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The End of the Cold War as a Hard Case for Ideas

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I write from the vantage point of both a coeditor of this special issue of the journal and a participant in debates on the end of the Cold War whose research comes to conclusions very different from those presented in the articles herein. Given this unusual mix of roles, I offer not a conclusion but a commentary on the project. Let me begin with the premises and objectives of all the participants in this endeavor. If we thought that establishing the role of ideas in explaining seminal events like the end of the Cold War was easy, we would not have come together to produce this special issue. Nina Tannenwald and I teamed up to edit this collection because we believe that it is only by coming to grips with the tough research challenges inherent in the task that scholars will ever learn from the complex events that make up international relations. We invited leading scholars of the role of ideas in the end of the Cold War to refine their arguments in light of recent challenges from analysts whose research finds a much greater role for economic and other material incentives than scholars previously realized. As we argued in the introduction, confronting these challenges head-on not only should improve our general understanding of the role of ideas but might also help advance the ongoing debates over the end of the Cold War.

Did we succeed in meeting the objectives set out in the introduction? On the question of establishing more firmly how ideas influenced the end of the Cold War, the answer is an unambiguous "yes." The articles in this issue of the journal refine, deepen, and extend previous studies of the role of ideas in the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Few analysts have addressed the anomaly of Gorbachev's reluctance to bargain with the Germans over economic aid, much less forwarded the innovative argument Tuomas Forsberg

I am grateful to Stephen Brooks, Robert English, Nina Tannenwald, and Daniel Thomas for helpful comments on an earlier draft. Space limitations prevented me from addressing some of their important criticisms.

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uses to explain it. Although many activists and journalists have noted the possible influence of the "Helsinki effect" on Soviet decision-making, Daniel Thomas is the first to subject the argument to a focused analysis, highlighting the causal mechanism of "rhetorical entrapment." Andrew Bennett's article represents the most rigorous application of cognitive learning theory to Mikhail Gorbachev's historically fateful decision to refrain from using force in Eastern Europe in 1989. No scholar has matched Robert English's study of the thirty-year journey of "new thinking" from heresy to grand strategy. As a result of their efforts, we have a much clearer sense of the many ways ideas worked to shape the outcome. Many of the causal mechanisms they identify, moreover, are generic and may well apply to other cases.

Advancing the debate over *how much* ideas mattered in this case and other cases is a tougher challenge, not least because it depends on how scholars respond to the research presented herein. Moreover, communicating such findings to a wider community of international relations scholars raises challenging questions. How large a role for ideas should we expect to find in this case, and how hard should we expect it to be to verify that role empirically? If we find it hard to substantiate a major role for ideas in this case, what are the implications for the overall research challenges presented by the resurgent interest in ideas in international relations? If we find that ideas mattered but that they mattered substantially less than some other factors, what does this imply for the broader significance of ideas in international relations?

To help initiate a discussion of these important but largely ignored questions, I will highlight three key problems that make the end of the Cold War a hard case for ideas. I will show how the contributors to this issue responded to the research challenges posed by each of the three problems. I will then argue that recognizing the end of the Cold War as a hard case for ideas is likely to yield important dividends for research on ideas in international relations.

The Covariation Problem

In the 1990s many scholars wrote as if the Cold War was self-evidently a strong case for ideas. After all, the Soviet Union of the late 1980s was gripped by intellectual ferment and ultimately experienced an apparent change in collectively-held ideas. Taking place against the backdrop of what appeared to be a static external material setting, this intellectual shift occurred just as Soviet leaders adopted new policies that contributed to the rapid ending of the bipolar Cold War rivalry. This approach to the case appeared to highlight the salience of ideas and their interactions with leadership and domestic politics.

The contributors to this issue of the journal all recognize that the evidence does not warrant such an approach because material incentives were also changing before and during the events that led to the end of the Cold War. In particular, relative economic decline and escalating imperial burdens were steadily raising the costs of the old Soviet foreign policy and generating incentives for new approaches. Hence, the explanatory variables in question—material incentives and ideas (as well as leadership and domestic politics)—all covary along with the dependent variable of policy choices.

The articles in this issue of the journal do much more to address the covariation problem than was common in the 1990s literature. They all explicitly address the interaction between changing material incentives, ideas, and policy choices, seeking to make the case that even though material incentives augured for policy change, the specific direction of change was strongly influenced by ideas. They adopt a variety of process-tracing strategies to substantiate this argument, notably the analysis of alternatives suggested by Tannenwald. Each author seeks to show how changing material incentives left considerable uncertainty about policy choice and then discusses the specific mechanisms by which ideas helped to resolve this uncertainty in favor of the choices Gorbachev ultimately selected. These self-conscious efforts produce much more convincing arguments and evidence for how ideas fit into the larger story than previous studies that were conducted as if the covariation problem did not exist. They represent a major step forward in understanding how ideas matter in a setting characterized by reinforcing material incentives.

Still, the question remains whether accounts focused on ideas really advance claims of causal importance that contradict findings about the role of material incentives. Scholars who report strong causal effects for material incentives in this case do not argue that Soviet retrenchment was the only possible response, just that it was the most likely response.[1] The problem here is that it is much easier to establish the possibility of alternatives than their probability. The contention by the authors that alternative choices were possible is irrefutable. But to know whether there is a real debate between them and scholars who find a strong role for material incentives, it is necessary to show how likely these alternatives were compared to the course the Soviet Union actually took. Only if the authors are claiming that in the absence of new thinking the Soviet Union most likely would have eschewed retrench-

1. This is true of such explanations whether or not they are explicitly realist. See, Randall Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, "Power Test: Updating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies,* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 60–107; and 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.

ment is there an argument here.[2] The best way to determine the plausibility of alternatives is for scholars to begin to discuss their claims explicitly in terms of probability instead of possibility.[3] Robert English comes closest to advancing a clearly probabilistic claim that in the absence of new thinking and Gorbachev's leadership a more hardline policy would have been likely. Yet, on my reading, the articles in this special issue—even English's—leave some ambiguity on this point. The ambiguity becomes evident when we consider the question of alternatives in light of a second general problem the case presents for the study of the role of ideas.

The Optimality Problem

To think about the question of alternatives, it helps to ask whether Soviet foreign policy decisions from 1985 to 1989 were optimal in light of material incentives, the information decision-makers had at their disposal, and their overall view of Soviet interests. Accounts that highlight material incentives answer "yes."[4] According to these accounts, the steps taken in the late 1980s to reduce escalating imperial burdens, to break the costly Cold War security dilemma via unilateral concessions, and to forgo the use of force to tame balky and expensive allies that were no longer essential for Soviet security were all optimal strategies for a state in the Soviet Union's position. What makes these decisions seem suboptimal in hindsight is their link in people's minds with the demise of the USSR itself. But it is important to stress that the Cold War ended before the Soviet Union did, and the connection between Gorbachev's foreign policy moves and the Soviet dissolution—to the extent there was one—was not at all evident before the fact.[5]

2. Mark Kramer, among others, has criticized realist accounts on this point. See Mark Kramer, "Ideology and the Cold War," *Review of International Studies,* Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1999), pp. 564–566; and Mark Kramer, "Realism, Ideology, and the End of the Cold War: A Reply to William Wohlforth," *Review of International Studies,* Vol. 27, No. 1 (January 2001), p. 120. Studies in this special issue of the journal and in the wider ideas literature have focused exclusively on hardline alternatives to Gorbachev's policies. It is important to note that in the 1985–1989 period numerous Soviet policy intellectuals criticized Gorbachev for being too hesitant about taking bolder retrenchment measures, especially on the German question. See William C. Wohlforth, "German Reunification: A Reassessment," in Arthur L. Rosenbaum and Chae-Jin Lee, eds., *The Cold War—Reassessments* (Claremont, CA: The Keck Center, 2000), pp. 153–183. To assess the probability of retrenchment, it is necessary to consider a full spectrum of alternatives to Gorbachev's policy choices.

3. For more, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "New Versus Old Thinking in Qualitative Research," *International Security,* Vol. 26, No. 4 (Spring 2002), pp. 93–111.

4. Schweller and Wohlforth, "Power Test"; and Brooks and Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War," are both examples.

5. In articles showing links between the collapse of East European Communism and the demise of the Soviet Union, Mark Kramer stresses that Gorbachev foresaw neither the collapse of East European

The articles in this special issue and studies that find a strong causal role for material incentives seem generally to agree that Gorbachev's foreign policy decisions were roughly optimal. Bennett is clearest on this point, arguing that the use of force to hold on to the East European countries already made no sense in the 1970s, to say nothing of the late 1980s, by which time the burden of ensuring their allegiance had become much costlier for Moscow. English, too, does not appear to be arguing that Gorbachev's foreign policy choices were misguided or ill-conceived. Rather, his account features new thinkers in a valiant fight for what appear to be sensible security policies in the face of pig-headed or self-serving opposition from hardliners.

Although Bennett and English could have dealt more explicitly with the optimality issue, they appear to agree that, given the Soviet Union's position, the kinds of policies Gorbachev pursued made sense. If this is the case, however, there was actually less uncertainty inherent in the material incentives confronting Moscow than these authors sometimes suggest. The alternatives they discuss were plausible only because of the distorting effects of the old Soviet ideology and the baleful influence of domestic actors who had a material or emotional stake in suboptimal hardline policies.

It follows that Gorbachev's foreign policy is not an easy case in which ideas act to prevent people from responding to material incentives.[6] Rather, it appears that if ideas mattered in this case they must have served functionally to help people respond more efficiently to material incentives. Research on how ideas fulfill this smoothing or facilitating role remains underdeveloped. Both Matthew Evangelista and George Breslauer have examined how Gorbachev used rhetoric strategically to hoodwink or sideline hardline opponents of optimal policies.[7] But both scholars focus more on language and framing than on ideas, and their studies exemplify the difficulty of separating

Communism nor the effects this outcome would have on the Soviet state. See Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1)," *Journal of Cold War Studies,* Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 178–256; Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)," *Journal of Cold War Studies,* Vol. 6, No. 4 (Fall 2004), pp. 3–64; and Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 3)," *Journal of Cold War Studies,* Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 2005), pp. 3–96.

6. Where Bennett and English do seek to make that kind of argument is on Soviet domestic economic policy, which they clearly regard as suboptimal compared to the alternative represented by China's approach to economic reform. Insofar as Gorbachev's policy choices on economic reform exacerbated the Soviet Union's economic crisis, the ideas that influenced these policies—to the degree that they diverted Gorbachev from a better course—may have had significant effects, as both English and Bennett argue. Although more research needs to be done to make the case that ideas actually played this role, ideational effects of this sort are much easier to establish in this case than in other cases in which ideas work to facilitate policies that respond more or less optimally to material incentives.

7. Matthew Evangelista, "Norms, Heresthetics and the End of the Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies,* Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 2001), pp. 5–36; and George W. Breslauer, "How Do You Sell a Concessionary Foreign Policy?" *Post-Soviet Affairs,* Vol.10, No. 3 (July 1994), pp. 277–290.

the effects of ideas from the strategic interests and talents of the leader. Ideas themselves are important in this context mainly to the degree that something about them assists leaders in implementing more optimal policies. When ideas are deployed to persuade people to move a country's policy in line with material incentives, their independent effects are hard to establish. The task of discerning these effects is difficult, but it is not intrinsically harder than some of the research ideational scholars have already performed. For example, the research English undertook to demonstrate the intellectual evolution of *new* thinkers could be emulated to try to document the effects that Gorbachev's use of new ideas and concepts had on *old* thinkers.

The Teleology Problem

Less obvious but still detectable in the articles in this issue of the journal is a larger problem. The period since 1989 has seen the demise rather than the rise of influential ideas. New thinking has disappeared from history. It is of no importance in the history of ideas—only in the history of this event—and it commands no following in either Russia or the West. Nothing of new thinking survives because it was new only in the Soviet context. To most Westerners, new thinking appeared to represent a step away from a distorted ideology and toward reality as they saw it. New thinking was not an *idée force* that motivates masses of people to action. Rather, it reflected the end of an *idée force*—revolutionary Marxism—and the gradual accommodation of Soviet elites to the worldview of elites in the world's richest and most powerful countries.

Compare the topic of this special issue to the task faced by the thinkers who sought to explain the role of ideas in the rise of Communism. Scholars such as Isaiah Berlin and Leszek Kolakowski did not have to work hard to persuade readers that Marxist revolutionary ideas were consequential.[8] The puzzle for them was how initially marginal ideas could spread from the fevered imaginings of powerless intellectuals to become a great motivating force in the twentieth century. For these scholars, as for most of their colleagues, the puzzle was only deepened by their sense that these historically powerful ideas were demonstrably false.

The end of the Cold War, by contrast, is a story of how ideas lost rather than gained force, a situation that presents rather different explanatory chal-

8. See, for example, Isaiah Berlin, "Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century," in Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality,* ed. by Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), pp. 116–167; and Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origin, Growth, and Dissolution,* trans. by P. S. Falla (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

lenges. For anyone familiar with official Soviet old thinking, it is not hard to explain why people stopped believing in it. To the extent that it was not simply vacuous nonsense, it purported to be a materialist ideology whose primary justification for the revolution and the distorted "socialism" it wrought was the promise to outperform capitalism materially. The implications for anyone exposed even briefly to life in the West were too obvious to belabor. Given the power and success of the West, it is not difficult to explain the appeal of the ideas that were associated with the capitalist democracies. Hence, when Gorbachev and his fellow advocates of perestroika abandoned the precepts of Soviet Marxism-Leninism in favor of ideas Western in all but name, they committed an intellectual act, to be sure, but, in light of the circumstances, it was an act that is much harder to disentangle from material incentives than scholars initially claimed.

The articles in this special issue all grapple indirectly with the teleology problem. Note, for example, how little the authors discuss the specific content of new thinking. The new thinking becomes concrete in only two ways: as a rejection of the Soviet past (clearest in the articles by English and Bennett), and as a reflection of the aspiration to become part of the West (clearest in the articles by English, Thomas, and Forsberg). Aside from the rejection of the Soviet past and the hope to become part of the rich and successful West, there is nothing lasting or distinctive. Most tellingly, there is no compelling vision for the future—other than the prosaic, bourgeois vision of a "normal" country living happily, securely, and, most of all, prosperously alongside its Western neighbors. The contrast with easier cases for ideas—Communism, fascism, Nazism, Islamism—could not be greater. You would never write about those ideas without going into detail about their motivating visions, which in all cases were in stark contrast to the status quo reflected by the West.

The teleology problem has important implications for establishing how ideas worked in this case. The story is about the intellectual accommodation of reality or, if you prefer, of "reality" as defined by the powerful West. Either way, it is a story of how old ideas lost force, not how new ones gained the power to shape human actions. There are many different ways to get to the same outcome.[9] Other states have made decisions like Gorbachev's—reducing external commitments, making unilateral concessions to escape security dilemmas, deciding not to use force, moving toward Western human rights norms—without the benefit of new thinking. Nothing in Bennett's article shows that new thinking was a necessary intellectual step toward learning that the use of force can be costly (unless one defines new thinking tautologically

9. Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, "International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Substitutability, and 'Nice' Laws," *World Politics,* Vol. 36, No. 3 (April 1984), pp. 383–406.

as learning that lesson), and, certainly, many leaders in the past have grasped this point without subscribing to new thinking. The articles by English, Thomas, and Forsberg are all explicitly about how an authoritarian country came to terms with the West, an epic theme of twentieth-century history that can be—and has been—told without reference to new thinking. One of the great themes of the 1970s and 1980s is how nearly every "closed" country moved to open itself up to the global economy. All of these other states did this without any intellectual stimulus from new thinking.

There is, however, a potentially important pathway by which new thinking might have been consequential. Perhaps the specific ideas were uniquely potent tools for dismantling the old ideas in the specific Soviet context. This is a potentially important ideational effect, but it is not explicitly addressed in this collection and has only begun to be addressed elsewhere.[10]

Ideas and the End of the Cold War in Perspective

The bottom line is that if you were seeking a case in which it was easy to establish a strong role for ideas as opposed to material incentives, you would not choose one in which material incentives and ideas pushed in the same direction, or one in which the policies that were actually adopted appear to have been a roughly optimal response to material incentives, or one in which the main intellectual movement was away from radical and revolutionary ideas and toward acceptance of the ideas held by the world's richest and most powerful actors. Certainly you would avoid a case with all three of these attributes. To stress that the Cold War is a hard case for ideas is not to be a materialist. Everything I have said about the end of the Cold War implies that there are many other cases in which it should be much easier to establish a strong role for ideas, including earlier phases of the Cold War. Recognition of the problems inherent in ideas-based explanations of the end of the Cold War yields three immediate dividends.

First, it explains the premium on methodology. To tackle the challenges posed by the end of the Cold War for the study of ideas, the scholars in this special issue of the journal all deploy at least some of the testing strategies outlined in Tannenwald's article. The longitudinal and cross-sectional tests she

10. The pioneering study is Jacques Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). More explicitly theoretical treatments are Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy," *International Organization,* Vol. 57, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 77–109; Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism (Part 1)," esp. pp. 181–192; and Jeffrey W. Legro, *Ideapolitik: Why Great Powers Rethink the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

outlines respond to the covariation problem by breaking the larger event into pieces in which the observable implications of ideas can be isolated from those resulting from other changing variables. Although many may regard the attention to explicit research design as a distraction, my reading of the three major problems this case creates for those seeking to verify an independent role for ideas prompts the opposite reaction. I heartily welcome the strategies proposed by Tannenwald, and I hope they will be applied even more rigorously in future work.

Second, wider recognition of the end of the Cold War as a hard case for ideas would result in a more realistic baseline when assessing the implications of the specific findings presented in these and other studies. It is a safe bet that scholars will continue to argue about the relative causal weight of ideas in accounting for the peaceful end of the Cold War. But the initial expectation in the early 1990s that this was a self-evidently powerful case of the role of ideas in international relations may have set an unrealistically high bar for ideas. Conceivably, part of the intensity of the debate is the result of high initial expectations for ideas—a sense that "if ideas aren't important here, they aren't important anywhere." Given the three problems I outline here, my reaction would be the opposite.

Third, recognizing the problems this case presents to ideas-based arguments points to suggestions for further research. There is no good reason to focus only on easy cases. Understanding how revolutionary intellectual movements end is every bit as important as understanding how they begin and take hold. What role, for example, might ideas play in the waning of fundamentalist Islamism as an *idée force?* The contributions to this collection demonstrate that there are many ways ideas can play a role in such cases, and I have suggested several avenues of research along these lines that might yield additional insights. A clear-eyed appraisal of the problems the end of the Cold War presents for those who seek to establish an independent role of ideas does nothing to impugn the potential value of more research along these lines. On the contrary, it suggests higher payoffs for understanding ideas in general and a greater likelihood that research findings on ideas and the end of the Cold War will earn general acceptance among scholars of international relations.