3 Period of Uncertainty – 1985–91

The launching of glasnost and perestroika in the former Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev, came as a surprise to the West. Although there were already some indications of a forthcoming change in Soviet policies, the extent of the reforms and the new thinking about foreign policy, had certainly been unexpected. The question asked at the time was what was one to make of this new thinking? Was Soviet domestic and foreign policy undergoing radical modification, or was the new policy merely a more sophisticated mask concealing the old political thinking? It was not only a question about the nature of the changes but also of how the West should respond to the new situation. For a short period between 1985 and 1991 – the year when the Soviet Union finally disintegrated – there was much confusion and uncertainty in the West.

In the Soviet Union, the situation was similar; there was a great deal of bewilderment as Gorbachev initiated a series of reforms and pronouncements of a kind never previously heard. Many Russian commentators, especially Party ideologues, began to analyse the new situation applying traditional Marxist tenets. They saw new thinking as a normal process of development of a socialist society. Others, who were more pragmatic, rejected the Marxist interpretation and taking advantage of the new freedoms began to see the new situation in a different light.

The debate among Russian intellectuals regarding the merits of the reforms and the possibility of their implementation provided a wide field of analysis for Western observers. However, in contrast with the past when everything that was written in the Soviet press had been taken as the expression of official policy, the plethora of views and opinions appearing under glasnost, made the task of rational analysis of the situation in Russia more difficult. Before Gorbachev came to power, the discussions about the internal situation in the Soviet Union and its implications for Soviet policies, focused on the question whether the Soviet Union was subject to change and if it was, what were the factors that would bring about that change. Most Western analysis of East–West relations, or to
be more precise, Soviet–American relations, were based on the fundamental differences between the two societies. Such differences were perceived as being caused by the contrasting ideologies, which in turn determined their political structures. In the words of Richard Pipes ‘these differences affect relations between the two societies because of the close and direct relationship that exists between a country’s internal condition and its external conduct: foreign policy, after all, is driven mainly by domestic interest and shaped by a society’s political culture’ (Pipes, 1984, p. 48).

Pipes asserted that totalitarian regimes are by definition incapable of evolution from within and impervious to change from without (ibid., p. 49). But he found the Soviet Union to be ‘in the throes of a serious systemic crisis which sooner or later will require action of a decisive kind – action which will exert the most profound influence on Soviet external policy.’ Economic difficulties were the catalyst to change, according to Pipes. ‘Changes for the better that one can expect in the nature of the Soviet government and in its conduct of foreign relations would come about only from failures, instabilities, and fears of collapse and not from growing confidence and sense of security’ (ibid., p. 56). Pipes was, therefore, against détente asserting that the notion ‘that the more confident and secure the Soviet elite feels, the more restrained its conduct will be’ was wrong. Instead, Pipes suggested a policy that would ‘deny the Soviet bloc various forms of economic aid, which would help to intensify the formidable pressures exerted on their creaky economies’. This, he said, will push them in the direction of general liberalisation as well as accommodation with the West.

His predictions may have come true in the sense that Russia adopted the path of liberalisation, but the debate whether the collapse of communism and of the Soviet empire was due to internal or external pressures, or if there were other forces at work, is still going on. Furthermore, the question of how to respond to the changes in Russia, has still to be resolved.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR

The forces that constrained and ultimately changed Soviet international behaviour were seen in the breakdown of the Soviet system. The collapse had hampered Moscow’s ability to achieve its stated objectives at home and abroad (Lynch, 1990, p. 21). Thus, the West