

Reagan and the Russians

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Abstract

According to the Russian view, the Cold War ended despite Pres Reagan's arms buildup, not because of it. After years of effort and opposition from his advisers, USSR Pres Gorbachev finally managed to convince Reagan of his sincerity about improving the US-USSR relationship.

Full text

SHORTLY after the Berlin Wall was torn down, prominent political leaders and commentators concluded that the U.S. military buildup under President Ronald Reagan had won the Cold War. "We were right to increase our defense budget," Vice President Dan Quayle announced. "Had we acted differently, the liberalization that we are seeking today throughout the Soviet bloc would most likely not be taking place." Even Tom Wicker, a New York Times columnist with impeccable liberal credentials, reluctantly conceded that the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and the Reagan buildup "seemed to impress the Soviets as a challenge that they might not be able to meet."

Hanging tough paid off. Forty years of arms competition, so the argument goes, brought the Soviet economy to the brink of collapse. The Vatican's Secretary of State, Agostino Cardinal Casaroli, said, "Ronald Reagan obligated the Soviet Union to increase its military spending to the limits of insupportability." When the Soviet Union could no longer afford the competition, its leaders decided to end the Cold War. A modified version of this argument holds that the American military buildup simply worsened the Soviet economic quandary: it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Neither the strong nor the weak version of the proposition that American defense spending bankrupted the Soviet economy and forced an end to the Cold War is sustained by the evidence.

The Soviet Union's defense spending did not rise or fall in response to American military expenditures. Revised estimates by the Central Intelligence Agency indicate that Soviet expenditures on defense remained more or less constant throughout the 1980s. Neither the military buildup under Jimmy Carter and Reagan nor SDI had any real impact on gross spending levels in the USSR. At most SDI shifted the marginal allocation of defense rubles as some funds were allotted for developing countermeasures to ballistic defense.

If American defense spending had bankrupted the Soviet economy, forcing an end to the Cold War, Soviet defense spending should have declined as East West relations improved. CIA estimates show that it remained relatively constant as a proportion of the Soviet gross national product during the 1980s, including Gorbachev's first four years in office. Soviet defense spending was not reduced until 1989 and did not decline nearly as rapidly as the overall economy.

To be sure, defense spending was an extraordinary burden on the Soviet economy. As early as the 1970s some officials warned Leonid Brezhnev that the economy would stagnate if the military continued to consume such a disproportionate share of resources. The General Secretary ignored their warnings, in large part because his authority depended on the support of a coalition in which defense and heavy industry were well represented. Brezhnev was also extraordinarily loyal to the Soviet military and fiercely proud of its performance. Soviet defense spending under Brezhnev and Gorbachev was primarily a response to internal political imperatives--to pressures from the Soviet version of the military-industrial complex. The Cold War and the high levels of American defense spending provided at most an opportunity for leaders of the Soviet military-industrial complex to justify their claims to preferential treatment. Even though the Cold War has ended and the United States is no longer considered a threat by the current Russian leadership, Russian defense spending now consumes roughly as great a percentage of GNP as it did in the Brezhnev years.

The Soviet economy was not the only economy burdened by very high levels of defense spending. Israel, Taiwan, and North and South Korea have allocated a disproportionate share of resources to defense without bankrupting their economies. Indeed, some of these economies have grown

dramatically. A far more persuasive reason for the Soviet economic decline is the rigid "command economy" imposed by Stalin in the early 1930s. It did not reward individual or collective effort; it absolved Soviet producers from the discipline of the market; and it gave power to officials who could not be held accountable by consumers. Consequently much of the investment that went into the civilian sector of the economy was wasted. The command economy pre-dated the Cold War and was not a response to American military spending. The Soviet Union lost the Cold War, but it was not defeated by American defense spending.

FORMER Soviet officials insist that Gorbachev's decisions to withdraw Soviet forces from Afghanistan and to end the arms race were made despite the Reagan buildup and SDI. In 1983 Gorbachev, then the youngest member of the politburo, visited Canada and spent long hours in private conversation with Aleksandr Yakovlev, then the ambassador in Ottawa. The two men talked openly for the first time about the deep problems that the Soviet Union faced and the urgent need for change. To their mutual surprise they agreed on the folly of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the necessity of ending the Cold War before it led to catastrophe for both superpowers. Both men hoped to reduce the burden of military spending in the USSR, and thus free resources for domestic reform and renewal.

By the time Gorbachev became General Secretary, in March of 1985, he was deeply committed to domestic reform and fundamental changes in Soviet foreign policy. "I, like many others," he observed recently, "knew that the USSR needed radical change. If I had not understood this, I would never have accepted the position of General Secretary." Within a month of assuming office he attempted to signal his interest in arms control to the United States by announcing a unilateral freeze on the deployment of Soviet intermediate-range missiles in Europe. The deployment of the SS-20, Yakovlev explains, was a "stupid and strange policy" that defied logical explanation. Yakovlev considered the deployment illogical and self-defeating before President Reagan announced SDI and the buildup of American military forces. He and Gorbachev were "united" on this issue.

Gorbachev felt free to make a series of proposals for deep cuts in his country's nuclear arsenal because he was confident that the United States would not attack the Soviet Union. In conversation with his military advisers he rejected any plans that were premised on war with the West. Since he saw no threat of attack by the United States, Gorbachev was not intimidated by the military programs of the Reagan Administration. "These were unnecessary and wasteful expenditures that we were not going to match," he told us. If both superpowers were to avoid the growing risk of accidental war, they had to make deep cuts in their strategic forces. "This was an imperative of the nuclear age."

Reagan's commitment to SDI made it more difficult for Gorbachev to persuade his officials that arms control was in the Soviet interest. Conservatives, some of the military leadership, and spokesmen for defense-related industries insisted that SDI was proof of America's hostile intentions. In a contentious politburo meeting called to discuss arms control, Soviet armed forces chief of staff Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev angrily warned that the Soviet people would not tolerate any weakening of Soviet defenses, according to Oleg Grinevsky, now Russia's ambassador to Sweden. Yakovlev insists that "Star Wars was exploited by hardliners to complicate Gorbachev's attempt to end the Cold War."

President Reagan continued to regard the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" and remained committed to his quest for a near-perfect ballistic-missile defense. To break the impasse, Gorbachev tried at the two leaders' summit meeting in Reykjavik to convince Reagan of his genuine interest in ending the arms race and restructuring their relationship on a collaborative basis. For the first time, the two men talked seriously about eliminating all their countries' ballistic missiles within ten years and significantly reducing their arsenals of nuclear weapons. Although the summit produced no agreement, Reagan became "human" and "likable" to Gorbachev and his advisers, and the President, convinced of Gorbachev's sincerity, began to modify his assessment of the Soviet Union and gradually became the leading dove of his Administration. The Reykjavik summit, as Gorbachev had hoped, began a process of mutual reassurance and accommodation. That process continued after an initially hesitant George Bush became a full-fledged partner.

The Carter-Reagan military buildup did not defeat the Soviet Union. On the contrary, it prolonged the Cold War. Gorbachev's determination to reform an economy crippled in part by defense spending

urged by special interests, but far more by structural rigidities, fueled his persistent search for an accommodation with the West. That persistence, not SDI, ended the Cold War.

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