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Ideology and the Cold War

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Scholars interested in international relations theory and history are indebted to Mark Kramer for his splendid review of new historical evidence on the role of ideas and power during the Cold War.[1] I agree with Kramer that new evidence by itself never settles learned debates such as the one he reviews. However, the sharper the debate, the bigger the potential payoff from fresh evidence. Toward that end, I have three comments.

Power and ideas

Kramer's juxtaposition between 'ideology' and 'power' is too rough to capture the subtleties at stake in the debate. No realist thinks that ideology does not matter, and few constructivists subscribe to the notion that political life is truly 'ideas all the way down'.[2] The question is how do power and ideas relate? Ideas may give material power its causal effect by defining what matters to actors and therefore what material capabilities will get others to 'do what they would not otherwise do'. Or material factors may cause actors to change their ideas by favouring them with more or less ability to control their environment. Sorting out these arguments is more complex than Kramer allows.

The major point that Kramer's review misses is that the Soviet Union was materially competitive with its rivals for the first three decades of the Cold War. True, it was more inefficient and poorer than the United States. But it was capable of fielding a first-class military force, sustaining a complex alliance system, and keeping the Western alliance mainly on the defensive for decades. As long as this was the case, the ideas in which the Soviet elite grounded its legitimacy seemed plausible and useful to a critical mass of the nomenclatura. As a result, the ideas often affected Moscow's strategic behaviour, as Kramer shows. But at some moment the Soviet Union began steadily to lose competitiveness, even in the military sector. The reasons for this shift lie partly within the Soviet Union itself, but many of the changes were technological and systemic in nature.[3] After all, the Soviet Union was hardly the only country changing its relationship to the West—and hence its 'identity'—in the 1980s. Dozens of others went down that path.

[1] Mark Kramer, 'Ideology and the Cold War,' *Review of International Studies* 25: 4 (October 1999), pp. 539–76.

[2] The phrase is Alexander Wendt's, and he has recently disavowed it. See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 109–13.

[3] For more, see Stephen G. Brooks, 'The Globalization of Production and International Security,' Yale University Ph.D. thesis, forthcoming 2000.

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This is the material setting in which more and more members of the Soviet ruling echelons began seriously to question the veracity and usefulness of their traditional ideas. And that is why I think Kramer is wrong, and the end of the Cold War is actually a poor showcase for the role of ideas in international politics. For changes in ideas closely tracked changes in material incentives, which makes it difficult to establish a strong and independent role for ideas.

Realism and the Cold War's end

Kramer notes that realist theories are indeterminate about the timing of events; they often have little to say about domestic processes that may have important international effects; and they are at best capable of only probabilistic estimates of state behaviour. All true. But these are deficiencies that realism shares with all other general theories of international relations. Moreover, they were well known to scholars before the end of the Cold War, so the event tells us nothing new about them.

Given prolonged relative decline, Moscow faced three grand-strategic choices: 'lash out' to reverse decline by preventive war, conquest or intimidation; 'hold fast' to maintain the *status quo*; or 'appease and retrench,' to allow for the revitalization of domestic institutions necessary to reverse decline. Standard realist theories state that the odds will favour appeasement and retrenchment.[4] Hegemonic theory predicts that the decline of a clearly weaker challenger will remove the problem of hegemonic struggle from world politics unless and until it reverses decline or a new challenger appears. Preventive war by a rational challenger that knows it is substantially weaker is not an option—especially in a world with nuclear weapons.

Kenneth Waltz's much-maligned neorealist theory predicts that under bipolarity alliance choices are strictly limited, and so Moscow's ability to respond to decline with alliance diplomacy was constrained.[5] When two states are far more powerful than all others, their fates are very largely determined by the competitiveness of their own political and economic systems. A declining Soviet Union could not expect to divide US allies from their powerful patron. And the relative geopolitical value of its own allies was small when compared to the value of restoring domestic competitiveness. Soviet use of force to retain balky allies would prevent the loss of a comparatively small portion of Moscow's power, but it would only hasten decline by stiffening the resolve of the opposed coalition, provoking it to tighten its sanctions regime, and locking in place the existing set of imperial relationships that were imposing escalating costs on Moscow.

Kramer is right that there is nothing in Waltz's or any other realist theory that rules out the possibility that the leader of a declining Soviet empire would be compelled by domestic political considerations to intervene in the periphery. But given the configuration of power in the 1980s, these theories would expect a strong preference against forceful intervention, especially if leaders perceived a contradiction between intervention abroad and the restoration of competitiveness at home.

[4] For a more extensive discussion, see Randall Schweller and William Wohlforth, 'Power Test: Updating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War', *Security Studies*, 9: 2 (Winter 2000).
[5] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

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This cost-driven reluctance to use force was already on display during the Polish events of 1980–81.[6] Gorbachev's efforts to avoid using force in Central Europe in 1989, when the Soviet Union was facing much tighter resource constraints, are not surprising in this light.

Thus, standard realist theories predict that Moscow's best response to relative decline within a US-dominated bipolar system was appeasement of the stronger superpower. This does not mean that no other policy was possible. It means that a Soviet politician favouring policies of 'lashing out' or 'holding fast' faced much longer odds than one opting for some form of retrenchment.

New evidence on Soviet decline and the end of the Cold War

Kramer's review fails to note that the overwhelming bulk of new documentary and memoir evidence confirms that Gorbachev and his colleagues saw their policy of engagement, retrenchment, and revitalization as the best response to Soviet relative decline.[7] As Gorbachev expressed it in a characteristic remark to the politburo in 1986: 'Our goal is to prevent the next round of the arms race. If we do not accomplish it, the threat to us will only grow. We will be pulled into another round of the arms race that is beyond our capabilities, and we will lose it, because we are already at the limit of our capabilities.'[8] Kramer's failure to note this cascade of evidence showing perceptions of decline and their direct causal connection to the new policy is bewildering.

One might discount this evidence by showing that Gorbachev and his fellow reformers began to see 'power' differently as a *consequence* of their new ideas. That is, they may have perceived steep decline only because they had already begun to see the world differently and thus had come to value different material things. Kramer himself notes one rebuttal to this argument (p. 566): Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko—hardly new thinkers—also perceived decline. As Kramer notes, they did not immediately begin to retrench or rethink hallowed precepts. But then neither did Gorbachev, who began with an Andropov-style 'acceleration' strategy and only moved to deep retrenchment abroad and radical reform at home when the initial incremental strategy failed disastrously. The initial response to material decline is always to seek remedies that do not threaten accepted ideas and practices. But each year decline continues is another argument that it is a systemic and not a cyclical downturn. That is why decline in 1988—after a decade of stagnation and the failure of two bouts of default-option reforms—was much worse than decline in 1980.

Moreover, if perceptions of decline were a consequence of new thinking, then old thinkers would have different assessments of power relationships. But the new

[6] Vojtech Mastny, 'The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980–81 and the End of the Cold War', (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project Working Paper no. 23, 1998).

[7] Space constraints preclude an exhaustive list of citations in this section; only a smattering can be cited below. See, for a more extensive review, Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'Why Identities Change: Power Globalization and the End of the Cold War,' unpubl. MS, under review, and available from authors upon request.

[8] Anatoly Chernyaev's notes from the politburo session of 4.10.86 in National Security Archive, *Understanding the End of the Cold War,* Briefing book for an oral history Conference, 7–10 May 1998 at Brown University , Providence, RI. doc. no. 32. See also doc. nos. 19, 25, 40, and 52.

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evidence reveals that conservatives and technocrats of the Ligachev-Ryzhkov variety, and, strikingly, even many members of the military and defence-industrial elite appear to have agreed that the Soviet Union simply could not long bear the costs of its international position.[9] American officials—if not scholars and pundits—agreed. Memoirs and documents from the Reagan and Bush administrations consistently confirm that American officials retained confidence in their superior power potential throughout the 1980s, and perceived relative power shifting in their favour as the decade progressed.[10]

One response to all this evidence is that it concerns 'just perceptions, not reality.' But here again new evidence presents problems. Recent estimates by economists and accountants as well as interview testimony reveal that Soviet relative decline was much worse than observers realized at the time: the budget deficit appeared earlier (in 1985) and was a much more serious constraint upon policy; inflationary pressures began earlier and built quicker; goods shortages, production backlogs and other tangible indicators of decline were worse; the technological lag was greater; the defence sector was less efficient; and military institutions were beset with more problems.[11] These sources also indicate that the burdens of empire—defence, subsidies to allies, and foreign assistance—absorbed a greater proportion of Soviet resources than all but the most pessimistic earlier analysts had reckoned.

What goes for the Soviet Union also applies to its critical allies, which were all worse off materially than outsiders realized, and whose debt burdens to the West were therefore all the more constraining. The GDR is the dramatic case in point. As of November 1989 the state was virtually bankrupt and needed new credits from the West to survive.[12] The use of force in these circumstances would have cut off credits, reduced access to critical Western markets, saddled Moscow with costly responsibilities, required leaders either to default or to extract further sacrifices from the populace, ruined the appeasement strategy, reinforced the costly *status quo*, and done nothing to address the underlying problem of decline.

Of course, Moscow faced choices. Another leader might have done things differently. But here again, the new evidence provides fascinating glimpses of the internal opposition to Gorbachev. Overall, it seems weak, ineffectual, and lacking in good arguments. Most critics tended to accept that retrenchment of some form was

[9] See Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, 'The Collapse of the Soviet System and the Memoir Literature,' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49: 2 (March 1997); Ellman and Kontorovich (eds.), *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insider's Account* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); and William Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

[10] See sources cited in William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and the End of the Cold War', *International Security*, 19: 3 (1995), fns. 69–72. More recent recollections that reflect these assessments include George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998); and Philip Zelikow and Condoleeza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), among many others. Also illustrative is NSD 23 (9/22/89) 'United States Relations with the Soviet Union', doc. no. 52 in National Security Archive, *The End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989: New Thinking and New Evidence*. Briefing book for National Security Archive's oral history conference at Musgrove, St. Simon's I., Georgia, 1–3 May 1998.

[11] See for example, Elman and Kontorovich, *Destruction;* Clifford G. Gaddy, *The Price of the Past* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1997); Sergei Sinel'nikov, *Biudzhetnyi krisis v rossii, 1985–1995 gody* (Moscow: Evraziia, 1995); Randall Stone, *Satellites and Commissars: Strategy and Conflict in the Politics of Soviet-Bloc Trad*e (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[12] Hans Hermann Hertle, 'Staatsbankrott: Der Ökonomische Untergang des SED-Staates', *Deutschland Archiv* 25: 10 (October 1992), pp. 1019–30; (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

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necessary.[13] The internal debate was less over whether retrenchment and engagement were necessary, but over timing, terms and tactics. And that finding is no surprise. Given Soviet decline from an already inferior position in a word of revolutionary technological change, a policy of renewing the Cold War was not realistic for Moscow, and the threat to do so would have lacked credibility with Washington. And that reality is the unwritten clause in every treaty codifying the Cold War's end.

Of course ideas are necessary for a full explanation: there is always some lag between material change and policy change; choices are informed by expectations that cannot be mechanistically derived from material trends; and actors' 'mental models' will affect how they resolve the uncertainty that characterizes any strategic situation. The question is not whether realist theories can provide a complete explanation for every aspect of these events. The real question is whether there is something about how these events happened that should cause us to reduce our confidence in the explanatory power of these theories. The evidence that has come to light does not warrant such a conclusion.

[13] See Brooks and Wohlforth, 'Why Identities Change'.

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