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WILL CHINA SUFFER THE SAME FATE AS THE SOVIET UNION?

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Abstract: It was widely assumed in the West following the collapse of European socialism that China would undergo a similar process of counter-revolution. This article seeks to understand why, three decades later, this hasn't happened, and whether it is likely to happen in the foreseeable future. The article contrasts China's "reform and opening up" process, pursued since 1978, with the "perestroika" and "glasnost" policies taken up in the Soviet Union under the Gorbachev leadership. A close analysis of the available data makes it clear that China's reform has been far more successful than the Soviet reform; that, in contrast to the Soviet Union in the 1980s, all the key quality of life indicators in China have undergone significant improvement in the last 40 years, and China is emerging as a global leader in science, technological innovation and environmental preservation. The article argues that the disparate outcomes in China and the Soviet Union are the result primarily of the far more effective economic strategy pursued by the Chinese government, along with the continued strengthening of the Communist Party of China's leadership.

Key words: China; Soviet Union; socialism; reform

We should think of China's communist regime quite differently from that of the USSR: it has, after all, succeeded where the Soviet Union failed. (Jacques 2009, 535)

This article addresses the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union, and seeks to understand whether the People's Republic of China (PRC) is vulnerable to the same forces that undermined the foundations of European socialism. What lessons can be drawn from the Soviet collapse? Has capitalism won? What future does

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socialism have in the world? Is there any escape for humanity from brutal exploitation, inequality, and underdevelopment? Is there a future in which the world's billions can truly exercise their free will, their humanity, liberated from poverty and alienation?

The conclusions I draw are that China is following a fundamentally different path to that of the Soviet Union; that it has made a serious and comprehensive study of the Soviet collapse and rigorously applied what it has learnt; that the People's Republic of China remains a socialist country and the driving force towards a multipolar world; that, in spite of the rolling back of the first wave of socialist advance, Marxism remains as relevant as ever; and that, consequently, socialism has a bright future in the world.

Maintaining the Legitimacy of the CPC through Highly Effective Governance and Improvement in Living Standards

The Chinese experience since 1978 shows that a developing country must take the improvement of people's standard of living as its top priority. . . . With this belief, China has done its utmost to improve people's standard of living and achieved remarkable results in poverty eradication. (Zhang 2012, 96)

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the European people's democracies between 1989 and 1991, many senior officials in China worried that the reform process could get out of hand. The Soviet leaders had attempted reform via *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and their experiments had ended in disaster. Wasn't this a cautionary message for the Communist Party of China (CPC) to return to the model of comprehensive state ownership and strictly centralized economic control?

Deng Xiaoping's insight was that the central element destabilizing the Soviet Union wasn't its experiment with a mixed economy but its failure to deliver improvements in people's living standards. Economic stagnation from the mid-1970s onwards meant that people's basic expectations for a better life weren't being met. As a result, when it came to defending socialism from attack (both domestic and international), the masses couldn't easily be mobilized.

Deng understood that the Communist Party's legitimacy would only be maintained by eliminating poverty and improving people's everyday quality of life. Therefore, on his famous Southern Tour in 1992, he urged boldness rather than caution. As long as the CPC maintained political control, as long as the crucial parts of the economy (the "commanding heights") continued to be publicly owned, markets and foreign investment would benefit China. Attracted by the huge, well-educated, and hard-working labour force, foreign companies would invest in

China, thereby increasing China's capital and technical know-how, creating a virtuous cycle that would allow China to rise up the value chain and provide vastly improved living conditions to its population.

Decades later, it's uncontroversial to say that the economic strategy adopted in the period of "reform and opening up" (1978 onwards) has been highly successful. China's per capita income in 1979 was \$210. Much of the rural population lived below the poverty line. Per capita food production had grown a total of just 10% from 1952. The PRC had fallen a long way behind the "East Asian miracle" zone (Japan, South Korea, China's Taiwan, China's Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia) in terms of living standards. Justin Yifu Lin writes that the post-Mao leadership "had to improve national economic performance and make its people as rich as their neighbours, or it might lose support and its legitimacy for rule" (Lin 2012, 154).

In the following decades, the number of people in China living in "absolute poverty" (as defined by the World Bank) fell from 840 million to practically zero (Gupta 2020). Wages have increased continuously. Between 1988 and 2008, average per capita income grew by 229%, ten times the global average of 24%. In 1994, a Chinese factory worker made \$500 a year, only a quarter of the wage of her counterpart in Thailand (Kroeber 2016, 174). In 2020, the average annual income in China exceeds \$10,000—three times the figure for Thailand.

Although inequality has emerged as a serious problem, practically all Chinese people are substantially better off than they were 40 years ago in terms of nutrition, housing, clothing, access to services, and ability to travel. Consumer goods that were previously considered luxuries—such as washing machines, refrigerators, heated shower units, air conditioners, colour televisions, computers—can now be found in almost every home.

In the 2000s, the government re-established a comprehensive social security program, including universal health insurance, free compulsory education for ages 6–15, pensions, subsidized housing, and income support. Workers' wages are increasing at a much faster rate than GDP, and as a result the income gap is starting to narrow.

Human Development Index (HDI) is a useful compound metric comprising life expectancy, educational level, and per capita income. In HDI terms, China has risen from 0.407 in 1980 to 0.758 today (for calibration purposes, Norway is at the top of the charts with 0.949 and the Central African Republic at the bottom with 0.352). China's increase in HDI makes it the only country to leap-frog the "medium" HDI rank, moving from the "low HDI" group in 1990 to the "high HDI" group today (the requirement for the "very high HDI" group is 0.800—it's likely China will get there before the end of this decade).

Chinese productivity and innovation levels are gradually catching up with the most advanced capitalist countries, as the government's huge investment in science and technology reaps rewards. Veteran science writer Philip Ball notes that

the patronising old idea that China . . . can imitate but not innovate is certainly false now. In several scientific fields, China is starting to set the pace for others to follow. On my tour of Chinese labs in 1992, only those I saw at the flagship Peking University looked comparable to what you might find at a good university in the West. Today the resources available to China's top scientists are enviable to many of their Western counterparts. (Ball 2018)

Whereas Soviet infrastructure was starting to crumble by the 1980s, modern Chinese infrastructure is world-class. Indeed, the quality of roads, trains, airports, ports, and buildings in major Chinese cities is now noticeably higher than in global cities like New York and London.

The continuously improving economic situation and corresponding improvement in people's quality of life has led to strong popular support for the government and for Chinese socialism. The Pew Research Center reports that President Xi Jinping enjoys a confidence rating of 94%,¹ which compares favourably with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose approval rating is a mere 34%.² In 2014, 89% of Chinese rated their economy "good," compared with 64% for India and 40% for the US (Kroeber 2016, 198). British academic Peter Nolan writes that, "under Communist Party rule, China has experienced the most remarkable era of growth and development in modern history" (Nolan 2016, 2). Because of that, the rule of the Communist Party of China enjoys tremendous popular support and legitimacy.

Why Has Chinese Economic Reform Succeeded When the Soviet Reform Failed?

The vastly different results of the Russian and Chinese reforms are demonstrative of the critical importance of choosing the right reform strategies and paths. (Hu 2011, 28)

The late Italian Marxist historian Domenico Losurdo noted that, in the 1930s and 1940s, the Soviet "command economy" had worked extremely well: "the rapid development of modern industry was interwoven with the construction of a welfare state that guaranteed the economic and social rights of citizens in a way that was unprecedented" (Losurdo 2017, 17). However, after the period of frenetic building of socialism, followed by World War II, then by reconstruction, came

“the transition from great historical crisis to a more ‘normal’ period” in which “the masses’ enthusiasm and commitment to production and work weakened and then disappeared” (Losurdo 2017, 17). In its final few years,

[T]he Soviet Union was characterised by massive absenteeism and disengagement in the workplace: not only did production development stagnate, but there was no longer any application of the principle that Marx said drove socialism—remuneration according to the quantity and quality of work delivered. (Losurdo 2017, 17)

From the mid-1970s onwards, the Soviet economy entered a period of slow economic growth, just at the point when the major capitalist countries were starting to leverage developments in technology and management to achieve major steps forward in productivity. Jude Woodward notes that,

from 20 per cent of the size of the US economy in 1944, the Soviet economy peaked at 44 per cent that of the US by 1970 (\$1,352 billion to \$3,082 billion) but had fallen back to 36 per cent of the US by 1989 (\$2,037 billion to \$5,704 billion). It never came near challenging the economic weight of the US. (Woodward 2017, 248)

Losurdo contends that China in the late 1970s faced very similar problems:

The China that arose from the Cultural Revolution resembled the Soviet Union to an extraordinary degree in its last years of existence: the socialist principle of compensation based on the amount and quality of work delivered was substantially liquidated, and disaffection, disengagement, absenteeism and anarchy reigned in the workplace. (Losurdo 2017, 19)

China had made remarkable progress in terms of life expectancy, land ownership, social equality, education, and mass empowerment since the birth of the People’s Republic in 1949, yet by the late 1970s it was still a long way from being an advanced country. Hundreds of millions of people in the villages faced food insecurity and poor housing conditions.

Being a poor country with a tremendous responsibility to meet the immediate needs of its huge population, China lacked the resources to invest heavily in research and development, and the resulting low productivity meant that it couldn’t guarantee an adequate standard of living to its people. Cut off from the global marketplace, it wasn’t able to quickly learn from others or benefit from an ever-more globalized division of labor. There was a shortage of capital, a low

level of technological development, and a lack of incentives for production and innovation. Much as with the Soviet Union in its later decades, China's planning system continued to be overly reliant on voluntarism and "moral incentives" to raise production. The history of socialist economics over the last century indicates that such an approach suffers from diminishing returns and can't be sustained forever.

This is the context in which reform and opening up was adopted in the late 1970s. Superficially, the reform strategy pursued by China from 1978 shares some similarity with the various attempts at economic reform in the Soviet Union, particularly the set of policies introduced by the Gorbachev leadership under the umbrella of *perestroika*. However, there are profound differences between the Chinese and Soviet approaches that help to explain the unquestionable success of one and the comprehensive failure of the other.

China's approach to reform was extremely cautious and pragmatic, "based on a step-by-step, piecemeal and experimental approach. If a reform worked it was extended to new areas; if it failed then it was abandoned" (Jacques 2009, 176). All reforms had to be tested in practice, all results had to be analyzed, and all analysis had to inform future experiments. Chen Yun, the lead economist of the Deng era, stated in 1980 that

the steps must be steady, because we shall encounter many complicated problems. So do not rush. . . . We should proceed with experiments, review our experience from time to time, and correct mistakes whenever we discover them, so that minor mistakes will not grow into major ones. (Hu 2011, 33)

Many key reform concepts came from the grassroots. "We processed their ideas and raised them to the level of guidelines for the whole country. Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth" (Deng 1992).

Reform in China was patient, incremental, and results-oriented, whereas "Gorbachev made the fatal mistake of trying to do too much, too fast" (Shambaugh 2008, 65). Gorbachev's reforms were implemented in a heavy-handed, top-down way, without leveraging the ideas and creativity of the masses or attempting to collate feedback. Given that the project was presented as a form of "democratization," it's ironic that it was carried out in a profoundly undemocratic manner. The leadership didn't mobilize the existing, proven structures of society (the soviets and the Communist Party), but sought to bypass and weaken them.

Instead of relying on the most pragmatic elements of the party and state officialdom in restructuring of the country, Gorbachev tried to build up new political forces and movements while gradually diminishing the power of the party and of centralized state structures (Zubok 2007, 307).

The media weren't used to unite the people behind a program of development but to denigrate the Communist Party. The economic program was incoherent and subject to sudden changes in direction. The result was, in the words of veteran Russian communist Gennady Zyuganov, "a parade of political arrogance, demagoguery, and dilettantism, which gradually overwhelmed and paralysed the country" (Zyuganov 1997, 107).

The Chinese and Soviet economies in the 1970s both suffered from a stifling overcentralization. China's reform process addressed this imbalance in a gradual manner, in which "the relaxation of restrictions on private capital development was combined with state control and planned and state-led heavy investment" (Roberts 2017). In the Soviet Union, by contrast, the planning agencies were simply dismantled overnight, creating chaos throughout the economy.

Although China's reform process served to introduce market forces into the economy, the whole process was carried out under the tight control of the government and took place within the context of a planned economy. The level of marketization that has taken place in China is far greater than that which took place in the Soviet Union; however, China also maintained stronger macroeconomic control. Even now, after more than four decades of economic reform, "the state remains firmly in command" of the Chinese economy. "The government will pursue reforms that increase the role of the market in setting prices, but will avoid reforms that permit the market to transfer control of assets from the state to the private sector" (Kroeber 2016, 225).

Peter Nolan, by no means a cheerleader for centrally planned economies, writes: "The comparison of the experience of China and Russia's reforms confirms that, at certain junctures and in certain countries, effective planning is a necessary condition of economic success" (Nolan 1995, 312). Nolan (1995, 160–175) points out that the Chinese state took the lead in conducting large-scale experiments and analyzing the results; protecting domestic industry from the sudden appearance of foreign goods; supporting the growth of the state-owned enterprises to a level where they could become competitive in the global marketplace; investing in social and economic infrastructure (transport, healthcare, education, power generation); and coordinating the different parts of the reform program.

David Kotz and Fred Weir observe that there was hardly any privatization in the Chinese reform process—state enterprises were kept under state ownership and control.

There was no sudden price liberalisation—state enterprises continued to sell at controlled prices. Central planning was retained for the state sector of the economy. Rather than slashing state spending, various levels of government poured funds into improving China's basic economic infrastructure of

transportation, communication, and power. Rather than tight monetary policy, ample credit was provided for expansion and modernisation. The state has sought to gradually develop a market economy over a period of decades, and the state has actively guided the process. (Kotz and Weir 1997, 197)

The result was a far more effective program of economic reform than that which took place in the Soviet Union from 1985–1991 or in post-Soviet Russia from 1991 onwards.

If “the proof of the pudding is in the eating,” then Chinese dessert has proven itself to be far tastier than its Soviet counterpart. *Perestroika* turned a sluggish economy into a failing one. By 1991, the last year of the USSR’s existence, the economy was contracting at a rate of 15% per year. Gorbachev’s blind faith in the inherent corrective power of the market turned out to be misplaced; investment collapsed. “Net fixed investment declined at the astounding rate of 21 per cent in 1990 and an estimated 25 per cent in 1991” (Kotz and Weir 1997, 97).

In China, GDP growth increased from around 4% in the 1970s to nearly 10% in the period from 1978 to 1992. Since 1978, China’s economy has grown more than any other country; it also tops the list for growth of per capita GDP, which has risen from \$156 in 1978 to just over \$10,000 at the time of writing.

China Is Not Weakening Communist Party Rule or Attacking Its Own History

If China allowed bourgeois liberalisation, there would inevitably be turmoil. We would accomplish nothing, and our principles, policies, line and development strategy would all be doomed to failure. (Deng 2007)

In both China and the Soviet Union, market-oriented economic reform meant breaking with past policy to some degree. A major difference is that, in the Soviet Union, this change of policy was accompanied by a concerted attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Communist Party and the confidence of the people in their history.

In 1986, Gorbachev and his advisers came up with the concept of *glasnost*—“openness”—to encapsulate policies of greater government transparency, wider political discussion, and increased popular participation. The idea seemed unobjectionable to begin with, but *glasnost* soon became a battle cry for an all-out attack on the legitimacy of Communist Party rule and a powerful weapon in the hands of class forces hostile to socialism.

Faced with significant opposition to their economic proposals within the Communist Party, and lacking a base among the masses, Gorbachev’s team

increasingly looked to “liberal reformers” for support—people who supported *perestroika* and wanted it to be accompanied by a transition towards a European-style parliamentary political system. These reformers encouraged Gorbachev to engineer a quiet coup in the name of democracy, ending the Communist Party’s leading role in the government by dismantling the Supreme Soviet and replacing it with a Congress of People’s Deputies. Representatives to this latter body were directly elected, but the selection of candidates was heavily manipulated in favor of pro-*perestroika*, pro-Western Gorbachev loyalists.

Cheng and Liu observe that,

in the name of promoting young cadres and of reform, Gorbachev replaced large numbers of party, political and military leaders with anti-CPSU and anti-socialist cadres or cadres with ambivalent positions. This practice laid the foundations, in organisational and cadre selection terms, for the political “shift of direction.” (Cheng and Liu 2017, 305)

Yegor Ligachev, a high-ranking Soviet official who observed all this firsthand, supports this conclusion. “What happened in our country is primarily the result of the debilitation and eventual elimination of the Communist Party’s leading role in society, the ejection of the party from major policymaking, its ideological and organisational unravelling” (Ligachev 1996, 286).

The political transformation was supported by a thoroughgoing media campaign denigrating Soviet history, vastly exaggerating the excesses and mistakes of the Stalin period, and even attacking the Soviet Union’s role in World War II. Things went so far that Cuban leader Fidel Castro was prompted to comment in 1989:

It’s impossible to carry out a revolution or conduct a rectification without a strong, disciplined and respected party. It’s not possible to carry out such a process by slandering socialism, destroying its values, discrediting the party, demoralising its vanguard, abandoning its leadership role, eliminating social discipline, and sowing chaos and anarchy everywhere. This may foster a counter-revolution—but not revolutionary change. . . . It is disgusting to see how many people, even in the Soviet Union itself, are engaged in denying and destroying the history-making feats and extraordinary merits of that heroic people. (Castro 2013, 56)

The Communist Party had been the major vehicle for promoting the needs and ideas of the Soviet working class; once it was sidelined, the workers had no obvious means of organizing in defense of their interests. This opened up a space for a pro-capitalist minority to dominate political power and, ultimately, break up the country and dismantle socialism.

The Chinese leadership understood that the People's Republic of China could not survive without the continued leadership of the Communist Party, and this is a key lesson that it has learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Xi Jinping notes that

[O]ne important reason for the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the CPSU is the complete denial of the history of the Soviet Union, and the history of the CPSU, the denial of Lenin and other leading personalities, and historical nihilism confused the people's thoughts. (Cited in Rudolph and Szonyi 2018, 23)

There was no appetite whatsoever for transplanting the political ideas of the American and European bourgeoisie onto Chinese soil. According to Zhang Weiwei, who worked as an interpreter for Deng Xiaoping, Deng was completely focused on the main task: improving people's livelihoods. Any political reform should be conducted not for its own sake but only to the extent that it served the overall goal.

He believed that copying the Western model and placing political reform on the top of the agenda, like the Soviets were doing at the time, was utterly foolish. In fact, that was exactly Deng's comment on Gorbachev after their meeting: "This man may look smart but in fact is stupid." (Zhang 2014)

In a changing economic environment, where private capital was being accumulated and a new class of entrepreneurs emerging, continued Communist Party rule was essential to guarantee that development benefitted the masses and that the new owners of capital didn't become politically dominant. Moreover, political stability was an absolute requirement for successful economic reform.

In practically every important speech on China's development path from 1978 until his death in 1997, Deng insisted on what he termed the Four Cardinal Principles: 1) Defend the socialist path; 2) Maintain the dictatorship of the proletariat (working-class rule); 3) Maintain the leadership of the party; and 4) Adhere to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. He was extremely clear regarding the importance of a workers' state:

What kind of democracy do the Chinese people need today? It can only be socialist democracy, people's democracy, and not bourgeois democracy. . . . Personal interests must be subordinated to collective ones, the interests of the part to those of the whole, and immediate to long-term interests. In other words, limited interests must be subordinated to overall interests, and minor interests to major

ones. . . . It is still necessary to exercise dictatorship over all these anti-socialist elements. . . . The fact of the matter is that socialism cannot be defended or built up without the dictatorship of the proletariat. (Deng 2001, 183)

The CPC has not followed the Soviet example of attacking its own history. Although the Chinese leadership made serious criticisms of certain policies associated with Mao (in particular the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution), it has never come anywhere close to repudiating Mao and undermining the basic ideological and historical foundations of Chinese socialism. No Chinese Wall has been constructed between the Mao-era and the post-Mao era; the two phases are inextricably linked, and are both “pragmatic explorations in building socialism conducted by the people under the leadership of the Party” (Xi 2014, 47).

We will forever keep Chairman Mao’s portrait on Tiananmen Gate as a symbol of our country, and we will always remember him as a founder of our Party and state. . . . We will not do to Chairman Mao what Khrushchev did to Stalin. (Deng 1980)

The CPSU leadership suffered a crisis of legitimacy that it had created. Gorbachev and his colleagues attacked and weakened the organs of working-class rule. They colluded in the transfer of political power to anti-socialist forces. Meanwhile in China, “the rule of the Communist Party is no longer in doubt: it enjoys the prestige that one would expect given the transformation that it has presided over” (Jacques 2009, 277).

In addition to its successes in the economic realm, the CPC has also led a process of unification, stabilization, and recovery following the “century of humiliation,” which started with the First Opium War (1839–1842) and ended with the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The Chinese political system has been extraordinarily effective in protecting China’s independence and national integrity, and this is the pre-eminent factor in the Chinese people’s support for the CPC-led government.

China Has Managed to Avoid a Superpower “Cold War”

The last thing China wants is war. China is very poor and wants to develop; it can’t do that without a peaceful environment. Since we want a peaceful environment, we must cooperate with all of the world’s forces for peace. (Deng 1984)

The necessity of maintaining peaceful relations with the imperialist world has been a preoccupation of socialist states from 1917 onwards. All socialist leaderships—those

of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Kim Il Sung, and Fidel Castro included—have pursued “peaceful coexistence” to the extent that it has been possible.

The importance of international peace for China’s development was implicitly recognized by Mao in the early 1970s, when Henry Kissinger’s visit to Beijing opened the way for the PRC finally taking its seat at the UN. Continuing US–China communications throughout the 1970s led to the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and the US in 1979. Ever since, China has managed to maintain peaceful and mutually beneficial relations with the capitalist world.

Peaceful coexistence has required compromises, one of which has been China relinquishing a direct leadership role in the global transition to socialism. The Soviet Union took on a heavy responsibility as the global center of anti-imperialist forces, giving extensive practical solidarity to socialist states, national liberation movements, and progressive governments around the world—including vast economic support to the People’s Republic of China between 1949 and 1959; military and economic support to Cuba, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, Korea, Ethiopia, and elsewhere; training, aid, and weapons to the ANC (African National Congress) in South Africa, Frelimo in Mozambique, Swapo in South West Africa (now Namibia), PAIGC (Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde) in Guinea Bissau, and others.

In addition to direct aid, the Soviet role as the protector of the progressive world—and its position as one of two “superpowers”—meant that it was forced to devote an extraordinary portion of its resources to military development. The figures vary wildly, but Russian-American historian Alexander Pantsov estimates that, “at the start of Gorbachev’s perestroika, in 1985, the Soviets were spending 40 percent of their budget on defence.” Indeed, Pantsov concludes that “the economy of the USSR collapsed under the burden of military expenditures” (Pantsov and Levine 2015, 432). US President Ronald Reagan developed a “full-court press” strategy in the early 1980s that sought to vastly increase US military expenditure, forcing the USSR to follow suit and thereby deepen its economic difficulties.

The Soviet Union had long stuck to a system of “strategic parity” of nuclear weapons development, sparing no effort to keep up with (but not surpass) the US. As long as it had the ability to retaliate against any US-initiated nuclear strike, it could basically guarantee that such a strike wouldn’t take place. However, the economic burden of it was enormous. In a capitalist society, the arms industry is a highly profitable field of investment; creating demand for weapons is a boon for private capital. In a socialist society with a strong responsibility towards catering to the basic needs of its population, arms manufacturing means diverting human and material resources away from those basic needs.

This was not a situation of the Soviet Union's making, but one that was forced on it by a US-led Western imperialist strategy that was hell-bent on undermining European socialism. Indeed, the Soviet leaders routinely proposed multilateral disarmament and a thawing of the Cold War. Boris Ponomarev, Chief of the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee from 1955 to 1986, wrote:

The US has taken the initiative all along in developing and perfecting nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles ever since the advent of the atom bomb. Each time the USSR was forced to respond to the challenge to strengthen its own defences, to protect the countries of the socialist community and to keep its armed forces adequately equipped with up-to-date weaponry. But the Soviet Union has been and remains the most consistent advocate of the limitation of the arms race, a champion of disarmament under effective international control. (Ponomarev 1983, 53)

Furthermore, by the late 1970s, the Cold War had turned decidedly hot. The Western powers were engaged in a massive "rollback" operation, supporting rebellions against progressive governments in Angola, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Cambodia, and South Yemen. Vijay Prashad writes that the CIA and the Pentagon "abandoned the idea of the mere 'containment' of communism in favour of using military force to push back against its exertions" (Prashad 2012, 112). All the states under attack had an urgent need for military and civilian aid, which the Soviet Union had little choice but to provide.

The peak of this "hot" Cold War was in Afghanistan, where the leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government pleaded with the Soviet leaders to help them quell an Islamic fundamentalist rebellion that was generously funded and armed by the US.

The first Russian troops crossed the border into Afghanistan on December 25, 1979. The scope of their mission was limited: try to restore unity within the PDPA, help the Afghan Army gain the upper hand against the uprising, and come home soon.

The aim was not to take over or occupy the country. It was to secure the towns and the roads between them, and to withdraw as soon as the Afghan government and its armed forces were in a state to take over the responsibility for themselves. (Braithwaite 2012, 123)

The intervention turned out to be much more difficult, complex, and prolonged than the Soviets had imagined. Their Afghan allies were divided and often

demoralized; meanwhile their enemies were armed with sophisticated weaponry, had significant support among the rural population, were fueled by a vehement hatred of the Russians, and were able to leverage Afghanistan's mountainous territory to their advantage. Meanwhile the Red Army was not trained for a counter-insurgency war. The last major war it had fought was World War II. Odd Arne Westad writes that

from 1981 onwards the war turned into a bloody stalemate, in which more than one million Afghans died and at least 25,000 Soviets. In spite of well-planned efforts, the Red Army simply could not control the areas that were within their operational zones—they advanced into rebel strongholds, kept them occupied for weeks or months, and then had to withdraw as the Mujahedin concentrated its forces or, more often, because its opponents attacked elsewhere. (Westad 2007, 356)

The Red Army didn't lose any of its major battles in Afghanistan; it won control of hundreds of towns, villages, and roads, only to lose them again when its focus moved elsewhere. The US deployed increasingly sophisticated weaponry to the rebel groups at just the right rate so as to prolong the war.

The Red Army began a phased withdrawal on May 15, 1988. It had not been defeated as such, but it had manifestly failed in its objectives of cementing PDPA rule and suppressing the rebellion. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union had expended vast economic, military, and human resources. Thousands of young lives were lost. Soviet diplomatic clout had been reduced. The CPSU's popular legitimacy was damaged, just as had been hoped by US strategists—Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was US National Security Advisor at the time of the Soviet intervention, and who had talked specifically about “the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war” (Brzezinski 1998). Afghanistan and the arms race were by no means the sole—or even primary—factor in the Soviet Union's demise, but they certainly contributed.

China on the other hand has been able to enjoy a long period of peace. The Chinese People's Volunteer Army proved during the Korean War (the War to Resist US Agression and Aid Korea) of 1950–1953 that People's China was willing and able to defend itself from attack, and no doubt the US drew the appropriate lesson that any military operation against it would be highly risky.

The post-1978 leadership of the CPC realized that, by inserting China into the emerging global supply chains, China could become sufficiently important to the functioning of the global economy that the imperialist states would have to think very carefully about the wisdom of attacking or isolating it. Jude Woodward notes that China's rise has forced many countries to pursue good relations with it, even if they oppose its ideology.

Rather developed neighbours such as South Korea or [China's] Taiwan are deeply economically engaged with [the mainland of] China and do not want this derailed. . . . Even America's European allies, notably Germany, France and Britain, were prepared to ignore US opinion on China when they signed up to the AIIB [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank]. (Woodward 2017, 251)

This could be thought of as a sort of strategic parity with Chinese characteristics, with a much lower price tag than its Soviet equivalent. Additionally, China's integration in the world economy has allowed it to be a part of "the unprecedented global technological revolution, offering a short cut for the country to accelerate its industrial transformation and upgrade its economic structure" (Clegg 2009, 129).

In the relatively safe international environment constructed by the PRC government, China has been able to reduce its military spending from around 7% of GDP in 1978 to around 2% currently, allowing more resources to be devoted to improving living standards. Although its strategy doesn't allow it to play an active military role in the defense of friendly states and movements, China's economic strength means that it is able to provide crucial support for progressive countries around the world.

Conclusion

So long as socialism does not collapse in China, it will always hold its ground in the world. (Deng 2007)

It was widely assumed in the West following the collapse of European socialism that China would undergo a similar process of counter-revolution. Three decades on, it's abundantly clear that China is not following the same trajectory. Its reform process has been highly successful; the quality of life of its people continues to improve; it is emerging as a global leader in science, technological innovation, and environmental preservation; nationalist separatism is being effectively contained; and the Communist Party of China remains popular and hegemonic. In short, China has continued to develop a form of socialism that is appropriate to its own conditions.

This does not of course imply that the People's Republic of China doesn't face serious problems. Rapid development has engendered unprecedented levels of inequality and environmental destruction. While living standards have increased at all levels of the population, income inequality is stark, and this is a source of considerable social friction. Meanwhile the policy of focusing development on the eastern and southern coastal cities has led to regional disparities. The CPC government has been particularly focused on these problems over the last 10–15 years,

for example, narrowing regional inequality via preferential investment in poorer areas. Meanwhile China has taken significant strides in improving its environmental record, emerging as a leading force in the global battle against climate breakdown (Finamore 2018).

Chinese economists often talk of the “latecomers’ advantage” in the world of technology, whereby “technological innovation and industrial upgrading can be achieved by imitation, import, and/or integration of existing technologies and industries, all of which implies much lower R&D costs” (Lin 2013). There’s a sense in which this idea applies to the world of politics as well. The USSR was the world’s first socialist state, and as such its successes and mistakes constitute indispensable raw material for the study of socialist society. The CPC has been assiduous in learning from the Soviet demise in order to avoid suffering a similar fate. David Shambaugh, citing a study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, sums up some of the key lessons the CPC has tried to absorb. These include

concentrating on economic development and continuously improving people’s standard of living,” “upholding Marxism as the guiding ideology,” “strengthening party leadership,” *and* “continuously strengthening efforts on party building—especially in the areas of ideology, image, organisation, and democratic centralism—in order to safeguard the leadership power in the hands of loyal Marxists. (Shambaugh 2008, 77; emphasis in the original)

The issue of maintaining a workers’ state and preventing the ascendance and dominance of pro-capitalist “liberals” is arguably the most important lesson to be learned from the collapse of the USSR. Even with ongoing economic difficulties, it’s perfectly conceivable that Soviet socialism could have survived if the top leadership hadn’t effectively abandoned the project. In that sense, Gorbachev and his close collaborators bear significant responsibility for the Soviet demise. Allen Lynch, a researcher of Russian politics at the University of Virginia, speculates that, if Gorbachev’s predecessor Yuri Andropov had lived longer (he died at the age of 69 after just one year as General Secretary of the CPSU), things might have been very different.

Judging from Andropov’s programmatic statements in 1982–83, as well as his long record at the summit of Soviet politics, there can be little doubt that he would not have countenanced anything remotely resembling Gorbachev’s political reforms or that he would have hesitated to use force to stop public challenges to communist rule. Moreover, Andropov’s networks in the Party, KGB, government and military were incomparably stronger than Gorbachev’s and he might well have leveraged a viable coalition for piecemeal reform of the Soviet economy. (Lynch 2012)

Therefore, the dissolution of Soviet Union was not caused by socialist institution or system itself. Instead, it is an inevitable result of the betrayal of socialism by Gorbachev and Yeltsin's leadership. The lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union must be thoroughly learned by the remaining—and future—socialist states as well as the global working class as a whole. In the current stage of history, where these states constitute a minority and where they face a powerful ideological enemy that is determined to undermine them, these lessons are broadly applicable. They form a key part of the great legacy that the Soviet experience leaves to the global working class.

The Soviet project is by no means a historical relic; its experience is relevant and even crucial to contemporary politics. The heroic feats of the Soviet people live on in China, Vietnam, Cuba, Laos, and Korea; in socialist-oriented and progressive states and movements around the world. Even in the territories of the former Soviet Union and the former socialist states in Europe, the memory of better times lives on (not least in the considerable defense and retention of Soviet achievements, traditions, and forms in Belarus). Their populations are starting, as Fidel Castro predicted they would, to regret the counter-revolution, to miss “those orderly countries, where everyone had clothes, food, medicine, education, and there was no crime, no mafia”; they are beginning to “realise the great historic mistake they made when they destroyed socialism” (Castro 1995).

The socialist project lives on in China and becomes stronger every day. As quality of life gradually catches up with and outstrips that in the leading capitalist countries, and as China emerges as a global leader in science and technology and as a force for peace, multipolarity and environmental preservation, Chinese socialism will become widely recognized as a highly effective, creative, and adaptive branch of Marxism.

Notes

1. See “Confidence in the Chinese President,” Pew Research Center Global Indicators Database, Spring 2019. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/69/country/cn/>.
2. See “Yougov Public Figure: Boris Johnson,” February 2020. Accessed April 28, 2020. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/explore/public_figure/Boris_Johnson.

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