7 Russia and the World

Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the foreign policy of the former USSR had always been reasonably well defined. During the Cold War it was thought to be determined by the ideological conflict with the United States, and Soviet relations with a foreign country were conditioned by the degree of the latter’s opposition to the policy of the United States. The USSR could usually rely on the support of the ‘progressive forces’ in the United Nations, and Soviet influence on world affairs was also determined by its power of veto in the Security Council. Soviet foreign policy was then operating within a bipolar world system in which the United States and the Soviet Union were the dominating powers. From the Soviet point of view it was a satisfactory state of affairs because it placed the USSR on the world stage as an equal major player.

The bipolar world system signified a political division of the world into countries considered as belonging to the Western free democratic world and those that supported communism under the guidance of the Soviet Union. The division into the two camps did not make a clear distinction between countries according to the regime under which they operated. The Western camp contained many countries with an undemocratic, often dictatorial government, but as long as it showed its opposition to communism, it gained the support of the United States. Similarly, within the socialist camp were regimes that could hardly be defined as communist, but as long as they opposed imperialism, they were considered by the Soviets as fraternal states and received material support, mainly in the form of supply of weapons either on credit or simply free of charge.

The change in the Kremlin leadership in 1985, signalled a change in the direction of Soviet foreign policy. While Gorbachev declared his willingness to compromise on many issues of international politics, he continued to assert the existence of the two political systems, but attempted to show that peaceful coexistence is possible and indeed desirable. This was considered at the time as the end of the Cold War.

There was a great deal of confusion regarding the role of the USSR in the world. For the Soviet Union it was a question of determination of its position – real or desired – within the world’s
economy and politics (*Kommunist*, no. 12, 1990). A major problem facing the USSR at the time was the internal economic situation and the lack of adequate resources for asserting its role on the international arena. Its strategic and political international position has been steadily deteriorating. Its standing was for a long time determined by the parity of missiles, but with the rising internal chaos, the intellectual ‘superpower’ concept was being eroded. In the words of a Russian analyst, ‘one cannot get very far with missiles alone’ (Bovin, 1991). In the area of military power, however, the USSR acquired strategic parity with the US and preserved it despite the apparent effort by the American military to achieve superiority.

Until the advent of *perestroika* Soviet foreign policy was based on the outside threat factor. It dated from the time of the Revolution and even during the post-war years it was used to rally general support. Some post-Soviet political analysts, describe this period of threat of a global conflict and of the use of nuclear weapons as having had a deforming influence upon the Soviet Union’s role on the world arena (*Kommunist*, no. 12, 1990, p. 115).

With the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, the most important task of Soviet foreign policy was the destruction of the old mechanism of confrontation and the removal of the ideological myth. It proved to be a very slow process compared with what took place in former Soviet satellites. Ideological dogma and other Stalinist attributes had much deeper roots in the USSR than in its Western neighbours. For the Soviet Union, ‘Stalinism was an indigenous creation, a monster raised on the national soil, while in Eastern Europe it was imported by force’ (Kortunov, 1990, p. 117). Under Gorbachev, the process of democratisation and formation of foreign policy was still in its initial stage. Despite the economic and political failures on the domestic front, the New Thinking had moved Soviet foreign policy to the forefront of international politics. Gorbachev became fashionable in the West as the man ‘with whom one could do business’. He created much interest and his speeches were being listened to with great attention.

Between 1985 and 1991 the Soviet government was in full control over its foreign policy. However, events within the USSR and in Eastern Europe, took away from the Soviet government the ability to formulate an independent foreign policy. Following the coup of August 1991, when all former republics declared their independence, Soviet foreign policy entered a period of transition during which it