

Introduction: The Role of Ideas and the End of the Cold War

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The end of the Cold War sparked a new surge of interest in the study of ideas in international politics. Once the province of a few dedicated researchers on the fringes of the discipline, scholarship on the role of ideas now occupies an important place in the mainstream of North American and especially European international relations research. Yet even as scholarship on ideas has advanced in recent years, a less heralded change has occurred in studies of the end of the Cold War. The initial wave of scholarship highlighting the role of ideas has come under increasing criticism on both methodological and evidentiary grounds. Although many of these criticisms remain debatable, taken together they challenge a large body of scholarship on ideas and the end of the Cold War.

The five articles in this special issue respond to this challenge by moving the research agenda on ideas and the end of the Cold War to a new level of rigor. The authors develop new models of how ideas affected the outcome and, in so doing, advance the process of taking stock of this event and its impact on our understanding of how ideas work in international politics. Although we seek a deeper understanding of the end of the Cold War itself, we also seek to use this seminal case to clarify and advance the debate over the role of ideas in international politics more generally.

The Ideational Turn—And Its Critics

Growing out of earlier traditions in historical institutionalism, organizational institutionalism in sociology, and the study of foreign policy belief systems, and influenced by the rise of constructivism in international relations, the new wave of ideas literature has sought a systematic analysis of the role of ideas in explaining policy outcomes. The dramatic and unexpected change in

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Soviet foreign policy and ideology in the late 1980s led to an outpouring of scholarship on the role of ideas in this transformation.¹ For many scholars of international relations, the case further underscored already widespread perceptions of the limitations of realist theory and its emphasis on material explanations of events. At the same time, in response to dissatisfaction with rational choice theory, American scholars of political economy and comparative politics began to try to understand how ideas, such as economic theories and ethical values, rather than material self-interests, influence policymaking.²

The debates over the end of the Cold War provide fertile ground for investigating the role of ideas. Many scholars contend that the way the Cold War ended should cause scholars to rethink the ways they have traditionally studied the role of ideas in international politics. For many, the event is an example of large-scale, rapid ideological change or what Albert O. Hirschman has called “creedal periods,” when ideas in and of themselves appear to be important causal factors.³ Such periods are typically highly ideological. “Nor-

1. The initial wave included Stanley Kober, “Idealpolitik,” *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 79 (Summer 1990), pp. 3–24; Douglas Blum, “The Soviet Foreign Policy Belief System: Beliefs, Politics and Foreign Policy Outcomes,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (December 1993), pp. 373–394; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Michael Hogan, *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Kjell Goldmann and Pierre Allan, eds., *The End of the Cold War: Evaluating Theories of International Relations* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1993); Stephen Kull, *Burying Lenin: The Revolution in Soviet Ideology and Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview, 1992); Charles W. Kegley Jr., “The Neo-Idealist Moment in International Studies? Realist Myths and the New International Realities,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (June 1993), pp. 131–147; Jeffrey Checkel, “Ideas, Institutions and the Gorbachev Foreign Policy Revolution,” *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (January 1993), pp. 271–300; Friedrich Kratochwil and Rey Koslowski, “Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet Union’s Demise and the International System,” in Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds., *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 109–126; John Mueller, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” in John Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm: Reflections on the Recent Transformation in World Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 27–39; and Robert G. Herman, “Identity, Norms and National Security: The Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution and the End of the Cold War,” in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 271–316.

2. Kathryn Sikkink, *Ideas and Institutions: Developmentalism in Brazil and Argentina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Peter Hall, ed., *The Political Power of Economic Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen, and Frank Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Peter Haas, “Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination,” *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 1–35; Emanuel Adler, “The Emergence of Cooperation: National Epistemic Communities and the International Evolution of the Idea of Arms Control,” *International Organization*, No. 46, Vol. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 101–145; Emanuel Adler, “Cognitive Evolution: A Dynamic Approach for the Study of International Relations and Their Progress,” in Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford, eds., *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 43–88; Robert Keohane and Judith Goldstein, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Paul Egon Rohrlach, “Economic Culture and Foreign Policy,” *International Organization*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 61–92.

3. This relates to Kowert and Legro’s discussion of a two-step model—periods where ideas are up for grabs and those where they are acted upon instrumentally. Jeffrey Legro and Paul Kowert, “Norms,

mal politics,” as described by Peter Hall, does not apply during these unusual times, and ideas gain a special salience.⁴ In such times, new ideas can either facilitate a wholesale break with the past or “can supply an entirely new common ground for positions between which there existed previously no common ground.”⁵

This certainly describes the end of the Cold War. Simply as a matter of description, “what changed” with the end of the Cold War was most notably the ideas of one of the two principal actors. The Cold War itself was defined in part by the clash of ideas between the Communist Soviet bloc and the liberal-democratic and capitalist West. It came to an end when the Soviet Union abandoned its old class-struggle ideology, even though the material capabilities (nuclear and conventional weapons) that could destroy the other side remained largely in place in both the Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviet Union’s abandonment of confrontation in favor of “common security” paved the way for a series of unilateral gestures that broke the logjam of East-West conflict.

The issue goes well beyond mere description. In the view of some analysts, to the extent that the changes in ideas (for example, Gorbachev’s adoption of common security ideas) led to a shared perception that the Cold War was over, these new ideas had a causal effect. New beliefs and concepts motivated people’s actions and formed the basis for the establishment of a new political relationship between the Soviet Union and the West. In the most expansive view of the role of ideas, the change of Soviet ideas ended a whole “social structure of hostility” and gave rise to fundamental changes in constitutive rules, institutions, identities, and practices.⁶

The literature on ideas in international relations in general and in the specific case of the end of the Cold War has confronted significant challenges even as it has gained increasing prominence. Some critics have charged that the concept of ideas and their effects on policy outcomes were poorly conceptualized. Scholars who attempted to define ideas precisely by fitting them within a rational-choice framework were taken to task for using ideas as ad hoc remedies for the inherent weaknesses of their research programs rather than treating them as objects of investigation in their own right. Rationalist approaches, critics argued, thus did not represent a serious attempt to investi-

Identity and Their Limits: A Theoretical Reprise,” in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 451–497.

4. See Hall, ed., *The Political Power of Economic Ideas*.

5. Albert O. Hirschman, “Ideologies of Economic Development in Latin America,” in Albert O. Hirschman, ed., *Latin American Issues: Essays and Comments* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), pp. 350, 357.

6. Kratochwil and Koslowski, “Understanding Change in International Politics,” pp. 109–126.

gate the power of ideas.⁷ But scholars who propounded more expansive conceptualizations of ideas were criticized for ambiguous research designs. The broad rubric of “ideas” has encompassed notions of culture, shared belief systems, and worldviews, as well as specific strategies of actions and policy programs.⁸ Others argued that even scholars who took the power of ideas more seriously and set forth tractable definitions paid insufficient attention to causal mechanisms, multiple relationships between material and ideational factors, and standards of evidence. These critics alleged that most constructivist theories, for example, have been unable to show how processes of persuasion, legitimation, and social learning actually translate into changes in collective ideas.⁹

In addition to the problem of conceptualization, a second challenge concerns research design and evidence. Critics of the ideas literature have argued that it founders on the problem of endogeneity. They contend that ideational analyses do not provide convincing empirical evidence that ideas affect policy outcomes in ways that are truly independent of material interests.¹⁰ If the key element in the end of the Cold War was a change in ideas, what caused Soviet adoption of radically new foreign policy ideas? Was it pressing material circumstances, as materialists allege, or did ideas themselves play an independent role? Ideationalists have pointed variously to the key role played by Mikhail Gorbachev, the role of learning, changing conceptions of legitimacy, the transmission of new ideas about security and foreign policy, and Soviet new

7. Jutta Weldes and Mark Laffey, “Beyond Belief: Ideas and Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June 1997), pp. 193–237; and Mark Blyth, “Any More Bright Ideas? The Ideal Turn of Comparative Political Economy,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (January 1997), p. 229.

8. John L. Campbell, “Institutional Analysis and the Role of Ideas in Political Economy,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (June 1998), pp. 377–409; Weldes and Laffey, “Beyond Belief”; and John Kurt Jacobson, “Much Ado about Ideas: The Cognitive Factor in Economic Policy,” *World Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (January 1995), pp. 283–310.

9. Rodger Payne, “Persuasion, Frames and Norm Construction,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (March 2001), pp. 37–61; Jeffrey W. Legro, “Whence American Internationalism,” *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 253–289; Jeffrey Checkel, “The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory,” *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (January 1998), pp. 324–348; and Daniel H. Nexon and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, “Whence Causal Mechanisms? A Comment on Legro,” *International Organization Online*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Spring 2001); available online at: http://mitpress.mit.edu/journals/Inor/Dialogue_IO/jackson_nexon.pdf.

10. William C. Wohlforth, “Reality Check: Revising Theories of International Politics in Response to the End of the Cold War,” *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (October 1998), pp. 650–680; Stephen G. Brooks, and William C. Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/2001), pp. 5–53; Sheri Berman, “Ideas and Culture in Political Analysis” (paper presented at the “Ideas, Culture and Political Analysis Workshop,” Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, May 1998); Campbell, “Institutional Analysis and the Role of Ideas in Political Economy,” pp. 377–409; and Blyth, “Any More Bright Ideas?”

thinking that may have originated several decades earlier.¹¹ More materialist-oriented scholars have countered, however, that the new ideas adopted by Soviet leaders were largely a product of underlying material changes, and that the end of the Cold War is best explained by traditional measurements of relative power and shifting economic incentives and capabilities.¹²

One response to the endogeneity critique is that it misses the point of much scholarship on the role of ideas. Many constructivist scholars do not accept that ideas can be usefully modeled as independent or intervening variables. They focus instead on the “constitutive” rather than the causal effect of ideas. That is, ideas construct actors’ interests and identities rather than merely constrain behavior. For these scholars, simple causal models will inevitably fail to capture the true importance of ideas. As Alexander Wendt puts it, “Gorbachev’s New Thinking was a deep, conceptual reassessment of what the US–Soviet relationship ‘was.’ . . . It may be that objective conditions were such that the Soviets ‘had’ to change their ideas about the Cold War but that does not change the fact that in an important sense those ideas *were* the Cold War, and as such changing them by definition changed the reality.”¹³

This brings us to a third criticism of the literature on the role of ideas, both generally and in the case of the end of the Cold War: that the idea of “constitutive effects” or “constitutive explanation” is a non sequitur. Criticism along these lines is often made only by implication, but it is extremely important, for it helps to account for much of the communication breakdown among scholars from different research traditions. According to the critics, the notion that the Cold War was constituted by Soviet and American policymakers’ ideas about their countries’ relationship does not absolve one of the need to address traditional questions of causality. As David Dessler puts it, “specifying what something is does not explain it. . . . Constructivists might

11. Vladislav Zubok, “The Collapse of the Soviet Union: Leadership, Elites, and Legitimacy,” in Geir Lundstad, ed., *The Fall of the Great Powers* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1993), pp. 157–174; Herman, “Identity, Norms and National Security”; Kratochwil and Koslowski, “Understanding Change in International Politics”; Edward A. Kolodziej, “Order, Welfare and Legitimacy: A Systemic Explanation for the Soviet Collapse and the End of the Cold War,” *International Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (June 1997), pp. 111–151; Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

12. Jack Snyder, “Myths, Modernization, and the Post-Gorbachev World,” in Lebow and Risse-Kappen, eds., *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War*, ch. 5; William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/1995), pp. 91–129; and Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization and the End of the Cold War.”

13. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Alexander Wendt, “On Constitution and Causation in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 5 (December 1998), pp. 101–117.

very well be right that ideas are more important in the world than traditional IR theories have suggested, but to show this, they will have to rely on conventional categories of scientific theory and explanation.”¹⁴

These challenges encompass theory, evidence, and methodology. We cannot expect to achieve a consensus on how to respond to them, but in addressing them forthrightly we do seek greater clarity about how and why scholars continue to disagree both about the explanation of the event and its more general implications for international relations research.

Structure of the Special Issue

The authors of the articles in this special issue agree that an important way to address these challenges is to examine both material incentives and ideas more rigorously. In principle most scholars acknowledge that both material and ideational factors mattered in the end of the Cold War, but in practice during the initial rounds of the debate only a few researchers explicitly incorporated both material and ideational causes into their analyses, and even those few who did consider both material and ideational changes made little effort to examine how they influenced each other.¹⁵ Many of these writings frame the issue as one of materialist versus ideational explanations or, alternatively, as one of as “realism versus constructivism.”¹⁶ The new evidence and accumulating scholarship suggest, not surprisingly, that such formulations are too simplistic. Given a little more distance from the event and a lot more evidence from the archives, most observers agree that material factors (e.g., decline, technological change), ideas (“new thinking,” democratic liberalism, new views of human rights), institutions (particularly Soviet party rule and central economic planning), personalities (especially Gorbachev’s), and a good dose of historical contingency all “mattered” in bringing the Cold War to a close.¹⁷ The question is how to discuss productively the role ideas played in this complex outcome.

14. David Dessler, untitled review of Alexander Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics*, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (December 2000), p. 1003.

15. See for example, Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry, “The International Sources of Soviet Change,” *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Winter 1991/92), pp. 74–118; and Kenneth A. Oye, “Explaining the End of the Cold War: Morphological and Behavioral Adaptations to the Nuclear Peace,” in Lebow and Risse-Kappen, eds., *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War*, pp. 57–83.

16. The study of ideas today is often mistakenly equated with constructivism, but much research on the role of ideas, especially in political economy, is not constructivist. Most authors in Keohane and Goldstein, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, for example, are primarily rationalist.

17. See, for example, Mark Kramer, “Ideology and the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1999), pp. 539–587, esp. 570–586.

To answer that question, a critical and often overlooked first step is to clarify the methodological issues in dispute. Accordingly, Nina Tannenwald develops a theoretical framework that guides the analysis of the empirical articles. Her article identifies various explanatory strategies for the role of ideas and seeks to clarify key methodological issues in the study of ideas. She defines terms, identifies several different relationships between ideational and material factors, and lays out a series of “tests” to evaluate the causal effect of various kinds of ideas and ideational mechanisms. She also seeks to clarify two primary issues: whether it is possible to draw a clearer line between the material and the ideational, and what is meant by “constitutive effects” and “constitutive explanation.” She defends the notion of constitutive explanation and argues that causal analysis and constitutive analysis are equally valid explanatory strategies for the role of ideas.

The four articles that follow take their cue from Tannenwald to identify explanatory strategies that can help unravel key puzzles about the end of the Cold War. By “explanatory strategies” we mean a combination of theory, causal mechanisms, constitutive processes, and “tests” that can show the independent effect of ideas on policy. We seek to identify different relationships between ideational and material factors and the associated causal pathways and constitutive processes at work in ideational phenomena. We thus move beyond either a focus on explaining residual variance (in which ideas account for the variance that other explanations leave unexplained) or a sequencing or “pass the baton” approach in which, for example, constructivism is employed to account for the origins of interests and rationalism is then employed to explain choice under constraints. Instead, we are interested in establishing more clearly the precise pathways or mechanisms by which ideas helped bring the Cold War to a close. Our work on the end of the Cold War converges with current debates regarding international political economy and human rights, as well as the debate between rationalists and constructivists working on European integration.¹⁸

The empirical focus in this special issue is on a set of puzzles that allow us to explore the role of ideas. Despite the lively debate between materialists and idealists, they tend to agree that the most intriguing puzzles are on the Soviet side of the story. To concentrate on these puzzles and to exploit a large

18. See, for example, the papers presented at the workshop on “Ideas, Culture and Political Analysis,” held at Princeton University in 1999 (papers available from Columbia International Affairs Online). See also Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jeffrey T. Checkel and Andrew Moravcsik, “A Constructivist Research Programme in EU Studies?” *European Union Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (June 2001), pp. 219–249; Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Antje Wiener, Knud Erik Jørgensen, and Thomas Christiansen, eds., *The Social Construction of Europe* (London: Sage, 2001).

extant literature, we focus on change in Soviet foreign policy in the second half of the 1980s. Several questions are nested within this focus: the *timing* of change (why the second half of the 1980s, as opposed to earlier or later), the *direction* of change (why Soviet leaders chose accommodation, reform, and integration into the international economy, as opposed to retrenchment), and the *character* of change (why new thinking was as radical as it was, why the change was peaceful). The specific empirical puzzles we analyze include the non-use of force, the role of human rights in the collapse of Communism, the origins of new thinking, and Soviet acceptance of German unification within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).¹⁹ The different articles thus have different explananda or dependent variables, and they illustrate different explanatory strategies for the role of ideas.

Robert English begins by tracing the origins of new thinking as a case study of how Soviet intellectuals sought to redefine national identity in response to the West. He argues 1) that new thinking was fundamentally normative, not instrumental, because it was developed in a period (the 1950s and 1960s) when “socialism” was thought to be outperforming capitalism materially, and 2) that new thinking decisively affected Soviet policy in the second half of the 1980s. English offers a richly empirical socialization argument, showing how ideas associated with new thinking originated in the post-Stalin period within a community of intellectuals who shared the experience of battling the Communist system. He traces the development of these ideas through the 1970s and 1980s. In the mid-1980s, when Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and empowered many of the new thinkers as advisers, their liberal, Westernizing ideas played an indispensable role in shaping his reforms. English’s analysis focuses on mechanisms of identity change, including socialization and learning, at two levels: that of the community of reformist intellectuals, and that of the Soviet Union itself. The analysis challenges realist and rationalist views that new thinking was largely instrumental. At least until the Gorbachev era, Soviet reformers, according to English, advocated new-thinking ideas often at risk to their personal, professional, and institutional interests.

Andrew Bennett’s article focuses on the question of why Soviet leaders did not resort to force to preserve the Warsaw Pact in 1989 (with brief comparisons to other cases of Soviet use of force in 1989–1990). His essay provides a cognitive model of how decision-makers learn from experience. The

19. These topics, though important, do not exhaust the ideas relevant to our case. In the case of the end of the Cold War, for example, others have developed arguments for the role of liberalism and democracy, the Reagan administration’s worldview, and the decline of empire.

article is a rigorous effort to specify and establish the causal effect of this mechanism (elite cause-and-effect learning) as opposed to alternatives (more materialist or normative arguments). He also seeks to lay out the scope of and conditions for its operation. Bennett argues that Soviet leaders learned from previous Soviet military interventions in Czechoslovakia, in Afghanistan, and elsewhere the high costs and negative consequences of the use of force. He claims that even Soviet conservatives, for both material and ideational reasons (i.e., beliefs about the efficacy of force), would have been unlikely to use force in Eastern Europe in 1989 had they been in power. In contrast, hardliners had much different views about the terms the Soviet Union should seek regarding German unification. Gorbachev's ideas prevailed largely because of the lingering authority of his position as top leader. In short, although ideas and material constraints jointly produced the startling events of 1989, ideas and governmental structure were critical in determining which of the competing policy prescriptions would prevail regarding German unification.

Daniel Thomas analyzes the role of human rights ideas in the collapse of Communism. He argues that the demise of Communist rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was significantly attributable to the transnational diffusion of human-rights ideas. His analysis focuses on how human rights norms were transmitted to Soviet dissidents and policymakers, as well as precisely how, and how much, these ideas affected policy. Thomas focuses on two primary causal mechanisms: the transmission of human rights ideas by a transnational Eastern European social movement for human rights, which expanded the roster of available political concepts and the terms of political legitimacy; and the mechanism of "rhetorical entrapment" that expanded the discourse of human rights and may have constrained Soviet leaders to uphold their rhetorical commitment to the Helsinki Accords. Thomas contends that Soviet leaders accepted human rights ideas for both substantive and instrumental reasons. Western power played some role, but the ideas themselves were salient, legitimate, and resonant for Soviet leaders seeking a new identity and destiny for the Soviet Union. Thomas highlights the factors that are likely to favor this kind of international transmission of norms, and he reflects on how human rights ideas could "matter" in the late 1980s in the Soviet Union in light of the subsequent lack of institutionalization of human rights in Russia.

Tuomas Forsberg's article focuses on Gorbachev and German unification. Forsberg argues that the effectiveness of economic aid depends on decision-makers' ideas about economics and identity. German economic statecraft worked in securing Gorbachev's support for German unification, but only because of a specific set of ideas that animated Soviet decision-makers precisely

during that period. The weakness of the Soviet economy made economic assistance from Germany attractive, but Gorbachev did not bargain hard over the amount of aid because he thought it would ruin an anticipated close, friendly relationship with Germany in the future. He was more interested in the prospect of a true partnership with Germany and in being accepted by the West than in the direct economic utility of the aid. The importance of the German economic incentives thus lay in their role as trust-building measures. In contrast, Japan's efforts to use economic aid to persuade Soviet and then Russian leaders to return the Kurile Islands in 1991–1993 came to naught, in part because Soviet and Russian leaders did not expect a friendly relationship with Japan. For cultural and political reasons, Soviet and Russian leaders were more oriented toward Germany and the West. Forsberg argues that Soviet and Russian leaders' disinclination to seek aid or technology from Japan—a technology powerhouse—and to turn instead to Germany shows that material pressures alone cannot account for the success or failure of economic incentives and that actors' ideas about social relationships must be taken into account.

In a brief concluding article, which takes the form of a commentary rather than a synthesis, William Wohlforth argues that the articles in the collection reflect a sea-change in thinking about the end of the Cold War and a greater recognition of the case as a hard one in which to establish an independent role for ideas.