that shortly began to find their way into Gorbachev's speeches.⁷⁵ A year later, Eduard Shevardnadze, the Party Secretary for Georgia and Gorbachev had a similar conversation whilst on vacation in the Crimea. 'Everything is rotten' Shevardnadze apparently remarked to Gorbachev.⁷⁶

In June 1984, Gorbachev in a speech at Smolensk called for a reopening of the superpower dialogue with the United States.⁷⁷ Three months later, Marshal Ogarkov, who had repeatedly warned of the dangerous and aggressive nature of President Reagan's policy toward the Soviet Union, was relieved of his position as first Deputy Minister of Defence and Chief of General Staff of the Soviet army.⁷⁸ Then, in December 1984, Gorbachev publicly aired for the first time the concepts of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in an address before the Moscow All-Union Scientific and Practical. Amongst other things, Gorbachev argued that 'only an intensive, fast developing economy can ensure the strengthening of the country's position in the international arena, enabling it to enter the new millennium appropriately, as a great and prosperous power'.⁷⁹ In 1984, Chernenko's politburo had approved in principle a radical economic reform plan which would form the basis of Gorbachev's *perestroika* programme between 1985 and 1988.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, Gorbachev led a Soviet delegation to Britain, the closest ally of Reagan's America. The British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, extended an exceptionally warm welcome to

⁷² Jonathan Schell 'The Gift of Time: The Case for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons' [interview with Mikhail Gorbachev], *The Nation*, 2/9 February 1998.

⁷³ I am grateful to Stephen Page, Department of Political Studies, Queen's University, Canada, for bringing this point to my attention. Yakovlev apparently engaged in a number of wide ranging political discussions with Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister, during his spell in Ottawa. Private correspondence, 28 November 1998.

⁷⁴ Alexander Yakovlev interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', pp. 35–6.

⁷⁵ Jeff Checkel, 'Ideas, Institutions, and the Gorbachev Foreign Policy Revolution', p. 283.

⁷⁶ Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), p. 37.

⁷⁷ Martin Walker, *The Cold War*, p. 286.

⁷⁸ Michael McGwire, *Perestroika and Soviet National Security*, p. 121; Stephen Sestanovich, 'Did the West Undo the East?', p. 29.

⁷⁹ Mikhail Gorbachev, in Martin Walker, *The Cold War*, p. 283.

⁸⁰ Igor Prostiakov, 'Under Chernenko', in M. Ellman and V. Kontorovich (eds.), *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 90–7.

Gorbachev and declared he was 'a Communist I can do business with'.⁸¹ Almost immediately after this visit, Thatcher flew to Washington and conveyed a glowing assessment of Gorbachev to the Reagan administration.

Clearly, the new political thinking had begun before Gorbachev formally assumed the position of General Secretary of the CPSU in March 1985. It was no coincidence that from 1983 Soviet 'global foreign policy strategy' increasingly reasserted the 'Leninist precept that we influence international development, the march of world history, above all through our economic achievements'.⁸² All this had been accompanied by the beginnings of a long term shift within the power structure of the ruling elite.

Strength of association

The Soviet leadership initially reacted cautiously to the tough stance of the new Reagan administration. At the 26th CPSU Congress, which met in the late winter of 1981, Brezhnev declared that despite the 'bellicose' language of the Reagan government, he was nevertheless willing to consider a summit meeting with the new American President.⁸³ Presumably, the Kremlin hoped that the new administration in Washington would prove more accommodating than its rhetoric.

But disappointment soon gave way to anger and alarm. Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko said the new administration 'did everything it could to undo the work of its predecessors, striking blows at one agreement after another, either emasculating them or as in the case of SALT 11, declaring them defunct'.⁸⁴ In July 1982, Dmitry Ustinov, the Soviet Defence Minister, accused the US of striving for military superiority and of orchestrating an economic and technological war against the socialist countries.⁸⁵ Three weeks before his death in October 1982, Brezhnev told a gathering of five hundred senior officers that the US and its allies had unleashed an unprecedented arms race in order to achieve military superiority.⁸⁶ Georgi Arbatov, Director of the Institute of US and Canadian Studies, and later one of those closely identified with the NPT after the death of Brezhnev described the Reagan government in 1982 as 'a highly ideological group of people, holding what are perhaps the most right-wing views of any current in the West today'.⁸⁷

The official Soviet depiction of the danger of war became sharply more pessimistic after March 1983 when Reagan promulgated SDI. While Andropov insisted that 'all attempts at achieving military superiority over the USSR are futile', he said SDI was 'not just irresponsible. It was insane'.⁸⁸ In June 1983, Andropov described

⁸¹ *The Guardian* (London), 17 December 1984.

⁸² 'Efficiency for the Common Good', *New Times*, 2, 1985.

⁸³ *Documents and Resolutions, The 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 23 February–3 March 1981, Moscow, Novosti Press Agency, p. 29.

⁸⁴ Andrei Gromyko, *Memories* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), p. 296.

⁸⁵ *Pravda*, 12 July 1982.

⁸⁶ David Holloway, *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race*, Second edn. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984) p. x.

⁸⁷ *Pravda*, 16 July 1982.

⁸⁸ *Izvestiya*, 27 March 1983.

US policy as being 'extremely dangerous to mankind'.⁸⁹ By September, Gromyko asserted that Washington is calculating 'the USSR will exhaust its material resources before the USA and therefore will finally be forced to surrender'.⁹⁰ Soviet concerns at the hawkish stance of the Reagan administrators escalated further with a NATO exercise, Able Archer 83, in early November 1983. This exercise was designed to test the command and communications procedures for the use of nuclear weapons. Perhaps because its timing was close to the deployment of the Euromissiles, it is claimed that the Andropov government suspected that the exercise could be the occasion for a full-scale nuclear strike and apparently contemplated a pre-emptive strike against Britain and other American allies.⁹¹ The end of the exercise was presumably met with profound relief in the Kremlin. Clearly, it believed that Reagan's America was capable of launching a surprise nuclear attack against the USSR. Soviet fears of war subsided in 1984 but did not disappear entirely. An incident in August of that year in which President Reagan played a 'nuclear joke' which was picked up over the air whilst preparing for a regular five minute broadcast certainly strained nerves in Moscow. Reagan said: 'My fellow Americans, I am pleased to tell you I just signed legislation which outlaws Russia forever. The bombing begins in five minutes'.⁹² Pravda reacted by saying that this was fresh evidence of the dangerous designs hatched by the US administration.⁹³

Why was the Soviet leadership so taken aback by the Reagan challenge? The answer lies in the international context of that challenge and also its very nature. Ideologically, all Soviet governments since Lenin had a deeply ingrained tendency to evaluate their domestic accomplishments and global standing against the background of economic and technological trends or developments in the capitalist world. During the 1970s the Brezhnev government perceived that there had been a profound shift in the international correlation of forces in favour of socialism. Two factors were central to this perception. First, the Brezhnev government, thanks to a sustained military build-up, had attained rough parity with the United States in strategic nuclear weapons in 1969–70. Second, tumultuous events in the US over two decades, including racial violence, political assassinations, rising inflation and, above all, the 'Vietnam syndrome' convinced many in the Brezhnev government that the US had begun a long period of irreversible decline.⁹⁴

Détente, as conceived by the Brezhnev leadership, was a mechanism for managing the transition of the United States into a new international era, one in which the USSR, not the US, would become the dominant global actor.⁹⁵ Such expectations were linked to Soviet gains in the Third World in the 1970s, what Pravda called the 'contradictions' and 'inconsistency'⁹⁶ of President Carter's foreign policy, and the

⁸⁹ *Soviet News*, no. 6177 (16 June 1983), p. 197.

⁹⁰ Andrei Gromyko, *Memories*, p. 306.

⁹¹ Michael McGwire, *Perestroika and National Security*, pp. 390–1; *The Sunday Times* (London), 30 November 1997.

⁹² Ronald Reagan cited in Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, p. 85.

⁹³ *Tass*, 14 August 1984.

⁹⁴ V.M. Kulish, ed., *Voyennaya Sila i Mezhdunarodnyye Otnosheniya* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo 'Mezhdunarodnyye Otnosheniya', 1972), p. 113; V.V. Zhurkina and Y.M. Primakova, *Mezhdunarodnyye Konflikt* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo 'Mezhdunarodnyye Otnosheniya', 1972), p. 23.

⁹⁵ Robert G. Patman, *The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa: the Diplomacy of Intervention and Disengagement*, p. 64.

⁹⁶ *Pravda*, 3 and 4 March 1978.

most substantial reduction in American military capabilities relative to those of the Soviet Union in the entire postwar period. Defence expenditures as a percentage of GNP shrank in the United States from 8.2 per cent in 1970 to 5.2 per cent in 1977 while corresponding figures for the Soviet Union showed a steady annual increase of around 2.5 per cent.⁹⁷

The advent of the belligerent Reagan administration in Washington, therefore, was something of a rude awakening for the old Soviet leadership. It confirmed that Moscow had seriously misread the international situation and had confused short-term US reverses with long term projections of 'imperialist' decline. If socialism had gained the upper hand, nobody seems to have informed the Reagan administration.⁹⁸ From the Soviet standpoint, the rhetoric and policies of the new Reagan government represented a qualitatively different challenge from the previous administration. Soviet leaders such as Ustinov, Gromyko and Andropov portrayed the Reagan threat not merely in military terms, but as an all-round political ideological and economic danger. The Reagan administration combined record military spending with a willingness to consistently challenge Marxist-Leninist notions concerning inevitable Western decline. In a series of speeches—at Notre Dame University in May 1981, at London's Westminster Hall in June 1982, the 'evil empire' speech of March 1983 and the Dublin address in June 1984—Reagan turned the tables on Moscow by saluting the triumph of liberal democracy and predicting the imminent demise of Soviet-style communism.

Such rhetoric disturbed the Soviet leadership. For one thing, it reflected the desire on the part of the Reagan government to de-legitimise Soviet rule. The administration rejected the notion that the Soviet and US political systems were somehow morally equivalent. Instead, Reagan directly promoted Western values as superior and worthy of emulation in the 'socialist commonwealth': 'I urge you to beware the temptation to label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself between right and wrong and good and evil'.⁹⁹

This emphasis on values not only changed the terms of Moscow's competition with the West, but also placed the Kremlin on the defensive. Since 1917, the operational code of Soviet leaders had been that international politics was a classical zero-sum game, one in which communism, the eventual winner, takes all and capitalism, the ultimate loser, ends up with nothing. Suddenly, Moscow found itself being told very publicly in the early 1980s that its system was on the wrong side of history: 'In an ironic sense, Karl Marx was right. We are witnessing today a great revolutionary crisis—a crisis where the demands of the economic order are conflicting with those of the political order. But the crisis is happening not in the free, non-Marxist West but in the home of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet Union'.¹⁰⁰

What is more, Reagan was adept at using modern communications to get his message across to the world. With a professional background in both radio and movies, Reagan was much better prepared and equipped to take advantage of the

⁹⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategy of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 320–2.

⁹⁸ Michael Cox, 'Rethinking the End of the Cold War', *Review of International Studies* 20:2 (April 1994), pp. 199.

⁹⁹ Ronald Reagan, in Martin Walker, *The Cold War*, p. 269.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Reagan, in Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 262.

opportunities presented by the information revolution of the early 1980s.¹⁰¹ Here the presentational skills of Reagan were almost as important as the actual content of his anti-Soviet rhetoric. That became evident in a number of specific instances which are discussed in the next section. Certainly, Reagan's communication skills could not be a matter of indifference to significant elements within the Soviet leadership. They took words very seriously, believing that they had real consequences. For Soviet politicians, conducting an ideological struggle was important for its own sake and in that sense Reagan was perceived by Moscow as a much more formidable adversary than his immediate predecessor. The Reagan administration was also sensitive to the importance of the imagery of the US–Soviet relationship. Amongst other things, the administration removed the privileged access of the Soviet ambassador in Washington to the State Department building¹⁰² and moved to change the anomalous situation whereby Soviet spokesmen like Vladimir Posner and Georgi Arbatov had easy access to the US media when their American counterparts did not have the same rights with respect to the Soviet media.¹⁰³

Two other aspects of Reagan's first term caused disquiet in Moscow. On the face of it, Reagan appeared to be a propaganda gift to the USSR: 'Patriotic, prone to the wildest Cold War rhetoric, apparently indifferent to the plight of the Third World, and to all intents and purposes ignorant of Europe', Reagan 'was almost the identikit ugly American'.¹⁰⁴ Yet, to the great frustration of the Kremlin, Reagan, the 'great communicator', while notoriously vague on the details of policy, had shrewd political instincts, especially in reading the mood of his country and fashioned a foreign policy that reflected genuine US concerns about Soviet behaviour during the detente years.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, there is substantial evidence that Reagan's hardline approach to Moscow struck a chord with many Americans and helped restore the nation's optimism and sense of pride after the reverses and disappointments of the Carter years.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the ageing Soviet leadership found itself confronted with a US President who was determined to re-assert America's status as the number one power, both in military and ideological terms, and who demonstrated a powerful ability to mobilize US public opinion behind those goals.

Furthermore, Reagan's predictions of Soviet decline actually corresponded with mounting signs of that decline in the early 1980s. Afghanistan, Poland, Grenada and the Euromissile deployment were just some of the symptoms of the malaise. And during this period, Reagan reminded the world that Moscow made no new advances in the 'national liberation struggle' in the Third World. Such a pattern could not but lead to a loss of confidence in the ideas that had defined and sustained the Brezhnevite foreign policy line. By 1983, Reagan's predictions about Soviet communism began to look less like right-wing rantings than intuitive insights into the weaknesses of the Soviet system. A year later George Shultz told his colleagues in the State Department, 'Globally, things are not going well for the Soviets'.¹⁰⁷ The

¹⁰¹ David Mervin, *Ronald Reagan and the American Presidency*, pp. 72–3; Ghita Ionescu, *Leadership in an Interdependent World*, pp. 225–6.

¹⁰² George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 117.

¹⁰³ Georgi Arbatov, *The System*, pp. 310–11.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Cox, 'Radical Theory and the New Cold War', p. 38.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ Gary Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 358–9; Peter Rodman, *More Precious Than Peace*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁷ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 376.

contrast with America's fortunes during this period could not have escaped the critical gaze of the 'system modernisers' within the CPSU. Under Reagan's leadership, the United States experienced a growing consciousness of resurgent power and national confidence. For many Americans, Reagan's first term signalled that Washington's will to resist perceived Soviet expansionism was back and that it had re-discovered its 'can do' spirit. As one observer put it, Reagan 'was an unashamed believer in American exceptionalism' and insisted the US had a moral mission to be 'the last best hope of man on earth'.¹⁰⁸ In many ways, the patriotic upsurge occasioned by the Los Angeles Olympics of 1984—boycotted by the USSR—symbolised the return of the 'feelgood' factor to the United States.

Viewed from Moscow, Reagan's first term was a harrowing and disconcerting experience. Reflecting on this period in his memoirs, Andrei Gromyko said 'we in the leadership had gone through a period of considerable nervous strain'. The Reagan administration sought 'to weaken the Soviet system. They want to bring it down'.¹⁰⁹ By 15 June 1984, *Izvestiya*, then a Soviet government newspaper, acknowledged that the correlation of forces was beginning to shift against socialism.¹¹⁰

Specificity of association

While the Reagan administration in its first term presented the Soviet leadership with a multi-faceted challenge, specific factors helped to convert a general sense of anxiety into a concrete desire for some members of the CPSU hierarchy, particularly in the International Department of the Central Committee, to revise Soviet foreign policy.

The 'Second Cold War' had exacerbated political tensions over the growing role of the Soviet military-industrial complex in the Kremlin decision-making process. In 1994, Georgi Kornienko, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister 1975–86, Arbatov and former KGB General, Nikolai Leonov recalled with some bitterness that they had no advance knowledge of the deployment of SS-20 missiles in 1977.¹¹¹ According to Arbatov, Brezhnev's poor health between 1975 and 1982 meant that the Soviet military was increasingly asserting itself during this period, and the likes of Ustinov as well as Andropov were not inclined to pick a fight with such a powerful organisation without clear direction from the centre.¹¹² Given that the Brezhnev leadership acquiesced in the principle that the Soviet Union should have the same military potential as the entire NATO bloc plus China, the military-industrial complex was able to exercise considerable influence over the shaping of Soviet foreign policy. In the case of the SS-20s and Soviet intervention into Afghanistan, warnings by Arbatov and Bogomolov that such decisions would be unacceptable to the US fell on deaf ears.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁹ Andrei Gromyko, *Memories*, p. 340; Gromyko cited in Don Oberforfer, *The Turn*, p. 89.

¹¹⁰ *Izvestiya*, 15 June 1984.

¹¹¹ Georgi Kornienko and General Nikolai Leonov interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', pp. 15–16; Georgi Arbatov, *The System*, p. 198.

¹¹² Georgi Arbatov, *The System*, pp. 200–1.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

These resentments and political divisions were exacerbated by the Reagan military build-up. Because Moscow saw itself as the centre of the international class struggle against US imperialism, it initially tried to respond to the ideological and military challenge of the Reagan administration. In a speech three weeks before his death, Brezhnev said 'special mention should be given to the further strengthening of the Armed Forces' material base. The struggle in the field of military technology has sharply intensified. Frequently it takes on a fundamentally new character. A lag in this struggle is inadmissible'.¹¹⁴ That mentality, in the words of Alexander Yakovlev, meant 'that every harsh statement from the West had a very grave effect on the economic situation in the country'¹¹⁵ as extra funds were earmarked for the Soviet military. According to Michael McGwire, cuts in Soviet weapons production in the 1981–85 five-year plan were reversed, and the plan for 1986–90 provided for a rise of around 40 per cent in military expenditure, although the full extent of the Soviet response to Reagan's policies could not be revealed because of the reorientation of Soviet defence policy after 1987.¹¹⁶ However, it can be assumed that it was hardly a trifling amount for an already over-extended economy which had devoted between 15 and 20 per cent of GNP to the military sector throughout the 1970s.¹¹⁷

It was in this context that the SDI announcement of March 1983 emerged as the most decisive factor in accelerating pressures for a revision of Soviet foreign policy within the CPSU ruling elite. Launched in extravagant Hollywood style, SDI immediately caught the attention of the Soviets who in George Shultz's words were 'genuinely alarmed by the prospect of American science [being] 'turned on' and venturing into the realm of space defenses'.¹¹⁸ Certainly Marshal Viktor Kulikov, Commander-in-Chief, Warsaw Pact Forces, between 1977 and 1988, conceded that SDI 'made a strong impression'¹¹⁹ in Moscow. Georgi Kornienko and Georgi Arbatov said the Star Wars announcement 'scared' the Soviet leadership because it threatened to make the USSR's nuclear capability irrelevant to deterrence.¹²⁰ Since the late 1960s the Soviet leaders seemed reconciled, for the foreseeable future, to living with the United States in a relationship of mutual vulnerability. But that relationship was called into question by President Reagan's announcement which held out the hope that space-based defensive systems could be developed that would render nuclear weapons 'impotent and obsolete'.¹²¹

KGB General Nikolai Leonov said SDI 'played a powerful psychological role. And of course it underlined still more our technological backwardness. It underlined the need for an immediate review of our place in world technological progress'.¹²² The last point assumes greater meaning in light of the fact the Soviet Union had been working secretly on its own 'Star Wars' defence system since 1976 without success.¹²³ Another KGB General Sergei Kondrashev said that SDI 'was the issue that influenced the situation in the country to such an extent that it made the

¹¹⁴ *Izvestiya*, 28 October 1982.

¹¹⁵ Alexander Yakovlev interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', p. 29.

¹¹⁶ Michael McGwire, *Perestroika and Soviet National Security*, pp. 383–4.

¹¹⁷ David Holloway, *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race*, p. 130.

¹¹⁸ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 264.

¹¹⁹ Marshal Viktor Kulikov interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', p. 33.

¹²⁰ Georgi Kornienko and Georgi Arbatov interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', p. 33.

¹²¹ Radio address by Ronald Reagan, 23 March 1983, *Reagan Policy Papers*, 1983, pp. 442–3.

¹²² General Nikolai Leonov interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', p. 35.

¹²³ Steven Zaloga, 'Red Star Wars', *Jane's Intelligence Review* 9:5 (1997), pp. 205–8.

necessity of seeking an understanding with the West very acute'.¹²⁴ It became clear, according to General Makhmud Gareev, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces 1984–88, that it 'was beyond our power'¹²⁵ to compete in the Star Wars area. While SDI was not threatening in itself—it was a research programme—it symbolised a declaration of intent by Reagan to achieve strategic superiority over the USSR and undermine its claim to superpower status. It gave the Soviet Union a powerful incentive—Shulz called SDI 'the ultimate bargaining chip'¹²⁶—to curb the arms race.

If the SDI highlighted the costs and dangers of maintaining the Brezhnevite course in Soviet foreign policy, two other developments reinforced this process. On 1 September 1983, Soviet air defence forces shot down the Korean airliner, KAL-007, which had strayed over the Sakhalin peninsula in what seemed to have been an innocent navigation error. The episode brutally exposed the diplomatic limitations of the old thinking in Moscow. The Andropov government offered no apology for an incident which cost more than 100 lives and took five days to make a statement.¹²⁷ On 9 September, the Soviet Armed Forces Chief of General Staff Marshal Ogarkov, observed: 'It has been irrefutably demonstrated that the South Korean air company's aircraft intrusion into Soviet airspace was a premeditated and carefully planned intelligence operation. It was directed from certain centres on the territory of the US and of Japan'.¹²⁸ A number of Soviet officials were embarrassed by this explanation. Some senior officials, speaking unofficially, told foreign reporters in Moscow that the Soviet action 'may be attributed partly to [pilot] error' and also that they felt 'that Moscow mishandled the incident internationally'.¹²⁹ Commenting on why it took so long for the Soviet leadership to admit what its own air force had done, Viktor Afanasev, the chief editor of *Pravda*, said 'I think in this respect our military people are guilty'.¹³⁰ Certainly, Moscow's handling of the matter presented a media opening for President Reagan to exploit. He portrayed it as a 'crime against humanity' that showed the brutal and callous nature of the Soviet system.¹³¹

Furthermore, the USSR in late 1983 suffered a major reversal in Europe—a region which had always been paramount in Soviet thinking. For more than three years, the Kremlin had made strenuous efforts through public diplomacy, most notably by encouraging the electorates in NATO countries to bring pressure on the Reagan administration, to forgo the deployment of 572 Pershing 11 and cruise missiles in Europe. The 1979 decision to modernise NATO's intermediate nuclear forces was a consequence of the Soviet deployment in 1977 of a new intermediate-range missile, the SS-20. According to Tair Tairov, Soviet Representative of the Moscow-backed World Peace Council, the International Department of the CPSU, emboldened by the successful campaign by the Western peace movement to cancel the neutron bomb in 1978, sought to mobilise Western public opinion—especially

¹²⁴ General Sergei Kondrashev interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', p. 35.

¹²⁵ General Makhmud Gareev interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', p. 34.

¹²⁶ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 264.

¹²⁷ Joseph Noguee and Robert Donaldson, *Soviet Foreign Policy Since World War II*, p. 324.

¹²⁸ Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, in *USSR and Third World* 13:6 (1983), p. 8.

¹²⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 1983; *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September 1983.

¹³⁰ Viktor Afanasev cited in *USSR and Third World* 13:6 (1983), p. 8.

¹³¹ Ronald Reagan, in Michael McGwire, *Perestroika and Soviet National Security*, p. 113; Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, p. 59.

the peace movement—behind a Soviet diplomatic offensive.¹³² Capitalising on large anti-nuclear rallies in many parts of Western Europe, Brezhnev and Andropov advanced a stream of proposals including a two-thirds reduction of medium-range nuclear weapons in Europe and the reduction of SS-20s in Europe to 162, the number then in the British and French arsenals. From Moscow's standpoint (and that of NATO), the stakes were high. Militarily, the SS-20s could tilt the balance of power in Europe in Moscow's favour without the NATO modernisation programme. Politically, the American nuclear guarantee to Western Europe could lose its credibility unless the SS-20 was matched by a NATO equivalent. Nevertheless, constant and sometimes heavy-handed appeals to Western public opinion by Soviet officials and the Soviet Peace Committee reinforced the suspicion in Europe that Moscow was trying to divide the Western alliance and served if anything to unify the NATO countries.¹³³ In 1983, Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic Party in West Germany and Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in Britain both campaigned in favour of the Euro-missile deployment and won decisive election victories. As an upshot, Moscow failed to halt the planned NATO deployment which began in November 1983.

Coherence of association

There was a definite connection between the Reagan administration's first term and the emergence of New Political Thinking in Moscow after the death of Brezhnev in November 1982. An American policy of systemic confrontation that appeared to preclude cooperation without change in the Brezhnevite foreign policy had a marked effect on the Soviet domestic political context and how Soviet leaders viewed their external environment. The increasingly tense international situation in 1983 characterised by Soviet set-backs in relation to the SDI announcement, the KAL-007 incident and the Euromissile controversy, converged with long term social and economic problems in the USSR to create a sense of crisis within the leadership of the party and state apparatus.¹³⁴ These conditions created an opportunity for the disillusioned, reformist wing of the Party elite, the 'system modernisers', to move away from Brezhnevism and begin a process which became known as New Political Thinking.

While it would be wrong to claim that the sometimes divided Reagan administration deliberately engineered the NPT, it was certainly true that the administration believed from the outset that the USSR's underlying weaknesses made it susceptible to a hardline approach. Such a policy, it was argued, would ultimately moderate Soviet international behaviour. Those instincts proved broadly correct. The aggressive 'containment plus' strategy of Reagan's first term narrowed Soviet options and increased its Cold War costs. In doing so, the administration 'kept the USSR in the corner into which its own problems had already forced it'.¹³⁵

¹³² Tair Tairov interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow' pp. 25–6.

¹³³ Georgi Arbatov, *The System*, p. 198.

¹³⁴ Seweryn Bialer, 'Domestic and International Factors in the Formation of Gorbachev's Reforms', in Alexander Dallin and Gail W. Lapidus (eds.), *The Soviet System*, p. 29.

¹³⁵ Michael Cox, 'Radical Theory and the New Cold War', p. 48.

Equally important, the Reagan administration exerted politico-psychological pressure on the Soviet leadership in the early 1980s. Unlike some of his less ideological predecessors, President Reagan had a firm belief in the power of ideas and enthusiastically engaged with Moscow in 'the competition of ideas and systems' which Brezhnev said 'must continue'.¹³⁶ Indeed, Reagan maintained that the arms race—which Moscow had traditionally blamed on US 'imperialism' (although in practice it seemed to recognise that nuclear weapons did not adhere to the class principle)—could not be divorced from the ideological contest. This was essentially a case of giving the Soviets a dose of their own medicine, but it did involve risks in the nuclear era. Nevertheless, Reagan's willingness to take on the Soviets in the area of ideology was psychologically important. It signalled to the Soviet leadership they could expect a robust and very competitive relationship with the US under his leadership, something which the USSR had not always experienced during the Carter years.

Why, then, did Reagan's militant approach to Moscow serve to strengthen the 'system modernisers', rather than the conservatives, inside the Soviet leadership? Hardliners like Marshal Ogarkov had argued that Soviet military outlays should grow more rapidly to match the US which he claimed in late 1983 'would like to launch a decapitating nuclear first strike'.¹³⁷ However, there were a number of reasons why the tensions of 1983 weakened such arguments. First, the USSR's declining international position made conservative elements in the Soviet leadership vulnerable to internal Party criticism. In the 1960s and the 1970s, reformist pressures within the Soviet political establishment were countered by some favourable trends in the international correlation of forces. The conservatives *inter alia* could then point to the US's disastrous war in Vietnam, Washington's willingness to recognise the USSR as a superpower equal and the fourfold increase in the world market price of oil in late 1973 which brought a windfall of petrodollars for the Soviet economy for nearly a decade. Not surprisingly, the period of superpower detente did not bring any liberalisation of the Soviet system.¹³⁸ On the contrary, the international 'gains' of detente made it easier for the conservatives to resist change. However, in the early 1980s, the absence of mitigating international circumstances made it possible for the voices of the 'system modernisers' to raise critical questions about the direction of Soviet foreign policy.

Second, the modernisers argued that not only was the Brezhnev regime unable to effectively counter the Reagan challenge in the early 1980s, it had also played a major part in creating the Reagan threat in the first place. The likes of Arbatov and Yakovlev argued that decisions such as the Soviet-Cuban military intervention in Angola in 1975–76, the deployment of SS-20s in 1977 and the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 were self-defeating in that they undercut support for detente in the US and contributed to a climate that made it possible for Ronald Reagan to be elected on an anti-Soviet ticket.¹³⁹ Responding to the Reagan administration by continually spending more on military means, the 'system modernisers' argued,

¹³⁶ Leonid Brezhnev, in Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 263.

¹³⁷ Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov cited in George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 464.

¹³⁸ William Odom 'How to Handle Moscow' in Stanley, J. Michalak, Jr., (ed.), *Competing Conception of American Foreign Policy*, p. 84.

¹³⁹ Georgi Arbatov, *The System*, p. 203; Alexander Yakovlev in Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein, 'Reagan and the Russians', pp. 35–9.

would only compound the USSR's security problems. It ran the risk of escalating to nuclear war or economically exhausting the Soviet state.

Third, after the death of Brezhnev it became plain to a significant number of the Party elite, some of whom had not previously identified with the reformist wing of the CPSU, that a more flexible international policy was vital if Moscow was not to lose further ground to a resurgent US. The perception had grown that the old guard leadership was losing the international battle of ideas with the populist Reagan administration. Displays of ideological dogmatism with respect to situations like the KAL-007 incident and the Euromissile controversy only played into the hands of the Reagan government, especially its most extreme elements. That viewpoint was reinforced by a growing Soviet recognition in early 1984 that Reagan would be comfortably re-elected. Even figures like the long-serving Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, an important supporter of Gorbachev from 1984, came round to the view that Soviet foreign policy had not been punching its weight.¹⁴⁰

Fourth, and not unrelated to this point, the Reagan administration accentuated the impact of longstanding problems facing the Soviet system. The period 1981–84 confirmed what 'system modernisers' had long suspected, namely, the USSR needed to quickly embrace the international revolution in science and technology in order to maximise what was still seen as the superior potential of socialism to develop a modern economy and ensure the Soviet-American strategic balance was not irreversibly altered by a major technological development like SDI. In addition, the system modernisers believed that the increasing militarization of Brezhnev's foreign policy had united the West against Moscow and hindered the Soviet ability to exploit perceived 'inter-imperialist' contradictions arising from the technological revolution in the West.¹⁴¹ According to the modernisers, fresh thinking was needed to establish broader economic ties with the West and also to capitalise on anticipated changes in international capitalism such as the erosion of US hegemony through the rising power of Western Europe and Japan.

Taken together, these factors help explain how Reagan's first term had a considerable effect on the political balance of forces in Moscow. By shaping circumstances that strengthened the position of the 'system modernisers' in relation to conservative elements in the post-Brezhnev leadership, the hardline Reagan administration acted as a catalyst in promoting the early emergence of a comprehensive new Soviet foreign (and domestic) policy.

Conclusion

The first phase of New Political Thinking before 1987—which sought to revitalise the CPSU, revamp the Soviet economy, save socialism and gradually shift the international correlation of forces back in Moscow's favour¹⁴²—owed a substantial

¹⁴⁰ Andrei Gromyko interviewed in *The Observer*, 2 April 1989.

¹⁴¹ Robbin Frederick Laird, 'The Impact of the West on the Soviet Union', in Helmut Sonnenfeldt (ed.), *Soviet Politics in the 1980s* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 149.

¹⁴² Alexander Yakovlev interviewed in 'Messengers from Moscow', pp. 36–7; Graeme Gill, 'Sources of Political Reform in the Soviet Union', *Studies in Comparative Communism* XXIV:3 (September 1991), p. 238.

amount to the hardline challenge of the first Reagan administration. The idea that NPT suddenly emerged with the formal elevation of Gorbachev to power in March 1985 is not convincing. That process had begun in late 1982. Gorbachev was simply the most prominent of a generation of system modernisers that got the upper hand in an internal CPSU struggle over policy and power. In the context of this debate, the Reagan factor loomed large. There is evidence of a causal association between Reagan's first term and the emergence of NPT. This association was expressed in terms of its consistency, strength, specificity and coherence. While it is unrealistic to claim the Reagan administration was the sole cause of the systemic crisis that brought reform on to the policy agenda in the USSR—the Soviet system was in dire straits before Reagan came to power—it certainly exacerbated the crisis and thus accelerated existing long-term pressures for foreign policy change from a possibility into an urgent necessity for significant elements within the Soviet ruling elite.