A Look at the World Mikhail Gorbachev

Capitalism Needs Perestroika

wenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it's time to take stock. The Berlin Wall was

one of the shameful

symbols of the Cold War and the dangerous division of the world into opposing blocks and spheres of influence.

Many politicians of my generation sincerely believed that with the end of the Cold War, humankind could finally forget the absurdity of the arms race, dispense with dangerous regional conflicts, abandon sterile ideological disputes, and enter a golden century of collective security.

We hoped we would see the rational use of material resources, the end of poverty and inequality, and restored harmony with nature.

Alas, over the last few decades the world has not become a fairer place: Disparities between the rich and poor either remained or increased not only between the North and the developing South but also within developed countries themselves.

The social problems in Russia, as in other post-communist countries, are proof that simply abandoning the flawed model of a centralized economy and bureaucratic planning is not enough and guarantees neither a country's global competitiveness nor respect for the principles of social justice nor a dignified standard of living for the population.

While we politicians from the last century can be proud of the fact that we avoided the danger of a thermonuclear war, for many millions of

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people around the globe, the world has not become a safer place. Quite to the contrary: Innumerable local conflicts and ethnic and religious wars, along with terrorism, have appeared like a curse on the new map of world politics, creating large numbers of victims.

The new generation of politicians is acting irresponsibly. Defense spending by numerous large and small countries alike is now greater than during the Cold War. Strongarm tactics are once again the standard way of dealing with conflicts. Weapons of mass destruction are proliferating, and the erstwhile adversaries of the Cold War still compete to reach new technological levels in arms production.

Looking back, one real achievement we can celebrate is the fact that the twentieth century marked the end of totalitarian ideologies, in particular those that were based on utopian beliefs.

Yet new ideologies are quickly replacing the old ones. Many now forget that the fall of the Berlin Wall was not the cause of global changes but to a great extent the consequence of deep, popular reform movements that started in the East—and in the Soviet Union in particular.

Capitalism risks leading the world down another historical blind alley.

After decades of the Bolshevik experiment and the realization that this had led Soviet society down a historical blind alley, a strong impulse for democratic reform also evolved in the form of Soviet Perestroika.

But it soon became very clear that Western capitalism, too—deprived of its old adversary and imagining itself the undisputed victor and incarnation of global progress—was at risk of leading Western society and the rest of the world down another historical blind alley.

Today's global economic crisis has revealed the organic defects of the present model of Western development that was imposed on the rest of the world as the only one possible. It has shown that not only bureaucratic socialism but also free market capitalism was in need of profound democratic reform—in effect, its own kind of Perestroika.

One other truth has emerged since the fall of the Berlin Wall: global interdependence. In effect, humankind has started to transform itself into a single civilization.

This opens up possibilities. While we sit among the ruins of the old order, we can think of ourselves as active participants in the process of creating a safer, fairer, and more democratic world.

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