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[Leon T. Hadar](#)

Journalist and foreign affairs analyst

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Barack Gorbachev: Adjusting To The Global Reality

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The political leaders and the generals were continuing to debate on whether to start pulling out the troops from Afghanistan at a time when political power was being consolidated by a relatively young reformer interested in mending relations with the rest of the world and despite the growing recognition that the war there was lost.

But finally, in April 1988, Mikheil Gorbachev, the leader of the USSR, introduced a timetable for the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, announcing that the withdrawal of about 100,000 troops will start in the following month. It took Gorbachev another four years to complete the withdrawal from South Asia while he was also trying to manage the gradual erosion in Soviet hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe and the broader restructuring of the global position of the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev and most of the leaders in the Kremlin "were convinced that we did not need Afghanistan and had no business being there," a former Soviet advisor told journalist and author [Michael Dobbs](#). "We would have lost the war anyway," he explained. "We should have learned from the

British that Afghanistan is a country that cannot be conquered."

Yet even an open-minded reformer like Gorbachev was not ready to admit that a superpower like the Soviet Union had suffered a military defeat in Afghanistan, and insisted on spinning as a success what amounted to the failure on the part of Moscow to impose its will on the country, not to mention the enormous losses in life and money.

That in retrospect, Gorbachev's Vietnam in Afghanistan is starting to look more and more like Obama's Afghanistan in, well, Afghanistan, brings (once again) to mind [George Santayana's](#) warning that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (although it should probably be changes to "do not want to remember"). In both cases, political leaders found it difficult to extract their country from costly military quagmires.

But the dilemma facing Gorbachev in the late 1980s and Obama in the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century goes beyond failed military interventions in Afghanistan. In both cases, leaders of great powers experiencing erosion in its economic power and the overstretching of its military are forced to adjust an outdated global strategy to the changes in its military and economic capabilities.

Ironically, many observers have been comparing the current political upheaval in the Arab World to the growing pressure for liberalization in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, celebrating the so-called Arab Spring as another post-Cold-War victory for the U.S. and its push for democracy and free markets.

But as [I noted](#) after the fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt early this year, "those who compare the protest movements in Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia in 1989 to those in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen today, miss the point. It's not that the Egyptian insurgency is fueled by the same democratic-liberal ideals that drove the uprising in Poland. It probably is not. But this we do know: In both cases, the old order was maintained by an external power -- the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe in 1989; the United States in the Middle East today."

From that perspective, when it comes to the Middle East and its peripheries (Afghanistan and Pakistan), Obama is now trying to come up with the least costly strategy to help manage American decline, not unlike the man who presided over the collapse of Soviet power in Eastern Europe in 1989.

Indeed, as journalist and author Victor Sebestyen chronicled in his seminal [Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire](#), Gorbachev had hoped that the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan could be orchestrated as a peaceful transition of power and that Moscow's willingness to allow the downfall of its friendly dictators in Warsaw, Prague, Budapest and Berlin, would help preserve Soviet influence in the region.

And like Gorbachev, Obama and much of the foreign policy establishment in Washington seem to cling to the fantasy that the U.S. can muddle through towards victory in Afghanistan and to the notion that Washington could help drive the transformation taking place in the Middle East to the benefit of long-term U.S. interests.

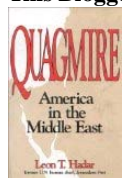
In fact, both the neoconservative narrative, which traces the start of the Arab Spring to the U.S. "liberation" of Iraq and the ensuing Freedom Agenda, and the liberal internationalist story-line that envisions "success" in Afghanistan and the partnering the United States with the dramatic change in the Middle East, reflect a lot of wishful thinking. Like an aging film star that has lost her sex-appeal a long time ago, American leaders and pundits are finding it difficult to admit that U.S. ability to determine political outcomes in the Middle East has been reduced in a very dramatic way.

In reality, after all the sacrifice of so much precious life and treasure in Mesopotamia and in Af-Pak, including two costly military surges, and the rest of the useless military and diplomatic hyper-activism in the Broader Middle East (like in Libya and Israel/Palestine), Iraq is expected to become a political and economic satellite of Iran while the corrupt pro-American government in Afghanistan will probably fall into the hands of the Taliban sooner or later. The rest of the region is likely to experience a series of civil wars between ethnic groups, tribes and religious sects. And there won't be any peace in the Holy Land in the near future.

The global player that is going to ride high after the dust settles in the Middle East and U.S. troops return home sometime in this decade will be China. Years of pre-occupation with the Middle East and the investment of economic and military resources to try to control and remake have diverted American attention from East Asia, a region of the world where core geo-strategic and geo-economic interests are at stake, while providing the Chinese with an opportunity to grow their economy, military power and diplomatic influence not only in East Asia but also in South and West Asia.

The Chinese, unlike the Americans, have been so successful in readjusting to the changing global realities, that when the Americans wars in the Middle East will end, it is China and not the U.S. that will emerge as the main strategic winner.

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