

Chomsky and Ellsberg on the Death of Gorbachev

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Paul Jay (PJ): Hi. Welcome to theAnalysis.news, I'm Paul Jay. In just a few seconds, I'll return with my guests, Noam Chomsky and Daniel Ellsberg. We're going to talk about the significance or legacy of the life of Gorbachev.

On Tuesday, August 30th, Mikhail Gorbachev died. And his legacy is a matter of, of course, international discussion, debate; apparently, Putin is not going to his funeral, which I believe is taking place maybe as we speak. He wrote some kind of note about it. But Gorbachev has been praised in the West as a hero of the deconstruction of the Soviet Union and also condemned; and much talk about his failings. Now to talk about the significance or of Gorbachev's life and the demise of the Soviet Union, joining me again is Noam Chomsky and Daniel Ellsberg. Thank you very much for joining me again, gentlemen.

Noam Chomsky (NC): Thank you.

PJ: Noam, kick us off; how do you assess the end of the Soviet Union and the role of Gorbachev?

NC: Well, Gorbachev was not committed to the end of the Soviet Union. That's a misstatement. It's commonly said that that was not his goal. He did open up Russia and he opened up the region to a degree of freedom that they had not enjoyed. His own intention was not to break up the Soviet Union, but he had a very much broader vision, and I think that's his major contribution; amongst many. He called for what he called a common European home from Lisbon to Vladivostok, with no military alliances, no victors, no defeated, co-equals working together towards basically a social democratic future. A transformation in the whole region, working without military alliances, with cooperation. This was an expansion of the Gaullist vision of an independent Europe, as a third force in international affairs. Gorbachev

carried it forward, and it could have survived. President Bush was not strongly opposed to it. Clinton dismantled it when he moved right away to expand NATO to the Russian border in violation of firm promises to Gorbachev. But the ideal of a common European home, no military alliances, working to achieve a democratic future, that's a vision you should honour, respect and try to achieve.

Daniel Ellsberg (DE): I saw Gorbachev, when he was in power, as the single head of state we'd ever seen, and really the last one we'd ever see, I'd say, who was wholly committed, fundamentally committed to a non-nuclear world and to getting rid of nuclear weapons. And beyond that, to a world with a different world order that was not based on threats and unilateral sovereign efforts to assure the security of one nation at the expense of another.

But he pressed a revolutionary idea, really, that had some adherence which he got from some others of "common security," sometimes called cooperative security, collective security. The idea was first proposed in some detail by Olof Palme in the Palme Commission in 1982 before Gorbachev came to power. Gorbachev picked that up from European anti-nuclear and anti-war activists, and in the U.S from Randall Forsberg and others. They spoke of the need to take into account the security of others as well as one's own security, and let's try to avoid an action-reaction cycle in which efforts to maintain one's own security by threatening the other, by lessening the security of adversaries or rivals, and rather, by having adversaries and rivals work together to achieve security that would be best for both sides. In particular, Horst Afheldt and Randall Forsberg pressed for non-offensive defense, weapons of protection which could not be used in offense. You had to sort of eliminate the offensive threat to the others.

Let me give an example that is relevant right now, for example, oddly, or in an unprecedented kind of relationship we have with Taiwan. In theory we agree with China, Beijing, that Taiwan is part of China— one China. On the other hand, thanks to pressure from Congress since 1979, we continue to arm this province of China, Taiwan, against the possible use of force against it. Now, if Xi or his predecessors were like Gorbachev, they would not be threatening force to reunite with this province. Actually, as Paul has said, it was not Gorbachev's intention to dismantle the Soviet Union, but he definitely refused to use force to maintain it; in East Germany and other places, including Poland. It spread very quickly in '89 beyond what he'd expected. I think he thought there would be more willingness to remain in without the use of force, but in any case, he refused to use it.

Nevertheless, Xi and the others have always maintained that if peaceful means were not sufficient to reunite eventually Taiwan and the mainland, that force was not excluded. They have built up force to that effect for the last 20 years.

Now, for the last 40 years, we have limited our sales of arms to Taiwan to so-called defensive means. And we've seen those means at work in Ukraine actually: Stingers, anti-tank, anti-aircraft; weapons that do not pose a threat beyond their borders, and actually, very effectively— more than almost anyone expected in Ukraine—they have worked against the

invasion by tanks and other offensive forces in Ukraine, resulting so far in a stalemate; so not a wonderful situation.

Well, in Taiwan, I believe the effort to move toward recognizing Taiwan, overthrowing the 1979 agreements—I really don't know entirely what in the world motivates this; I think one thing is to sell arms to Taiwan, to greatly increase above the levels of the past the sales of arms, by our leading arms manufacturers: Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, Boeing, and Lockheed— and there has been talk, even recently, that let's add to their defense by giving them a deterrent capability against the mainland. That would mean longer-range weapons, missiles that could reach the mainland, which, as far as I know, they don't have now. They did have when it was a US base before 1979. The idea of making it a base which would again threaten the mainland for deterrent purposes is clearly crossing a red line. It would almost surely lead to war.

There is a difference between such armaments, coming right back to Ukraine as a matter of fact, what is the major rationale that Putin has given for forceful means to prevent Ukraine from uniting with the West, not only in the European Union but in NATO? And the answer is, there could be NATO bases, which aren't there now, which would have long-range cruise missiles right on the border of Russia. Now, whether Russia could really withstand that or not, what we can predict is the old cycle. Hundreds of years, thousands of years in effect, when one party, when one region gains an offensive threat against the other, the other reacts in various ways, by building up its own arms, or in this case by invading, against that threat of putting actual offensive weapons on its borders.

Now, right now, we've even given long-range rocket means to Ukraine with a proviso that they must not use them against Russia, taking the risk that someone will go beyond those constraints and go into Russia. The distinction is very clear there.

What Gorbachev accepted was this idea of non-offensive defense, of removing a threat in order to regain and increase the security of both sides together. He actually acted on that. By the way, I remember this so clearly with the death of Gorbachev, and the fact that no one that I've seen in the obituaries has mentioned what Gorbachev called “a new way of thinking”- from Palme, Forsberg, and the others, and people in his own group like Georgy Arbatov, and others at the Institute for the Study of the USA. The “new way of thinking” included this notion of removing threats from your adversary.

Well, on December 7th, 1988, three years after becoming head of the Soviet Union, he gave a speech to the UN that was totally unforeseen by the US, I would say. He talked about this common security and the need to work on common interests in pursuit, by the way, of what Noam has pointed to, a common home, a European home, rather than rival adversaries confronting each other. He then said, unilaterally, he was removing 5,000 tanks from East Germany, which by the way, had always surrounded Berlin and kept West Berlin under threat during that whole time. So he's removing 5,000 tanks and 50,000 troops from East Germany. Ultimately, he took out half a million troops— half a million unilaterally before any other agreement—from the Soviet armed forces.

As a colonel in the Pentagon, he was quoted in The New York Times the day after, the day after December 7th, he said, “This is worse than Pearl Harbor.” They meant that. As Georgy Arbatov said at the time, “We are doing something terrible to you. We are removing your enemy. We’re taking away your enemy.” And that preceded the general reduction of force in East Germany that led to the uprisings.

Well, I think what we’ve seen since then and right up to the present is this otherwise inexplicable refusal of the US and NATO in the ’90s and later in this century to try to enhance a friendly relation with Russia, which was not communist but capitalist and was for a time friendly and open for investment. To do what Gorbachev was offering, a friendly relationship— he said not an adversary, but a friendly relationship. That’s what George Kennan, one of the creators of the Cold War, said at the time: that expanding NATO was a disaster precisely because it would undermine those elements like Gorbachev in Russia and after Gorbachev who were for open, democratic-friendly relation with Europe, in favor of reactionary and militaristic elements. And Kennan said as early as the 1990s, “ultimately, you’ll go to Ukraine, and that will seal it. That will make it impossible to have any friendly relationship with Russia in this European home.” Well, we acted totally contrary to that. As early as 2008, George W. Bush, against France and Germany’s strong objection, said Georgia and Ukraine, both formerly parts of the U.S.S.R., would be part of NATO, and we’ve gone along those lines. Why were we doing that? Let me give my guess at this point. The ruling establishment in this country in the military-industrial complex, the Atlanticist forces of NATO, which was our foothold in Europe economically and militarily, never wanted a friendly relation with Russia to persist, never wanted Russia to be a non-enemy. Where would NATO be under those circumstances? Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and even Putin at one point said, Well, maybe Russia could be in NATO. For a while, there was a partnership, a relationship. But why do you need NATO, then, if Russia is in it? Why do you need all these weapons that the corporations I’ve just described, including French and other corporations, are selling to NATO against who? If Russia is a friend, you don’t need any of this. The profits go, but even more importantly, the US hegemonic leadership role in Europe vanishes if you don’t have a Russian enemy. Contrary to Gorbachev, in other words, a Russian enemy was indispensable to our imperial elements who wanted a dominant US position in NATO and elsewhere. This concept of his pretty much vanished with him. You just don’t read about it.

My friend Tom Reifer— our friend, Noam— sent me today at my request a number of articles on this subject which I’ve been looking at—which are absolutely fascinating— by Randall Forsberg, John Steinbruner, and others— who have innovated these concepts and are very brilliant. Even in the early 2000s— but they’ve gone down the memory hole essentially. I think that some US elements here have been successful in getting Putin to reconstitute Russia as a clear-cut enemy. As long as you can foresee, an enormous profitable benefit to the military-industrial complex but in particular to the US role in Europe. For example, getting rid of the Nord Stream 2 gas line from Russia, which the US has opposed for decades now, for more than decades.

So the loss of Gorbachev, not by death, but much earlier, the power, I think, was the loss of these concepts to the world. I don't want to say irretrievably, but I think it definitely lessened the odds for human survival.

PJ: Noam, do you want to pick up from there?

NC: There are a number of points that Dan made that I think ought to be stressed. The main one that comes out of what he's saying is that the great powers: the United States, Russia, and China, must come to some kind of accommodation, or else there's no hope for the survival of the human species.

Notice I don't mention Europe, and that's interesting. Europe ought to be on par with, certainly, China and the United States, at least economically. Russia doesn't even belong in that club. Their economy is about the size of Mexico. Europe has failed in the last 70 years to find a place in the world order. It's got a huge economy, an educated population, and is culturally advanced. There is every reason why it should play a major role in world affairs. Well, there has been a conflict. One was the Gaullist vision, as Dan pointed out— Olof Palme supported it. Willy Brandt in Germany, with his Ost- politics, supported it; the idea that there should be a third force in which Western Europe and Russia would join together without military alliances. That was confronted with the Atlanticist vision, as it was called, based on NATO, with the US in charge. Well, given the US power that, of course, won.

When Gorbachev came along, it raised a new crucial issue. You could no longer rely on the pretext that we have to defend ourselves against the Russian hordes. Actually, it was always a pretext, as Kennan and others understood well. You couldn't even claim it anymore by the time Gorbachev came along. So what was going to happen to Europe? Well, there's Gorbachev's conception of a common European home, no military bases, coequals, partnership, and move towards general accommodation, which would then naturally extend to the China-based region; the Silk Road initiative came later. That's one.

The other was the Atlanticist vision, NATO-based, and the US in charge and NATO expanding to the Russian border. When George Bush, the second, not the first, invited Ukraine into NATO, I don't know if he understood what he was doing, but the people around him certainly did. Robert Gates, his hawkish defense secretary, said this is reckless, provocative, and crazy. If Ukraine was to go into NATO, any Russian leader would probably go to war. That's the hawkish secretary of defense. It was understood all along the line. Bush went ahead. France and Germany, as Dan pointed out, vetoed it. The US power is strong enough to overcome that, so it stays on the agenda.

Since then, the US has been building up Ukraine as an offensive partner, integrated into NATO. In fact, US military journals call it a de facto member of NATO. The US has announced clearly it would not consider any Russian security concerns. We go on to the

situation where we are now, where NATO has changed the global geography. By now, the North Atlantic includes the Indo-Pacific region.

The last NATO summit, for the first time, invited US Asian allies and explained that the realm of NATO now includes the Indo-Pacific region surrounding China. Conflict with Russia is a recipe for disaster. The world can't go on like that. We will have to quickly find a way to bring, first of all, for Europe to play the role it should in world affairs, not hanging on to US coattails.

Emmanuel Macron is about the only statesman visible in the world right now who's continuing his efforts, so far in vain, to work towards some sort of way of ending the horrors in Ukraine through a diplomatic settlement and moving on towards better relations. That has to be done. If that isn't done, we have no hope.

It's not only Ukraine. The collateral damage, as it's called, is immense. It means millions of people are facing starvation with the closing off of the Black Sea, food and fertilizer region. The limited efforts to deal with the enormous crisis of global warming have been reversed. We don't have much time to spend. The few years that we have, instead of dealing with the crisis, to be exacerbating it is beyond lunacy. There is a severe and growing threat of nuclear war. It goes way beyond Ukraine. Answer, we have to find ways to move toward Gorbachev's vision, to cooperate, and work together to overcome problems that have no borders. There are global problems. Nuclear war has no borders. Climate change, of course, has none. Threats of growing pandemics have none. We cannot waste time destroying each other by producing destructive weapons and carrying out mass slaughter. Where we must be working towards, quickly, is towards accommodation and diplomatic settlement. First of all, move towards the vision that Gorbachev sketched.

PJ: Alright, well, thank you both very much. I'm going to continue my conversation with Noam and Dan. We're going to talk about US domestic politics and the rise of the far-right and fascism in the United States. So join me for that.

Let me add one other thing. Please don't forget that we depend on your donations to do this. So click the donate button, and get on our email list. If you're on YouTube, subscribe. Thanks again for joining us on theAnalysis.

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