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THE IMPACT OF THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL ON SOUTH AFRICA AND THE WORLD

We have just celebrated the 20th anniversary of the destruction of the Berlin Wall. I was fortunate enough to be in Berlin for the occasion and to have discussed the implications and consequences of the momentous events of 9 November 1989 with two of the main protagonists - Mikhail Gorbachev and Lech Walesa. We all agreed that the fall of the Berlin wall was one of the turning points in modern history.

The events of 9 November 1989 will reverberate through history with similar impact to those of 14 July exactly two hundred years earlier. The fall of the Bastille was only a single incident in a lengthy and complex process. Nevertheless, it came to symbolise the success of the French Revolution. The French revolution, in turn, marked the beginning of the end of absolute monarchy in Europe and signalled the dawn of a new approach to the government of society.

In the same way, the fall of the Berlin wall - although only a single event in a broad historic process - has come to symbolise the collapse of international communism and the end of the bipolar world. Perhaps, even more significantly, it signalled the failure of ideology and social engineering to provide workable solutions to the challenges of human societies.

The point of departure of ideologists is that intellectuals have the ability to construct utopia by shattering the old order and then remoulding it nearer to the heart's desire. This often involves not only the redesigning of the institutions of society - but of human nature itself.

However, ideologists usually discover that it is more difficult to remould human beings than they imagined. People have an obstinate habit of resisting change; clinging to traditions and pursuing what they believe to be their self-interest. For ideologists the utopian ideal is so imperative that they feel entitled to enforce conformity on those who disagree - usually by sending them to gulags or re-education camps. Ideologists also insist that because the revolution is never really complete they have a historic mandate to remain in power until utopia has been attained - in other words, forever. Almost invariably, ideology and freedom are irreconcilable.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was above all a victory for freedom. The crowds who gathered day after day in Leipzig and in other German cities quietly and peacefully reasserted their right to personal liberty. The constituent countries of the Soviet empire were able to assert their national independence - and in most cases quickly established constitutional democracies. At the same time, people throughout the former Soviet empire were able to begin to exercise their right to economic freedom. After decades in the straightjacket of command economies, they were finally able to participate in the newly re-emergent markets.

What factors contributed to these momentous developments?

In the first place, it had become evident to any rational observer that free markets generated much greater wealth and higher standards of living than rigid command economies. Western Europe was demonstrably a better place in which to live than the drab and severely rationed East. Even the most committed communist apparatchiks staring across the wall at the brash prosperity of West Berlin must have developed secret doubts. Khrushchev's boast in his 1957 kitchen debate with Vice-President Nixon - that the Soviet economy would eclipse the American economy in a couple of decades - simply did not happen. Instead of overtaking Americans in terms of prosperity, Soviet citizens fell further and further behind in the consumer race. Ultimately, the Soviet Union did not have the resources to continue to compete in the arms race against the United States.

Secondly, the citizens of the Soviet Union could no longer be isolated from the impact of globalisation. Even before the advent of the internet, fax machines and modern communication technology began to inform Russians of global trends and fashions. The new generation wanted American jeans, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles - not Marx and Lenin.

As with all collapsing empires, the main cause of the decline was simply that the leadership began to lose faith in the political mythology on which their state had been founded. It had become increasingly obvious to new generations of leaders that communism was not delivering the utopian paradise that had inspired their predecessors.

At the other end of the Eurasian landmass Chinese communists were drawing similar conclusions. They were fully aware of the spectacular success of the Chinese populations of Hong Kong and Taiwan. They also knew that the critical success factor of these societies was economic freedom - but had noted that Hong Kong under British rule was not a politically free democracy. They concluded that the extension of economic freedom in China itself need not necessarily threaten the position of the communist party.

One of the most astounding aspects of the 1989 developments in Eastern Europe was that they were entirely unexpected and unpredicted. No-one envisaged only two or three years earlier that within a decade Germany would be reunited; the Baltic republics would be independent; Central Europe would be free and the Communist Party would be banned in Russia. Anyone who had done so would have been taken away for psychiatric assessment.

The most important consequence of the events of November, 1989 and its aftermath was the end of the bipolar geostrategic paradigm that had characterised global politics since the end of World War II. The central reality in global politics was no longer the confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The primary strategic threat was no longer the possibility of a nuclear war or a conventional invasion of Western Europe. Soviet-backed wars of national liberation no longer dominated strategic considerations in the third world.

Within a few short months all these factors - which had dominated the strategic debate for forty-five years - evaporated. The world was left with the United States as the single, unchallenged, global super-power. The mantle of sole global pre-eminence came

unexpectedly to the United States. It was a role for which Americans were not properly prepared either by history or inclination.

The United States was now the only country that could effectively project its military power in any part of the world. Its political and economic system had emerged triumphant from its cold war engagement with communism. Francis Fukuyama wrote of the "End of History" based on the proposition that free-market democracy was the culmination of mankind's historic quest for the best possible system of political and economic government.

The result, inevitably, was a degree of hubris. When Vice-President Gore and Hilary Clinton came to South Africa in May 1994 to attend Nelson Mandela's inauguration, they bought their own armoured limousines in giant military transport aircraft. When our security authorities asked why they had done so when we could have provided perfectly good armoured vehicles for them, the reply was simply "because we can."

The United States could flaunt its power. It no longer felt it necessary to sacrifice its immediate national interests to comply with multilateral initiatives such as the Kyoto Protocol.

The question that American intellectuals now asked themselves was what the United States should do with its global military pre-eminence? The answer was provided in part by a Neo-Conservative think tank, The Project for a New American Century. In its 1997 statement of principles it asked whether the United States had the resolve "to shape a new century favorable to American principles and interests." Those principles included the need to promote political and economic freedom throughout the world; and the need preserve a world order that was friendly to America's security, prosperity and principles.

The result was the second Iraq War.

In the view of Neo-Con strategists Iraq presented an excellent opportunity to pursue their principles in practice. They could bestow the benefits of American democracy on the Iraqi people - and also secure the United States strategic position in the world's main oil-producing region. As a result, the Americans blundered into a tar-pit of conflict which they did not understand and from which they must still extricate themselves. History has not ended - and the new American century lasted less than twenty years.

America discovered in Iraq and Afghanistan - at an enormous cost - the limitations of its military power. Its economic power and prestige has at the same time been seriously tarnished by the current economic crisis. Everywhere, neo-Communists are emerging from the woodwork and proclaiming that they were, after all, right about the weaknesses of the capitalism. Nobel Economics Laureate Joseph Stiglitz has expressed his worry that "as they see more clearly the flaws in America's economic and social system, many in the developing world will draw the wrong conclusions." He fears that "a variety of forms of excessive market intervention will return" and that "these will fail". He goes on to point out that "There has never been a successful economy that has not relied heavily on markets."

Of course, he is right. The problem is not the proven performance vehicle of free markets, but the reckless manner in which the vehicle has been driven - often egged on

by the traffic police themselves! The answer is definitely not to return to the donkey cart of command socialism.

The world after 1989 has been dominated by new and unforeseen factors:

The first is a virtual end of wars between countries. Despite the continuing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we are living in one of the most peaceful periods in history.

The second is that the most serious threat to peace now comes from conflicts within countries between ethnic, religious and cultural communities.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 25 of the world's 27 serious conflicts are between ethnic, religious and cultural communities within countries.

A deep sense of cultural, religious or ethnic alienation lies at the root of many of the nasty little wars throughout the world - most of which seldom impact on the evening news. Too often, minority communities feel that they are not sufficiently accommodated, politically or culturally, in the processes by which they are governed. They feel that their governments are insensitive to their languages and cultures; that they are subject to discrimination, repression and efforts to integrate them forcibly into the majority culture.

This sense of alienation often breaks out in conflict, rebellion, demands for secession and sometimes in acts of terrorism. Present or recent conflicts in Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Georgia, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Darfur provide depressing examples.

Religious and cultural alienation are also among the main underlying causes of international terrorism. Most terrorists are motivated by a deep sense of religious and cultural grievance. The rampant advance of globalised consumer culture with its attendant political and social ethos, pose a threat to conservative societies and particularly to fundamentalist Moslems.

One of the great challenges of the new millennium will be to address cultural and religious alienation and to devise norms and approaches that will enable different communities to live together in peace.

Finally, the dominant development since 1989 has been the acceleration of globalization. The process of global economic and information integration is creating a new framework for international relations. Events in even the remotest regions can have an impact on the global environment. No one, no community, no country can any longer be ignored. Who would have thought ten years ago that Moslem fanatics hiding in caves in Afghanistan could possibly threaten the United States or downtown Manhattan?

In the same manner, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 had dramatic repercussions for South Africa's constitutional transformation.

One of the South African Government's central political and strategic concerns before 1989 was the expansion of Soviet influence in southern Africa and the influence of the South African Communist Party within the ANC.

Former South African governments were deeply concerned about Communist influence in the ANC. They knew that a large majority of the members of the ANC's National Executive Committee were also members of the South African Communist Party. They knew that SACP cadres controlled key functions within the ANC alliance, most notably its armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe. They knew that the SACP proposed a two phased revolution. During the first – national liberation - phase the ANC would be the vanguard party and would lead all forces opposed to apartheid to the goal of national liberation. During the second phase, the SACP would take over as the vanguard party and would lead the country to the establishment of a 'people's democracy'.

Former National Party governments did not feel that they were under any moral obligation to accept a one-man, one-vote process that would quickly lead to the demise of democracy and the establishment of a totalitarian communist regime – as had already happened in a number of neighbouring states.

This was not a question of 'reds under beds'. The communist threat was very real. The contest between the free world and the Soviet bloc was taking place through third world liberation struggles. Throughout the 1980s, South African Defence Force units were involved in direct conflict with Soviet and Cuban-led forces in southern Angola. The battle of the Lomba River in September, 1987, was one of the largest set-piece battles in Africa since the Second World War. However, the tide was already turning: the following year the Soviet Union and Cuba agreed to withdraw Cuban forces from Angola as the precursor for the implementation of UN resolution 435 for the independence of Namibia. The negotiations with the Angolans and the Cubans and the subsequent successful implementation of the UN independence plan during 1989 reassured the South African government that it could secure its core interests through negotiations with its opponents.

The collapse of the Soviet Union symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall removed one of the major obstacles to a negotiated settlement in South Africa

- communism was in headlong disarray;
- the South African Communist Party was in shell-shocked retreat;
- constitutional democracy and free market principles were triumphant.

Never again would the balance of forces be so favourable for an equitable negotiated settlement. The destruction of the Berlin Wall opened a window of opportunity through which we unhesitatingly jumped. During the following four years we were able to negotiate a model democratic constitution which has served as the basis for 15 years of stability and growth - despite the many challenges that continue to confront us.

South Africa is now a full participant in the globalised world and economy. Our history will continue to be shaped by developments on the world stage. Our economy is also suffering from the effects of the global economic crisis. The South African Communist Party is trumpeting this as the long-awaited failure of capitalism and is making a serious bid to re-establish its influence over its ANC alliance partner. As with the rest of the world, relationships between our ethnic and cultural communities present a threat to stability and must be managed with sensitivity and toleration. Our future will also depend on mankind's ability to address the threat of global warming and to ensure sustainable development.

What conclusions can we draw from the twenty years since November 1989? We have learned that

- countries that enjoy economic freedom and free markets perform much better than those with centralized command economies;
- pragmatism is preferable to ideology of any kind: including soviet communism; Verwoerdian separate development; and even the Neo-Con's new American century;
- we are increasingly interdependent: events anywhere in the world can affect countries all over the world;
- if we wish to address global problems - like global warming and third world poverty - we must work together;
- the unipolar world has come to an end - and we are about to enter an era of multipolarity;
- the main threat to peace now comes from conflicts between cultural, ethnic and religious communities within countries;
- it is unwise - even for the most powerful countries - to become involved in protracted military adventures far from their shores and remote from their core interests;
- in a rapidly changing world, the future is unpredictable; and
- there is no end to history.

For us in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall showed how deeply we are influenced by events on the global stage - and helped us to break down the walls between our own people.