

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Rise of the Unipolar World

Paper 2 • Unit 27

Gorbachev's reforms, 1989, the Soviet collapse and the unipolar moment: 40 marks in four years and the closing unit of the whole syllabus.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of the unipolar world: factors leading to the collapse of Soviet communism and the Soviet Union, 1985 to 1991; political changes in Eastern Europe, 1989 to 2001; end of the cold war and its impact on the third world; American world order.

The structural crisis before Gorbachev

The system was in difficulty for a decade before reform began, and any answer that starts in 1985 misses the causes.

- **Economic stagnation** set in during the Brezhnev years, with growth rates falling through the 1970s and the planned economy proving unable to absorb the computing and communications revolution.
- **Command planning** worked reasonably for heavy industry and catastrophically for consumer goods, quality and innovation, since the plan rewarded volume rather than usefulness.
- **Agriculture** never recovered from collectivisation, and the Soviet Union imported grain from the United States and Canada through the 1970s and 1980s.
- **Military spending** at an estimated fifteen to twenty five per cent of output, against roughly six per cent for the United States, imposed a burden a smaller economy could not carry.
- **Oil price collapse** from 1986 removed the hard currency earnings that had masked the problem, since Soviet exports were overwhelmingly hydrocarbons.
- **Afghanistan** from 1979 cost money, lives and legitimacy over a decade, and the withdrawal completed in 1989 was an acknowledged defeat.
- **Second economy** of black markets, informal exchange and blat, meaning the use of personal connections to obtain goods, grew until it was a structural feature rather than a deviation, and it corroded belief in the official system from within.
- **Legitimacy** eroded independently of economics, since the gap between official claims and everyday experience produced a pervasive cynicism that Soviet writers themselves described.
- **Dissident tradition** kept an alternative alive through Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov and the samizdat network, and although small it meant that when censorship lifted a critical vocabulary already existed.
- **Nationalities** were the unresolved structural problem, since the union was federal in form with fifteen republics each possessing institutions, borders and a titular nationality.

Gorbachev and the reforms

The 2025 paper asked for a critical discussion of his domestic reforms. They were serious, coherent in intention and destabilising in effect.

- **Mikhail Gorbachev** became General Secretary in March 1985 with a programme intended to save the system rather than to end it.
- **Uskoreniye**, acceleration, came first in 1985 and was a conventional attempt to raise growth through discipline, including an anti-alcohol campaign that cost significant state revenue.
- **Glasnost**, openness, permitted criticism of official failings, and its unintended consequence was that the past became discussable, so Stalinism, the famine, the purges and the Nazi-Soviet Pact all entered public debate.

- **Chernobyl in April 1986** was the turning point for glasnost, since the initial concealment discredited the old reflex and Gorbachev himself later called it a cause of the collapse.
- **Perestroika**, restructuring, allowed enterprise autonomy, cooperatives and limited private activity, but it dismantled central coordination without creating a market, producing shortages worse than before.
- **Political reform** in 1988 and 1989 created a Congress of People's Deputies with contested elections, and once the party faced electoral competition its monopoly ended in practice.
- **Article 6** of the constitution, guaranteeing the party's leading role, was repealed in 1990, which formally ended one-party rule.
- **Arms control** progressed rapidly, with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987 eliminating an entire class of missiles and the Reykjavik summit of 1986 coming close to a far larger agreement, and these were Gorbachev's clearest successes.
- **Foreign policy** under the new thinking abandoned the Brezhnev Doctrine, and Gorbachev's refusal to use force in eastern Europe in 1989 is the single decision that made the peaceful revolutions possible.
- **Nomenklatura resistance** blocked implementation at every level, since the party officials who administered perestroika were the people whose positions it threatened, and Gorbachev never built an institutional base outside the party to overcome them.
- **Critical assessment** for the 2025 question: the reforms were genuine and courageous, they were sequenced badly since political liberalisation preceded economic reform, and they released nationalist and democratic forces the system could not contain.

Eastern Europe, 1989

Named in the syllabus as political changes from 1989 to 2001. The 2024 paper asked whether 1989 destroyed governments or ended an era.

- **Poland** led, with **Solidarity** legalised in April 1989 after round table talks and winning almost every contested seat in the June elections, producing the first non-communist government in the bloc.
- **Hungary** dismantled its border fence with Austria in May 1989, which allowed East Germans to escape westward and made the East German position untenable.
- **East Germany** saw mass demonstrations in Leipzig and Berlin, Honecker's removal, and the opening of the **Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989**, followed by reunification in October 1990.
- **Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution** in November and December 1989 brought Vaclav Havel to the presidency within six weeks of the first demonstration.
- **Romania** was the exception, with the violent overthrow and execution of **Ceausescu** in December 1989.
- **Bulgaria** removed Zhivkov in November 1989 and Albania followed in 1991, completing the sequence, so within roughly two years every European communist government outside the Soviet Union itself had fallen.
- **Yugoslavia** disintegrated into war rather than into democracies, and the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and later Kosovo through the 1990s are the other exception to the peaceful pattern.
- For the 2024 question, the answer is that 1989 ended an era rather than merely changing governments, since it terminated the Cold War division of Europe, discredited state socialism as a model, and led to eastern enlargement of NATO and the European Union.

- **Baltic and central European** states pursued rapid integration westward, joining NATO in 1999 and 2004 and the European Union in 2004, which is why their transition outcomes diverged so sharply from those of the former Soviet republics further east.
- **Transition** proved harder than expected, with shock therapy producing severe contraction in the early 1990s, and outcomes diverging sharply between central Europe and the former Soviet republics.

The collapse of the Soviet Union

Eastern Europe went first, the union followed within two years, and the sequence is causal rather than coincidental.

- **Baltic republics** moved first within the union, with Lithuania declaring independence in March 1990 and Soviet force used in Vilnius in January 1991 without effect.
- **Nationalist mobilisation** spread through the republics, and conflicts including Nagorno-Karabakh from 1988 showed the centre could no longer manage them.
- **Yeltsin** was elected President of the Russian Republic in June 1991, which created a rival legitimate authority inside the union's largest republic.
- **August 1991 coup** by hardliners against Gorbachev failed within three days, chiefly because the army would not fire and because Yeltsin's public defiance rallied opposition.
- The coup's failure **destroyed the party and the centre** simultaneously, since the plotters were the institutions of central power and their defeat left Gorbachev without a base.
- **Belavezha Accords** of 8 December 1991, signed by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, declared the union dissolved and created the Commonwealth of Independent States.
- **Gorbachev resigned on 25 December 1991** and the Soviet Union formally ceased to exist the following day.
- **Ukraine's referendum** of 1 December 1991, in which over ninety per cent voted for independence, is the immediate trigger for Belavezha, since a union without Ukraine was not a union any Russian leader wished to preserve.
- **Explanations** to weigh are economic failure, nationalities, the Afghan war, Reagan-era pressure, and Gorbachev's own choices, and the strongest position holds that structural decay made reform necessary and the manner of reform made collapse likely.

The unipolar moment and its limits

The 2023 paper asked whether American supremacy after the Cold War brought its own challenges. It plainly did, and the evidence accumulated quickly.

- **Unipolarity** described a world with one superpower possessing decisive military, economic and technological advantage, and **Charles Krauthammer** named the unipolar moment in 1990.
- **Fukuyama's** end of history thesis of 1989 and 1992 argued that liberal democracy had won the argument about political organisation, and it is the period's emblematic claim.
- **Early assertions** of the new order came with the **Gulf War of 1991**, conducted under UN authority with a broad coalition, which appeared to vindicate collective security.
- **Challenges appeared quickly**, with Somalia in 1993 demonstrating the limits of humanitarian intervention and Rwanda in 1994 the consequences of declining to intervene.

- **Balkan wars** required American action after European failure, and the Kosovo campaign of 1999 was conducted without Security Council authorisation, which set a precedent that troubled the legal order.
- **11 September 2001** and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq consumed American resources and legitimacy, and the 2003 invasion without Security Council authority divided the western alliance itself.
- **Economic challenge** came from Chinese growth after its 2001 WTO accession and from the financial crisis of 2008, which damaged the credibility of the American economic model.
- **Russia's trajectory** after 1991 ran through economic collapse, the 1998 default and the consolidation of power under Putin from 2000, and its later assertiveness is best read as a reaction to the settlement of 1991 rather than as a return to Soviet policy.
- **Multipolarity** is the current description rather than unipolarity, with China's rise, Russian assertiveness, and the emergence of regional powers including India, and the BRICS and G20 as the institutional expression.
- For the 2023 question, the answer is that supremacy created the challenges of overextension, of legitimacy when acting without authorisation, of the resentment that unipolar dominance provokes, and of the domestic cost of sustaining it.

Impact on the Third World

Named explicitly in the syllabus and the part most relevant to an Indian candidate. The end of bipolarity removed both a threat and an opportunity.

- **Non-alignment lost its meaning** in its original form, since a movement defined by refusing to choose between two blocs had nothing to refuse once one had disappeared.
- **Soviet aid and patronage** ended, and states that had depended on it, including Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia and Angola, faced abrupt economic crisis.
- **Proxy wars ended** in southern Africa and Central America, which was a genuine gain, and the settlement in Namibia, Mozambique and El Salvador followed directly.
- **Structural adjustment** became harder to resist, since the Washington Consensus faced no ideological competitor and conditionality tightened through the 1990s.
- **India's own adjustment** came in 1991, when the loss of the Soviet trading relationship, the Gulf War oil shock and a balance of payments crisis together forced liberalisation.
- **Democratisation** spread through Africa, Latin America and eastern Europe in what Huntington called the third wave, though its consolidation was uneven.
- **New conflicts** emerged where superpower discipline had suppressed them, and the wars in Yugoslavia, the Caucasus and central Africa in the 1990s are the evidence.
- **China chose differently**, pursuing economic liberalisation without political reform after 1978 and suppressing the Tiananmen protests in June 1989, and the comparison between the Chinese and Soviet paths is the single most instructive one available in this unit.
- **Space for regional powers** opened, and India's economic opening, nuclear tests of 1998, Look East policy and eventual strategic partnership with the United States all follow from this shift.
- **Nuclear proliferation** changed character, since the Soviet arsenal was distributed across four successor states and the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 secured Ukrainian, Belarusian and Kazakh denuclearisation in exchange for security assurances.

- Assessment: the end of the Cold War freed developing states from proxy conflict and superpower patronage while exposing them to a global economic order with no alternative model available.

Answering the questions

Three questions in four years, on Gorbachev's reforms, on 1989 and on American supremacy. All are evaluative.

- On Gorbachev, give the **three reform strands** of glasnost, perestroika and political reform, then the sequencing criticism, then a verdict that credits his refusal to use force.
- For 1989, argue that it **ended an era** and evidence that with the end of the Cold War division, the discrediting of the model, and NATO and EU enlargement.
- On American supremacy, list **specific challenges** rather than generalities, so Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo's legality, Iraq 2003, China's rise and 2008.
- Always add the **Third World impact**, since the syllabus names it and it is where an Indian candidate can write with most authority.
- Where the question mentions the **Third World or the developing world**, remember that the syllabus phrase is impact on the third world, so the answer must move outside Europe and America rather than treating the collapse as a purely Euro-Atlantic event.
- Close any question in this unit by noting that the unipolar moment proved brief, since the current international order is contested rather than settled, and examiners reward that awareness.

Last-mile revision

- Pre-1985: stagnation, command planning failure, grain imports, defence at 15-25 per cent of output, oil price collapse 1986, Afghanistan from 1979.
- Gorbachev March 1985: uskoreniye, glasnost, Chernobyl April 1986, perestroika, Congress of People's Deputies 1989, Article 6 repealed 1990, Brezhnev Doctrine abandoned.
- 1989: Solidarity elections June, Hungarian border May, Berlin Wall 9 November, Velvet Revolution, Ceausescu December; reunification October 1990.
- Collapse: Lithuania March 1990, Vilnius January 1991, Yeltsin elected June 1991, coup August 1991, Belavezha 8 December, Gorbachev resigns 25 December 1991.
- Unipolar: Krauthammer 1990, Fukuyama 1989 and 1992, Gulf War 1991, Somalia 1993, Rwanda 1994, Kosovo 1999, Iraq 2003, China WTO 2001, crisis 2008.
- Third World: NAM loses its premise, Soviet aid ends, proxy wars end, Washington Consensus, India's 1991 liberalisation, Huntington's third wave.

Common errors to avoid

- Starting the story in 1985. Stagnation, the defence burden, Afghanistan and the nationalities question all predate Gorbachev.
- Treating Gorbachev as having intended to end communism. He intended to save the system and the reforms escaped his control.

- Crediting the collapse to Reagan alone. External pressure mattered, and internal economic and national factors mattered more.
- Saying 1989 merely changed governments. It ended the Cold War division of Europe and discredited the model, which is the 2024 question's point.
- Describing the present order as unipolar. The moment was brief and the current description is contested multipolarity.

Mains Practice

Discuss critically the salient features of Mikhail Gorbachev's domestic reforms.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

The revolutions of 1989 did not simply destroy governments; they also ended an era.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024

“The supremacy of the USA after the end of the Cold War had its challenges as well.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2023