

Mikhail Gorbachev – Still changing the world, after all these years

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In the past few weeks there have been numerous media reports celebrating the fall, twenty years ago, of the Berlin Wall - the physical manifestation of the divide and hostility between East and West. All these reports acknowledged the central role played by one man – Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader who introduced the word “glasnost” into the global lexicon and who, by his repudiation of force as a means to contain the peoples of eastern Europe, helped to end the Cold War and eliminate the specter of mutual nuclear destruction that had hung over our hemisphere since the end of the Second World War. I had the pleasure of meeting President Gorbachev in mid 1990 when he made a brief visit to Ottawa with his then Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. As a cabinet minister I was included in the events where he spoke and as a former “sovietologist” I was struck by the change he represented. Little did we guess at that time that the break-up of the Soviet Union was imminent and would send Shevardnadze back to his native Georgia and President Gorbachev into political oblivion when the country he presided over ceased to exist.

It is all the more interesting and remarkable then that Mikhail Gorbachev is today not merely a man of historical significance, but a man who continues to shape history with his world-changing ways. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Gorbachev remained on the world stage – in fact, centre stage. Gorbachev was a central figure at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and shortly thereafter founded Green Cross International – a global network of environmental NGOs addressing issues at the nexus of environment and conflict. Today Green Cross, under Gorbachev’s leadership, has grown to over 30 national member organizations, active on every continent (counting Antarctic expeditions). In states of the former Soviet Union this means working with the Global Partnership (a G8 project launched at Kananaskis in which Canada is a significant player) to clean up old weapons sites and facilities and in the Middle East it means working to resolve conflicts around shared water resources. In South America Green Cross works to minimize the environmental impact of mining projects and in Ukraine and Belarus Green Cross works with children who are still affected by the Chernobyl disaster of 20 years ago.

The Gorbachev Foundation, the first real “think tank” in modern Russia, deals with Russian and global issues around peace and security, development, the environment and democracy in Eastern Europe. I came to know President Gorbachev again in the late 1990’s when I was invited to be a Fellow of an American based foundation that also bears his name. Through this organization Mikhail Gorbachev became a founding member of the Club of Madrid, whose members, former presidents and prime ministers, work to promote democratic values and leadership.

President Gorbachev has also been a major contributor over the years to the Club of Rome (global thinkers) – always challenging the world to do more, to do better. He has been active in promoting numerous international peace and security initiatives.

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Mikhail Gorbachev's latest venture combines all of these elements, bringing together his work on the environment with the Green Cross, with climate change projects of the Club of Madrid, the Club of Rome and his fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureates to form the Climate Change Task Force, engaging world leaders and experts in an effort to push for real progress on climate change at the Copenhagen COP15 conference next month, and to engage civil society in the challenge to deal with the effects of climate change.

This past month Mikhail Gorbachev has been doing what he does best, working the world leaders' circuit selling climate change – the UN in Geneva in early October, the Club of Rome in Amsterdam two weeks later, Nobel Laureates in Berlin and the Club of Madrid last week – and onto Copenhagen next month. At 78 years of age, that is quite a breathtaking agenda!

Like so many others who have been encouraged and motivated by his energy and warmth, I have been proud to work with Mikhail Gorbachev over the years through the Gorbachev Foundation and other organizations. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, Mikhail Gorbachev continues to challenge the world to change – always for the better.