

EAST-WEST RELATIONS AFTER THE COLD WAR

A cautionary note about prediction is in order when we think about East-West relations in the post-Cold War era. The respected American scholar, Robert Gilpin wrote the following in 1981:

“An evaluation of the current international situation reinforces the hope that a gradual process of peaceful change rather than war may characterize the present era of world politics. An extremely important reason for guarded optimism is the relative stability of the existing bipolar structure and the internal condition of the United States and the Soviet Union.”¹

This respected scholar of international relations went on to elaborate his reasons for optimism: the major destabilizing tendencies of past bipolar international systems seemed unlikely to recur and he stressed, “the basic domestic stability of the United States and the Soviet Union today helps to ensure that revolutionary upheavals in these societies will not disrupt the international system.”²

Obviously, Dr. Gilpin was dramatically wrong in his confidence about the stability of the Soviet Union. To point this out is not to be unkind about the necessary and courageous task of prediction in international relations. Nor is it to suggest the inevitability of the worst-case outcomes internationally because of a collapse of the Soviet Empire. But it is worth juxtaposing both predictions with the subsequent reality in order to underline the huge shifts in reality and in perceptions which have taken place. We are all scrambling to keep up with a world that has a whole new set of rules.

What then remains and what has really changed in the adversarial East-West relationship that has so largely dominated the structure of the international system for nearly half a century? One way of appraising the situation is to say that the steam has gone out of the Cold War but much of the engine is still intact. The 34 members of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) met at the Summit in Paris in November 1990 in the most important such gathering since the Congress of Vienna. This conference ratified the end of the confrontational division in Europe and the beginning of an historic enterprise to forge what Gorbachev has called “the common European home”.