Bridging the Realist/Constructivist Divide: The Case of the Counterrevolution in Soviet Foreign Policy at the End of the Cold War

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The surprising end of the Cold War has led to a debate within international relations (IR) theory. Constructivists have argued that the end of the Cold War is best explained in terms of ideas and agency—specifically Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev’s new thinking. A few realists have countered that Soviet material decline was “endogenous” to the new ideas. Can these two theoretical perspectives be reconciled with respect to this case? They can be partially integrated with a path-dependent strategy that places an emphasis on “institutions.” Nevertheless, explaining the end of the Cold War largely requires a theory of Soviet foreign policy and its relation to the state. As a former or ossified revolutionary state, Soviet foreign policy for at least several years was largely based on the principle of externalization: outside threats were used to rationalize radical centralization, repression, and the dominance of the Party. In using the USSR’s institutionalized legacy as a revolutionary state, Gorbachev acted as a counterrevolutionary and reversed this process with his revolution in foreign policy. In creating a new peaceful international order, he sought—through the “second image reversed”—to promote radical decentralization, liberalization, and the emergence of a new coalition. The case examines how Gorbachev’s domestic goals drove his foreign policy from 1985 to 1991.

Explaining the end of the Cold War has touched off a debate within international relations theory (IR). In criticizing neorealism, constructivists have argued that the sudden and surprising end of the Cold War is better explained by agency and ideas, namely Mikhail Gorbachev’s “new thinking,” as opposed to neorealism’s focus on anarchy and security concerns.1 Indeed, constructivism has gained considerable momentum as a theoretical perspective as a result of this event. On the contrary, a few realists have countered that Soviet material decline accounts for Gorbachev’s ideas and revolution in Soviet foreign policy. In the words of Brooks and Wohlfirth (2000/01, 2002), material factors were “endogenous” to Gorbachev’s new think-
After over a decade, what are we to make of this debate? Can the two theoretical perspectives be reconciled with respect to this case?

This paper seeks to bridge the theoretical differences with respect to the case of the end of the Cold War. Both perspectives have presented sufficiently strong arguments about the importance of material or structural factors and agency or ideas, respectively, that it is now clear that we need a strategy that integrates structural and voluntarist approaches. The constructivist focus on identity and ideas through enlightened agency and the realist emphasis on material factors have left a large gap, however, that ignores politics, particularly the relation between foreign policy and domestic politics. The realists are correct that Gorbachev’s foreign policy was primarily undertaken for the instrumental reason of changing the moribund economy. Nevertheless, in stressing material factors, they create a deterministic explanation. They also cannot explain why Gorbachev went as far as he did. His foreign policy was more than “retrenchment”: it was transformative. The constructivists, on the other hand, recognize the transformative nature of Gorbachev’s foreign policy, but they fail to see that it was implemented for largely instrumental reasons. Indeed, shifts in foreign policy between 1985 and 1991 were mainly designed to shock the Soviet system into advancing perestroika and domestic change.

Both realists and constructivists focus on facets of IR; yet, a huge part of the end of the Cold War involved Soviet foreign policy. Thus, explaining the end of the Cold War requires a theory or explanation of Soviet foreign policy and its relation to the state. Gorbachev’s revolution in foreign policy made use of the “institutionalized” role that foreign policy played for the Soviet state as a result of its close relation to domestic politics. As a former or ossified revolutionary state, Soviet foreign policy for at least several years was largely based on the principle of externalization: external threats were promoted in order to rationalize strong internal centralization, repression, and the entrenchment of the Party. In acting as a counterrevolutionary, Gorbachev used this institutionalized legacy and reversed the process: the external world was recast in very positive terms so as to justify the promotion of radical decentralization, liberalization, and the emergence of a new coalition. This concept of the USSR as an ossified or former revolutionary state follows a coalitional approach, which assumes a major role for ideology.

Like the realist and constructivist authors on this event, I adopt the case study method. Although the case study method has been criticized with respect to making generalizations about IR theory, it has in part been justified by scholars on this topic on the grounds that the end of the Cold War represents a seminal event. Nevertheless, since this paper looks more at causal mechanisms as opposed to causal effects discussed by the other authors, the case study method is appropriate (Gerring, 2004:348). I use process tracing in examining the causal mechanisms (George and Bennett, 2004) behind the evolution of Soviet foreign policy from 1985 to 1991.

The first part of the paper looks at the theoretical debate in explaining the end of the Cold War, concluding with a path-dependent strategy that mediates structure and agency through institutions. In bridging the two perspectives, the second part demonstrates how understanding the linkage between foreign policy and the USSR as a former or ossified revolutionary state helps to explain Gorbachev’s own counterrevolution in foreign policy. The third section examines the four phases in Gorbachev’s foreign policy and shows how they corresponded with his evolving goals of perestroika.

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2 In contrast to neorealists who emphasize anarchy, Brooks and Wohlforth are structural realists who stress power within the system.

3 Although this paper broadly links material factors with structure and associates ideas (including identity and norms) with agency, it recognizes that ideas can be viewed as structure (Wendt, 1999).
The Theoretical Debate

It is ironic that American public perceptions and IR have diverged in their views about the end of the Cold War. Although the conventional wisdom for much of the public has been that the Cold War came to an end for material or structural reasons (for some: the Reagan military buildup), for IR this event has represented a major blow to realism and has led to calls for new approaches to study international politics. In spite of the surge that this event initially gave to constructivism, a few realists have strongly countered as to the importance of material factors.4

Brooks and Wohlforth maintain that Soviet economic decline was “endogenous” to Gorbachev’s ideas. In short, Moscow’s economic problems gave rise to new thinking. From the 1920s until the 1960s, the Soviet economy grew at impressive rates (except for the war years). Beginning in the 1960s, however, the economy began a steady decline until it hit zero growth by the early 1980s, and, by the mid-1970s, both growth rates in industrial production and labor productivity began to drop sharply.5 Moreover, the Eastern European states ceased to be economic assets to Moscow and became burdens, forcing the Soviets to provide subsidized loans in the 1980s to ameliorate their own declining growth rates. Given its long and seemingly irreversible downturn, Moscow could no longer even envision catching up to the United States, let alone surpassing it. All of the other economically advanced states were aligned against it and prospering. Brooks and Wohlforth (2000/01, 2002) write: “between 1960 and 1989, Soviet growth performance was the worst in the world, controlling for levels in investment and education, and its performance relative to the rest of the world was declining over time.”

Material explanations cannot explain, however, the magnitude of Gorbachev’s change in foreign policy. Brooks and Wohlforth erroneously imply that Gorbachev’s policies and the Cold War’s demise as it happened were inevitable. English (2002) demonstrates that few among the Soviet elite favored Gorbachev’s radical approach. Moreover, the claim that material factors were endogenous to new ideas is overstated. It is hard to imagine that Gorbachev would have made the overtures toward the West that he did if the period of détente had not occurred. Yet we now know that, beneath the Politburo and in contrast to the Brezhnev–Andropov–Suslov view of détente based on the “correlation of forces,” many mid-level Soviet leaders learned during détente that cooperation with the West offered many benefits. Soviet “learning” did not just take place when the United States followed conciliatory policies, however. Military might was largely the basis of Soviet power. If Moscow could have forced political concessions from the West, it might have continued the Cold War in spite of its economic decline.6

Second, and more importantly, Brooks and Wohlforth’s claim that “retrenchment” was Moscow’s only option mischaracterizes Gorbachev’s policy. Gorbachev went well beyond retrenchment, promoting instead a revolution in foreign policy. In renouncing the class struggle as the basis for Soviet foreign policy, Gorbachev also surpassed retrenchment in advocating a foreign policy based on common security, universal human rights, and the renunciation of nuclear weapons. Basing his foreign policy on more than rhetoric, he made asymmetrical cuts in Soviet arms, removed Soviet medium-range missiles, ended support to communist movements, and promoted regional cooperation. Gorbachev’s radical approach came before

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4 Other realists with respect to this case include Lemke (1997), Blacker (1993), and Oye (1995).
6 Following the Brezhnev arms buildup for two decades, Andropov thought he could intimidate and fragment NATO by targeting missiles at Western Europe. Thus, U.S. President Reagan’s placement of the cruise and Pershing missiles in Western Europe contributed to the end of the Cold War because it foreclosed the last realistic means the Soviets possessed to wage their struggle. Also see Patman (1999) and Gaddis (1989).
events overtook him. He began advocating the principle of noninterference in Eastern Europe in 1988. In spite of a deteriorating situation, the General Secretary did not later have to agree to permit a unified Germany in NATO. Retrenchment falsely implies that Gorbachev’s domestic goals were based on reducing costs. Instead, they were designed to transform the Soviet system. A revolution in foreign policy could be transformative because of the close linkage between foreign policy and the core domestic features of the Soviet state.

In his seminal article on constructivism, Wendt (1992) claims that Gorbachev’s abandonment of the class struggle as the basis for Soviet foreign policy so changed the “identity” of the Soviet state that Moscow changed its national interests. Wendt gives primacy to ideational factors and agency, for material factors explain little. Structure consists of “ideas most of the way down.” In emphasizing identity in international politics, Wendt believes that it is largely constructed through the mutual interactions of states. Gorbachev’s renunciation of the class struggle initiated an interactive process between the USSR and the United States that changed the interests of both states and the international system itself.

Koslowski and Kratochwil (1994) argue that Gorbachev transformed international politics with his renunciation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which had prevented the Eastern European states from choosing their own domestic systems. According to these authors, this transformation occurred not because of changes in the international system or material conditions, but because of revolutionary changes in the “norms” governing a bloc. Kratochwil (1993:65) argues that norms should not be regarded in instrumental terms.

Although the process of ending the Cold War began with the change in Soviet identity and was complete after the change in norms governing the Eastern bloc, constructivists give too much weight to ideas and agency. They fail to see the instrumental purposes of Gorbachev’s revolution in foreign policy. Not only was material decline largely endogenous to the new ideas, but Gorbachev used foreign policy to shake up the ruling coalition. He sought to weaken the military–industrial establishment and to create a new base of support within both the Party and country. He sought a change in identity more for domestic political purposes than for its own sake. Contrary to Wendt, the Cold War came to an end less as a result of the changed interactions between the United States and USSR and more because the Eastern bloc unraveled as a consequence of no longer having an external enemy to hold it together.

The constructivists’ focus on ideas and agency begs two questions: Where did the ideas come from, and what role did international factors play? Several scholars argue that transnational actors were the source for a number of the ideas that Gorbachev embraced. Checkel (1997) maintains that, because the authoritarian nature of the state prevented new ideas from emerging easily from within, there was a demand for new ideas from abroad. Transnational actors served as the supply for new thinking about international security, advocating common security and nonoffensive defense. Evangelista (1999) demonstrates that for several decades transnational actors tried to influence Soviet policy with respect to nuclear testing, conventional force reductions, and missile defenses, and they were at times successful.

Nevertheless, Gorbachev first chose a course of conciliation toward the West and then accepted the ideas of transnational actors. Moreover, it is unlikely that Moscow needed the transnational actors to learn of the ideas. Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko write:

> the new thinking was broader and more encompassing than arms control concepts such as common security and nonoffensive defense ... The principles

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7 Wendt (1999:375) concedes that material factors played more of a role in his later work.
of “freedom of choice” and noninterference in internal affairs were not inspired by contacts with European Social Democrats or liberal arms controllers. (2003:86, 87).

Larson and Shevchenko argue that a major source of Gorbachev’s new thinking can be related to social identity theory (SIT). Having failed to increase the Soviets’ lower status through “social mobility” or “social competition,” Gorbachev chose a third course: “social creativity.” Under him, the Soviets would gain status by leading the world in a peaceful transformation of international politics. What Larson and Shevchenko do not see, however, is that Gorbachev was acting very much within the Leninist tradition as a revolutionary. A revolutionary seeks to create a new international order and to vanquish his foes. Gorbachev sought the former, but instead of attempting to vanquish his foes he promoted a new peaceful order. Following SIT, Larson and Shevchenko fail to link the General Secretary’s foreign policy to domestic politics or perestroika. Most revolutionaries choose external conflict in order to justify internal centralization and repression. Gorbachev, on the other hand, wanted a peaceful new international realm in order to foster radical decen-tralization and liberalization of the Soviet domestic system.

Toward an Integrative Approach

Bridging the realist and constructivist perspectives requires a strategy that integrates structure and agency. It must meet two criteria: to accommodate the strong roles of both structure and agency and to be applicable to events involving large transitions. James Mahoney and Richard Snyder (1999) offer such a strategy that relates structure and agency to states shifting from authoritarian to democratic systems, and it is portable to great transitions involving states and their foreign policies. Their path-dependent strategy looks at historical events or “critical junctures” when “political action created structures that had persistent casual effects which shaped subsequent trajectories of political change” (Mahoney and Snyder, 1999:16). This strategy assumes that past events have long-term effects that constrain future outcomes. Nevertheless, it does not assume that structural factors predetermine critical junctures; instead, these junctures are based on contingency. With respect to the importance of “institutions,” Mahoney and Snyder write:

Political institutions are meso-structures that stand between actors and macro-level structures. The causal impact of human actors on institutions and the causal impact of institutions on human actors are unmediated by intervening levels of analysis. This “closeness” of institutions to agency makes them a powerful optic for analyzing the role of human design both in creating institutional structures during critical junctures and in sustaining those structures after junctures. (1999:17)

This strategy uses an “evolutionary model of causation” similar to the “punctuated equilibrium” model in biology. “Punctuations” are based on choice and shape the “equilibria,” which corresponds with structure. This strategy privileges structure, however, since agency is confined to moments of punctuation.

I adopt the path-dependent strategy because of the magnitude and duration of Soviet material decline, and the economy appeared difficult, if not impossible, to reform. As English (2000) demonstrates in his excellent book, structure should

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8 Mahoney and Snyder also offer a “funnel strategy”: it begins with broad macro-structural variables and moves to leadership and voluntaristic factors. I agree with Brooks and Wohlforth, however, that any Soviet response was limited to conciliatory options given the unrealistic possibility of a Stalinist-like retrenchment and globalization. Herman (1996) uses the funnel strategy.
also entail the growing acceptance of Western ideas since Khrushchev’s time. Gorbachev represented an extreme example of punctuation in embracing the new ideas and a different identity. The strong connection between foreign policy and the domestic realm was the “institution” that Gorbachev would use in promoting a revolution in foreign policy that would facilitate a transformation of the USSR.

The Legacy and Foreign Policy of a Revolutionary State

A revolution by definition overthrows the old order and establishes a dramatically different one. A counterrevolution has often been defined as opposition of any kind to revolution. In making use of the state’s revolutionary legacy, a counterrevolution in its ideal form, however, seeks through revolutionary action to overturn the old institutions and coalition of the revolutionary state and to create a new regime based on strongly antithetical principles. As a counterrevolutionary, Gorbachev sought both radical change and the destruction of the USSR’s core structures. As a type of revolution, a social revolution is a mass-based upheaval from below, and its foreign policy is largely a byproduct of this domestic turmoil. In contrast, Gorbachev’s counterrevolution was a revolution from above, and his foreign policy was not a result of domestic tensions. Instead, the General Secretary used foreign policy to initiate revolutionary change of the political system.

Gorbachev’s counterrevolution in foreign policy sought to shock the Soviet system into supporting perestroika. The General Secretary specifically wanted (1) a dramatic reduction in the military’s clout, (2) draconian decentralization of the command economy, (3) openness (glasnost) and the empowerment of new groups, and (4) the “vanguard” role in promoting global integration based on liberal principles. Given the institutionalized role that foreign policy played for the Soviet state, Gorbachev could expect his counterrevolution in foreign policy to serve such instrumental purposes. As a prototypical revolutionary state for at least some time, Soviet foreign policy was based on the principle of externalization: outside threats were used to justify radical internal centralization, repression, and the rule of the Party. Gorbachev drew upon this legacy in reversing Soviet foreign policy: a friendly external world, which he would bring about through a change in identity, would propel radical decentralization, liberalization, and a new coalition. Central to the concept of the revolutionary state is the coalitional approach: coalitions use foreign policy ranging from international openness to autarky and hostility to promote their domestic rule. For the revolutionary state, ideology plays an unusually strong role in rationalizing this most entrenched of all coalitional types. Reversing externalization, Gorbachev followed an outside-in approach or the “second image reversed” (Gourevitch, 1978).

The idea behind the second image reversed is that the international system shapes the domestic order of states. Gorbachev’s counterrevolution required two conditions. First, he needed to be able to change international politics in a dramatic way. Second, and more distinctly, Soviet foreign policy needed to have a sufficiently close relation to the domestic features of the state such that the counterrevolution in foreign policy could shake up the internal structures. In short, Gorbachev’s use of the second image reversed required a previously strong role for the second image. Before exploring how Gorbachev manipulated foreign policy for domestic purposes, it is first necessary to discuss how Soviet foreign policy was molded from its revolutionary past.

Recognizing the distinctive role that foreign policy played for the Soviet state runs counter to IR theory. Neorealists have long maintained that international politics is a distinct realm, that states are functionally equivalent, and that realism provides no basis for foreign policy (Waltz, 1979). Although constructivists empha-

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9 Contrary to English, economic decline did more to bring about the change than did an emerging Western identity, and shifting the economy was the main goal of perestroika.

size Soviet norms with respect to international relations, they fail to give proper
weight to interests, coalitional politics, and material factors in shaping these norms.
IR theorists have not been alone in treating the Soviet state as if it was just another
big power. Sovietologists since the early 1960s increasingly proclaimed it as such. Nevertheless, since the end of the Cold War and the opening of the Soviet archives, many scholars have come to recognize the Soviet Union’s distinctiveness as a state. Thus, even the totalitarian model has been resuscitated in order to explain the apparent inability of the USSR to reform itself in the 1980s (Odom, 1992; Roeder, 1993). The biggest finding, however, has come with respect to foreign policy: ideology played a much greater role than was recognized by scholars during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years.

Drawing upon these findings, Gould-Davies (1999) argues that Soviet foreign policy sought “geoideological” goals as opposed to the geopolitical and security goals of most other states. An “ideological state” such as the USSR seeks to accumulate power beyond its security needs, tries to influence the domestic politics of other states, and attempts to reproduce its own domestic system in other states. Both IR theorists and Sovietologists have rejected the conceptualization of the Soviet Union as an ideological or revolutionary state because they have wrongly assumed that such states must have foreign policies that are inflexible, aggressive, and noncooperative. But as Gould-Davies argues, these states can cooperate and be flexible; radicalism in goals does not require irrationality with respect to means.

Since it lost its revolutionary zeal and found areas of cooperation some time in the post-Stalinist era, however, the USSR would be hard to categorize unambiguously as an ideological or revolutionary state in international politics. But Soviet foreign policy under Khrushchev or Brezhnev hardly evolved to that of a distinctly “traditional” great power in that it officially supported the class struggle, and this ideology was believed by the elites (Blum, 1993). Most importantly, Soviet foreign policy still regarded the outside world as hostile, and it was overextended in pursuit of the goals that Gould-Davies outlines. “Even at the height of détente, Moscow never abandoned the idea that the great task facing the USSR was to weaken and eventually to eradicate competing systems” (Nichols, 2002:9). Thus, the Soviet Union might better be viewed as an ossified or former revolutionary state.

Jack Snyder in his landmark Myths of Empire (1991) best describes the general sources of Soviet foreign policy. In rejecting the realist focus on the international system, the operational code, and learning, he argues that only domestic politics explains Moscow’s “overextension.” Contrary to the realist notion of threats, Soviet foreign policy was cooperative before World War II when the international environment was most threatening and was noncooperative when the West was cordial after the war. Snyder identifies three major periods of overextension during the Cold War; the other periods of moderation represented learning from the periods of overextension. In just one of the three periods—Stalin’s aggression in the late 1940s—did international opportunities primarily explain Soviet foreign policy. In contrast to the Sovietologists who claim that the Soviet Union was a traditional great power, Snyder claims that for most of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years Soviet foreign policy was overextended and based on domestic politics. While Snyder attributes the domestic sources to a variety of factors related to late development, I associate them with the legacy of having been a revolutionary state.

The foreign policy of revolutionary states largely results from the externalization of domestic tensions (Snyder, 1999). Tilly (1975, 1978) maintains that social rev-

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11On the Soviet Union as a traditional power, see Aspaturian (1971) and Tucker (1970).
13Jack Snyder uses a coalitional approach in comparing different Soviet leaders, but I focus instead on the Gorbachev years.
olutions, which entail both radical transformations of domestic affairs and a drastic realignment of political coalitions, have two distinct features: violence and a close interaction of internal and external factors. As a means of state-building, revolutionaries use international violence or the threat of it in order to create new institutions and political coalitions. There are four dimensions to this idea of externalization: (1) an outside enemy is used to justify the military-like mobilization of society; (2) the basic institutions of the state become highly centralized as a result of international conflict or the threat of it; (3) the ruling coalition justifies repression of internal groups on the grounds of their alleged connections to the external enemy; and (4) foreign policy goals are global in scale and become costly.

The first dimension states that revolutionary states use external conflict in order to justify the mobilization of society. Revolutionaries usually project the outside world as hostile; revolutions thus need to prepare for war and global combat in order to defeat their adversaries. In one of her biggest findings about revolutions, Skocpol (1988) argues that the greatest consequence of social revolutions is “mass-military mobilization.” In short, revolutionary states often become military states. The Soviet Union was unlike most other states in that it was committed to a worldwide communist revolution. Because the Soviets saw the outside capitalist world as hostile, and because they were committed to such ambitious international goals, the USSR became the epitome of a military state (Gaddy, 1997).

The second dimension asserts that as a result of international violence or the threat of it, revolutionary states create highly centralized political orders. The basic institutions of the USSR were established under the intense threat of international conflict. Stalin could only justify his brutal industrialization, collectivization, and political terror by citing foreign threats. As a consequence of Stalin’s industrialization, the command economy became institutionalized along with the military–industrial complex (Snyder, 1987/88).

The idea that revolutionaries use international conflict in order to enhance their ruling coalitions is the third and critical dimension of externalization (Snyder, 1999). Since many groups in revolutionary states have transnational ties to others in status quo states, revolutionaries justify repression of these groups on the grounds that, given international tensions, these groups threaten the security of the revolutions. Thus, international conflict is promoted in order to rationalize the elimination of domestic rivals. The fact that the USSR needed external enemies to justify its repression of domestic groups became the centerpiece in Kennan’s (1947, 1967) argument for containment. According to him, the United States could not elicit Soviet cooperation after the Second World War because Moscow needed America as an enemy in order to rationalize its totalitarian system. Kennan said: “There is ample evidence that the stress in Moscow on the menace confronting Soviet society from the world outside its borders is founded not in the realities of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home” (1947:570).

Lastly, revolutions have foreign policy goals that usually become overly ambitious and costly. Even revolutions that seemingly should have had only regional appeal advocated the eventual global triumph of their revolutions (e.g., the Iranian Revolution). This is because of the high importance that revolutionaries attach to their millenarian ideologies and their military-like mobilization of society. Although Soviet leaders were generally cautious during the Cold War in becoming involved in wars, like most other revolutionaries they overextended themselves. Indeed, one may wonder, given the discrepancy in GNPs, why the Soviets even contested U.S. hegemony.

Revolutionizing a Former or Sclerotic Revolutionary State

Gorbachev sought to reverse Soviet foreign policy based on externalization in order to advance his domestic goal of perestroika. If foreign policy had been a byproduct of internal tensions, the new General Secretary now wanted to use foreign policy to shock the USSR into changing domestically. Thus, he dramatically altered the portrayal of the West as the enemy to that of friend in the hope of shaking up the political system such that the economy would become revitalized. The General Secretary learned from the failed reforms of Khrushchev, Kosygin in 1965, and Andropov that economic reforms would not work without both major changes in the political system and foreign policy. In seeking radical changes, Gorbachev borrowed from the Leninist revolutionary legacy in becoming a kind of revolutionary or counterrevolutionary himself. Shifts in foreign policy were based on the evolution of perestroika.

Most specifically, Gorbachev followed this pattern: first he decided on domestic policy, and then he chose a foreign policy that he thought would advance the former’s goals. The foreign policy was put in front of the major effort to push for domestic change.

Upon coming to power in 1985 “Gorbachev intended to subordinate foreign policy to the imperatives of correcting the domestic economy to a far greater degree than his predecessors” (Lévesque, 1997:15). Edward Shevardnadze told his ministry “that the goal of diplomacy is to create a favorable environment for domestic development” (quoted in Lévesque, 1997:15). The term perestroika, which came to embrace Gorbachev’s evolving domestic and foreign policies, involved fundamental reform or restructuring of the economy. From the outset, Gorbachev sought to overcome the stifling effects of the command economy and to revitalize it through the implementation of market mechanisms and initiation of leasing and cooperatives. Nevertheless, in his first year, the General Secretary did not attempt to overturned or revolutionize the system; instead, he encouraged its “acceleration” (uskorenie). His initially conservative domestic policies included “tightening discipline, attacking drunkenness, increasing investments in heavy industry” (Hough, 1997:107).

These more modest domestic policies were matched by a foreign policy of retrenchment but not of one that could be called revolutionary. In his first year Gorbachev primarily focused on reducing the increased hostility that had developed between Moscow and the West since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He met several European leaders and later Reagan in Geneva in the fall. Gorbachev acknowledged in effect that Moscow’s aggressive behavior and the Brezhnev–Andropov view that détente was attributable to a favorable change for the Soviets in the “correlation of forces” justifiably caused the West to scrap détente in the early 1980s. He expressed some new thinking in suggesting that the two blocs extend cooperation beyond that of the 1970s and eliminate their roles as enemies; yet, he made few changes in Soviet security policy. Instead, the new General Secretary promoted traditional policies: military spending was actually increased, and pre-existing Soviet interests were reaffirmed. Gorbachev’s five-year plan for 1986–1990 called for increasing military spending as a percentage of GNP, and he publicly supported the goal of winning the war in Afghanistan by military force.

Gorbachev began his revolution in foreign policy in February 1986 at the 26th Party Congress with his renunciation of the class struggle as the basis for Soviet foreign policy. This phase culminated with the signing of the INF Agreement in December 1987. The major reason for this foreign policy shift was the evolution of perestroika and domestic policy. As Odom (1998:97) says, “the pace of reform had not been fast enough over the past year and a new foreign policy had been chosen with care.” In addition to this lack of satisfactory progress, Gorbachev knew that he could not alienate the party elite by supporting a radical domestic program right away. In renouncing the class struggle and attempting a draconian reduction in
nuclear arms, Gorbachev was trying to use foreign policy in order to shock the domestic realm and to promote perestroika. He did this before and while he pursued his two big goals of 1986–1987: greatly reducing the influence of the military and overhauling the command economy.

The first principle of revolutionary states is the mass-military mobilization of society. Indeed, the Soviets had a permanent war economy. Perestroika largely sought to end the influence of the military in order to reallocate resources to other sectors. In contrast to realists, however, the Soviets could have continued to afford an arms race of relatively inexpensive nuclear weapons. As the vast literature maintains, the military’s dominance of the economy created a bloated bureaucracy that failed to allocate resources efficiently.15 What has been less appreciated has been how the emerging third industrial revolution,16 which Gorbachev strongly recognized, ran counter to the Soviet economy. The military’s emphasis on hierarchical authority and the undifferentiated masses precluded the development of individualism and innovation needed to enter the new economy.

In renouncing the class struggle and seeking drastic cuts in nuclear arms, Gorbachev undermined the raison d’être of the military’s dominance. In supporting the worldwide revolution of the proletariat, Moscow had cast itself as an aggressive power determined to destroy the status quo, which entailed not only the traditional balance of power but also the nation-state system itself. This declaration ended the extreme role of ideology in foreign policy, the threat of large-scale international violence, and the decades-long justification of the Soviet state in international affairs. In place of the class struggle, the General Secretary offered another revolutionary and universal principle: working to improve the human condition. The INF treaty eliminated a whole class of weapons with the destruction of medium-range missiles targeted at NATO and represented a watershed in Soviet security policy for three reasons. First, it was unprecedented in banning a whole class of weapons. Although Gorbachev had proposed the elimination of nuclear weapons at the Reykjavik summit in 1986, his offer was based on the condition that Washington scrap its SDI program. Second, given the large Soviet advantages in medium-range missiles, Moscow made asymmetrical cuts in accepting the “zero option.” The treaty violated the military’s principle of “parity.” Since it did not include British and French missiles, it further repudiated the principle of “equal security.” And third, the zero option was Reagan’s idea. Thus, the treaty appeared to vindicate the president’s “peace through strength” approach, since NATO had installed its missiles only a few years earlier.

Gorbachev succeeded in short-circuiting the military’s influence. This was due in large part to the hierarchical nature of the Soviet political system, which allowed the General Secretary and Politburo unusual power. Gorbachev was able to remove unsupportive Politburo members faster than Stalin and Khrushchev had. In the past, the Ministry of Defense and KGB were most important in handling security affairs, but Gorbachev shifted many matters to Shevardnadze and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The General Secretary bucked opposition because of the general desire among elites for reform, because of his timely announcement of his radical plans, and because of his persuasive skills. He undercut the military by forming sympathetic commissions, such as the Zaikov commission on disarmament, and by, according to Boldin (1994:172, 173), his chief of staff, not circulating important foreign policy and security memos. Gorbachev’s greatest passion against the military probably occurred in 1987 when the West German teenager Mathis Rust flew his plane undetected into Red Square, demonstrating the incompetence of the Soviet security apparatus. He fired Defense Minister Marshal Sokolov and replaced him with Dimitrii Yazov. Yet Yazov, who had doubts about the INF Treaty, remained docile. Anatoly Dobrynin writes:

15See footnote 5.
Yazov was far more obedient to Gorbachev than Sokolov, and thus Gorbachev accomplished a quiet coup. The new defensive minister knew little about disarmament talks, and had nothing to do with them. (1995:626).

The second principle of revolutionary states is that international conflict becomes embedded in the basic institutions of the state, and revolutions use international tensions to justify a massive centralization of power. As a revolutionary state, the Soviet Union was perhaps most distinguished by its highly bureaucratized command economy. As perestroika evolved in 1986–1987, Gorbachev sought to transform the command economy, which became equated with heavy industries, to a new economy based on decentralization and high-tech industries. Although the term perestroika means reform, the General Secretary more accurately sought a domestic revolution. Instead of trying to reform institutions, Gorbachev sought to destroy them. Hough brilliantly conveys this idea:

For the radicals, then, only a revolutionary overthrow of the ruling class would achieve true reform. In economic terms this meant that only shock therapy was left as an alternative: destroy the old institutions and their controls on the economy and let new ones be built on their ruins. (Hough 1997:122)

Gorbachev perceived his big enemies to be the bureaucracy and nomenclatura. He says:

The chief opposition to our plans were the leading structures of the ministries and departments, first of all the economic ones—Gosplan, the State Supply Committee, the Ministry of Finance, and the apparatus of the government. Then they closed ranks with the position of the party bureaucracy. (Gorbachev 1996:227)

Gorbachev used foreign policy and disarmament in particular to advance perestroika. The revolution in foreign policy was linked to the revolution in domestic policy. The old coalition based on hypercentralism, semi-autarky, and heavy industries rationalized its role with an aggressive foreign policy: “the Stalinist institutions held on as atavisms, using the militant ideology and the exaggeration of the foreign threat to justify their self-serving policies” (Snyder, 1987/88:94, 95). In reversing course, Moscow in 1988 allowed for more joint ventures, granting multinational corporations greater profit incentives and freedom, and allowing Soviet individuals to establish links independent of the state. “The result was a genuine, though at the time, modest breach of national autarky, and thus a real movement towards the Soviet Union’s integration into the world economy” (Malia, 1994:426). As Gorbachev became committed to promoting political change as the means to advance the economy, he increasingly began advocating disarmament. Thus, at the Reykjavik summit in the autumn of 1986 Gorbachev proposed nuclear disarmament of the two superpowers. Throughout 1987, Shevardnadze continually accepted U.S. demands with respect to foreign policy (Zelikow and Rice, 1995:149, 150). With the INF Treaty, Gorbachev smashed Soviet arms as a prelude to smashing the bureaucracy in capitulating to Reagan’s zero option.

The next shift in foreign policy occurred in the spring of 1988 and culminated in Moscow’s refusal to prevent the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. In the summer of 1988 at the 19th Party Conference, Gorbachev essentially rescinded the Brezhnev Doctrine, allowing the Eastern European states to go their own way. Moscow not only refused to bolster the regimes in Eastern Europe but encouraged reform. If there was a declaration that proclaimed the end of the Cold War, it was Gorbachev’s speech before the UN in December 1988. He announced massive cuts in conventional arms in Europe, thus precluding either an invasion of Western
Europe or a military campaign to prop up allied regimes in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the General Secretary declared an end to Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe. In 1989, Moscow gave its endorsement to the Polish government’s decision to allow Solidarity to run in parliamentary elections. In celebrating the 50th anniversary of the East German state, Gorbachev encouraged the removal of its hardline leader and the democratization movement. This all occurred before Moscow acquiesced in the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This shift in foreign policy followed Gorbachev’s decision to promote glasnost and democratization. As Jacques Lévesque writes; “it was not by accident that the acceleration of perestroika, and the measures that followed, brought about a repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine” (1997:79). Glasnost implied openness. Citizens were allowed to criticize the government and society, and the press and intellectuals began debates about the ills of the political system. Gorbachev’s big initiative from the 19th Party Conference, however, was democratization and his call for elections to be held in early 1989 to the Supreme Soviet. If the primary purpose of perestroika was to undo the command economy and military–industrial complex, glasnost and democratization sought to empower new constituencies. The newly elected Supreme Soviet would become Gorbachev’s base of support and lead the way in transforming the Soviet state.

The third and critical principle about the foreign policy of revolutionary states is that they externalize their internal tensions in order to rationalize repression. Since Gorbachev sought openness through glasnost, there was no longer a reason to maintain the international threat. Repudiating the Brezhnev Doctrine effectively ended the Cold War. As Koslowski and Kratochwil (1994) argue, the Soviet principle that it had a right to control the domestic affairs of the Eastern European states sharply violated fundamental norms of international politics and established the basis for hostility with the West. Moreover, maintaining the vigilant threat to invade Eastern Europe justified repression in the Soviet Union itself. Even the hardline, anticommunist Reagan accepted the idea that the international system in 1988 was being transformed, and Gorbachev became a hero throughout Western Europe. In short, as a new international system based on peaceful harmony emerged, the Soviet domestic order needed to adjust accordingly (the second image reversed).

As preparations for the elections were made during the summer, Gorbachev in effect stripped the Politburo of its powers through his reforms. His new course in foreign policy was advanced with his demotion of Yegor Ligachev, who had defended the Brezhnev Doctrine, and with the promotion of Alexander Yakolev, who strongly advocated reform and democratization in Eastern Europe, to the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations. The fact that Yakolev, one of the most radical thinkers, would become Gorbachev’s principal foreign policy advisor before the elections demonstrates how foreign policy served as a forerunner to change of the domestic realm.

Shortly before the elections to the Supreme Soviet, Gorbachev made his dramatic speech before the UN. The repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine was related to democratization in three ways. First, if Moscow sought democratization, promoting it in Eastern Europe would advance it at home. Gorbachev needed allies in Eastern Europe to support perestroika in the USSR. “Debates . . . about how much diversity to tolerate in Eastern Europe implicitly focused on how much diversity to tolerate at home” (Hough, 1997:197). Since democratization entails freedom, the Eastern European states would, in effect, be free to choose their courses if democratic measures were implemented. Second, new Soviet evidence demonstrates that Moscow worried that if it continued its repressive dominance, and the Eastern European leaders refused to implement reform, then popular explosions could erupt that would undermine perestroika in the Soviet Union itself. Kramer (1999:567–573) writes that Gorbachev believed that only reform in Eastern Europe could
prevent violent change in those states. Moscow’s leaders were so opposed to the use of violence, the cornerstone of the Soviet state, and afraid of its eruption that then Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze told U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, following separatist violence within the Soviet Union itself in April 1989: “If we were to use force then it would be the end of perestroika. We would have failed. It could be the end of any hope for the future” (quoted in Beschloss and Talbot, 1993:96). Not wanting to use violence at home, Gorbachev sought to show that its use was inconceivable in Eastern Europe. And third, it made little sense to maintain rigid control of Eastern Europe in light of its huge and increasing drain on Moscow’s resources.

The last shift in Soviet foreign policy occurred from the collapse of the Berlin Wall until the death of the USSR itself in 1991. Gorbachev allowed the two Germanys to become reunited and to be a member of NATO.

On the domestic side, Gorbachev’s goals became less relevant as the Soviet Union began to unravel. The Baltic Republics sought independence and violence flared up in the Caucasus. The General Secretary reversed course and became more repressive in 1990. After failing to stop the deterioration, hardliners launched the failed coup of August 1991. As nationalism spread to the core republics, Boris Yeltsin pulled Russia out of the USSR, causing the demise of the revolutionary state.

The fourth principle of revolutionary states maintains that foreign policy goals become exceedingly important and costly. Gorbachev’s UN speech declared an end to the Cold War, and the unification of the two Germanys effectively accomplished it. The unification took place entirely on West Germany’s terms, and Gorbachev, who had ample bargaining chips with the Red Army on East German soil, caved in to Bonn’s and Washington’s requests. Agreeing to the new Germany’s position in NATO brought about the demise of the Warsaw Pact. Failure to hold the Warsaw Pact together spelled the doom of the USSR itself as separatist-minded republics now became emboldened to seek independence. Gorbachev and his advisors maintained doctrinal commitments to embracing the West’s requests, democratization, and a rejection of violence, in spite of their calamitous consequences. Moreover, Gorbachev became more committed to winning the applause of the liberal West than to maintaining his popularity at home. For revolutionary states, the externalization of domestic tensions leads the revolutionary elites to follow a doctrinal foreign policy of hostility that becomes costly and usually isolates these states, but the domestic consequence is that it consolidates their power in the elimination of domestic rivals. On the contrary, Gorbachev’s counterrevolutionary effort to transform international politics into a new peaceful world in order to remake the USSR unwittingly set in motion the forces that pulled the Soviet Union apart.

Conclusion

In focusing on ideas, agency, norms, and transnational connections, constructivists have, in analyzing the end of the Cold War, offered path-breaking perspectives in the study of international politics. A change in Soviet identity and a shift in international norms were the immediate causes for the end of the Cold War. But this case offers a few lessons for constructivists. First, no focus on ideas, enlightened agency, and transnational actors should obscure the fact that the USSR experienced catastrophic economic decline, stagnation, and in the end, disintegration. Constructivists risk reifying the concept “identity” much as they accuse neorealists of doing with “anarchy” in failing to see the instrumental purposes of Gorbachev’s identity shift. Second, in drawing lessons from the end of the Cold War, constructivists have stressed new factors—common security, social identity theory (SIT)—in bringing about change, yet Gorbachev made use of a core institution—the revolutionary legacy—in transforming the USSR.
If realism is equated with materialism, then realist variables fail to offer a satisfactory explanation of this event. However, the end of the Cold War can be viewed in realist terms if three conditions are applicable: (1) material factors have primacy; (2) the end of the Cold War is compared in material terms with other events; and (3) a theory links these comparative events. Since this paper establishes the first condition, realists should, in contrast with Wohlfarth’s (1994/95) effort to use the idiographic method with respect to this case, seek to use the nomothetic method and compare the end of the Cold War with other events using material variables. Likewise, realists need a general theory that helps to explain the end of the Cold War in material terms as opposed to discussing material factors in an idiosyncratic fashion (as with Brooks and Wohlfarth’s emphasis on “globalization”). The end of the Cold War fits within Organski’s (1968) and Organski and Kugler’s (1980) power transition theory (also see Gilpin, 1980), and his theory offers insights into this event. The reason that the power transition theory provides such a useful theoretical framework for understanding the end of the Cold War is that the shift in power between the United States and Soviet Union is best explained in developmental terms.\(^{17}\) In contrast to the United States, the USSR failed to enter the postindustrial phase. The end of the Cold War is a case that should be regarded by power transition theorists as belonging to a special type. In contrast to most other transitions, in which the power shift occurs between two states in the same (industrial) phase, this type involves two different stages of development. Thus, the international consequences are even greater.\(^{18}\)

Although realists and constructivists have offered strong insights into understanding the end of the Cold War, this paper raises some doubts about both perspectives with respect to this case. Both fail to provide a satisfactory explanation, and they are somewhat misleading in their interpretations. Since the end of the Cold War largely involved a radical change in Soviet foreign policy, a theory of foreign policy and the Soviet state is needed to explain this event. Moreover, the Soviet Union was a highly distinctive kind of state. This finding has implications beyond this case, for foreign policy decision making and processes have been too often discounted in favor of grand theories of international politics in the study of IR. For example, much attention recently has been given to broad theories about “empires” in international politics in light of the Bush presidency, yet a focus on this particular U.S. administration’s strategic view of Iraq and its relation—in nontangible ways as well—to terrorism probably offers just as solid a guide to understanding U.S. behavior (Snyder, 2003). A second implication relates to my thesis about domestic politics as a big source of foreign policy change. In looking at domestic politics as a source of foreign policy, scholars too often have created a false dichotomy between agency and institutional constraints. On the contrary, this paper demonstrates, in looking at Gorbachev as a counterrevolutionary, how creative leadership can use and enhance institutional legacies in dramatically reversing foreign policy.

References


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\(^{17}\)Organski says that the power transition is a state’s internal trajectory of growth or power. There are three stages: the preindustrial, industrial, and postindustrial.

\(^{18}\)Not only did the Soviet Union have to make radical changes in attempting to catch up to the postindustrial West, but it collapsed in trying to do so. Similarly, Austria–Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire—states largely in the first stage—all collapsed following their defeats to states in the second stage after the First World War. On the other hand, the victorious power over the challenger in a lower stage may result in unipolar world. Thus Pax Americana has followed the Cold War just as Pax Britannica emerged in the nineteenth century sometime after the defeat of France. Great Britain had a qualitative advantage over the other powers in becoming the first big power to enter the industrial stage.


