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It's time for a second American revolution in the spirit of perestroika

Mikhail Gorbachev
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Years ago, as the Cold War was coming to an end, I said to my fellow leaders around the globe: the world is on the cusp of great events, and in the face of new challenges all of us will have to change, you as well as we. For the most part, the reaction was polite but sceptical silence.

In recent years, I have often told listeners that I feel Americans need their own change - a perestroika, not like the one in my country, but an American perestroika - and the reaction has been markedly different. Halls filled with thousands of people have responded with applause.

Some have reacted with understanding. Others have objected, sometimes sarcastically, suggesting that I want the United States to experience upheaval, just like the former Soviet Union. In my country, particularly caustic reactions have come from the opponents of perestroika, people with short memories and a deficit of conscience.

Our perestroika signalled the need for change in the Soviet Union, but it was not meant to suggest a capitulation to the US model. Today, the need for a more far-reaching perestroika - one for America and the world - has become clearer than ever.

The need for change in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s was urgent. The country was stifled by a lack of freedom, and the people - particularly the educated class - wanted to break the stranglehold of a system that had been built under Stalin.

We opted for free elections, political pluralism, freedom of religion and an economy with competition and private property. We sought to effect these changes in an evolutionary way and without bloodshed. We made mistakes. Important decisions were made too late, and we were unable to complete our perestroika. Nevertheless, perestroika won, because it brought the country to a point from which there could be no return to the past.

In the West, the break-up of the Soviet Union was viewed as a total victory that proved that the West did not need to change. Western leaders were convinced that they were at the helm of the right system and of a well-functioning, almost perfect economic model. Scholars opined that history had ended. The dogma of free markets, deregulation and balanced budgets at any cost was force-fed to the rest of the world.

But then came the economic crisis of 2008 and 2009, and it became clear that the new Western model was an illusion that benefited chiefly the very rich. Statistics show that the poor and the middle class saw little or no benefit from the economic growth of the past decades.

The global crisis demonstrates that the leaders of major powers had missed the signals that called for a perestroika. The result is a crisis that is not just financial and economic. It is political, too.

The model that emerged during the late 20th century has turned out to be unsustainable. It was based on a drive for super-profits and hyper-consumption for a few, on unrestrained exploitation of resources and on social and environmental irresponsibility.

But if all the proposed solutions and action now come down to a mere rebranding of the old system, we are bound to see another, perhaps even greater upheaval down the road. The current model does not need adjusting; it needs replacing. I have no ready-made prescriptions. But I am convinced that a new model will emerge, one that will

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emphasise public needs and public good, such as a cleaner environment, well-functioning infrastructure and public transport, sound education and health systems and affordable housing.

Elements of such a model already exist in some nations. Countries such as Malaysia and Brazil have achieved impressive rates of growth. China and India have pulled hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. By mobilising state resources, France has built a system of high-speed railways, while Canada provides free health care. Among the new democracies, Slovenia and Slovakia have been able to mitigate the social consequences of market reforms.

The time has come to strike the right balance between the government and the market, for integrating social and environmental factors and demilitarising the economy.

Washington will have to play a special role in this new perestroika, not just because the United States wields great economic, political and military power, but because America was the main architect, and America's elite the main beneficiary, of the current world economic model. That model is now cracking and will, sooner or later, be replaced. That will be a complex and painful process for everyone, including the United States.

However different the problems that the Soviet Union confronted during our perestroika and the challenges now facing the United States, the need for new thinking makes these two eras similar. In our time, we faced up to the main tasks of putting an end to the division of the world, winding down the nuclear arms race and defusing conflicts. We will cope with the new global challenges as well, but only if everyone understands the need for real, cardinal change - for a global perestroika.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, heads the International Foundation for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, a Moscow-based think tank.

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