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**POWER, IDEAS OR MERE COINCIDENCE?  
CONSIDERING THE END OF THE COLD WAR IN MATERIAL,  
IDEATIONAL AND COINCIDENTAL PERSPECTIVE**

by

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**Abstract**

This article refers to debates explaining the end of the Cold War. It notes a variety of theoretical approaches but outlines two fundamental explanatory perspectives—the material and the ideational. The paper favours the ideational approach, and especially Gorbachev's agency. Yet it underlines that the focus on agency does not automatically mean that an agent acted rationally and efficiently. The case of Gorbachev is a good illustration of partial reforms which were far from consistent. As a result, the article indicates a third, coincidental perspective which is necessary to an explanation of the end of the Cold War. It argues that elements of irrationality and coincidence cannot be ignored in the analysis of events accompanying the end of the bipolar rivalry. Finally, the paper formulates some conclusions about the rationality and predictability of contemporary international relations.

**Key Words:** the Soviet Union, Cold War, Gorbachev, Reagan, the United States, perestroika

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## **POWER, IDEAS OR MERE COINCIDENCE? CONSIDERING THE END OF THE COLD WAR IN MATERIAL, IDEATIONAL AND COINCIDENTAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Introduction**

The explanation of the end of the Cold War remains controversial. Scholars agree that the event was unique (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 93–94; Gaddis 1992/93, pp. 51–52) but they still disagree why the Cold War rivalry finished at the end of the 1980s. Theoretical debates (at least three during the last two decades) revolve around a variety of causes emphasised by different theoretical approaches. Richard K. Herrmann and Richard Ned Lebow indicate in this regard, ‘Four generic explanations—material powers and capabilities, ideas, domestic structure and politics, and leaders...’ (Herrmann and Lebow 2004, p. 7) while Henry Nau notes three sets of independent variables ‘...power or material factors, interactive or institutional factors and ideational or identity (constructivist) variables’ (Nau 2011, p. 461). In fact, the end of the Cold War has increased the popularity of constructivism and revives the agent-structure dimension of theoretical disputes. Nevertheless, the last debate on the Cold War’s end confirmed that ‘... theorists not only disagree on the causes and consequence of particular events, but they also disagree on which events were most important and in need of explanation.’ (Deudney and Ikenberry 2011, pp. 435–436)

The aim of the article is to identify the two most fundamental and at the same time the most contradictory perspectives explaining the end of the Cold War—the material and the ideational. They reflect opposite theoretical assumptions. The material perspective is closest to realism while the ideational expresses the main assumptions of constructivism. Yet I consider them more as general and cross-theoretical explanatory approaches that emphasise the principal dichotomy between material and ideational causes of the Cold War’s end. I compare both perspectives to illustrate the complexity of events at the end of the 1980s and fundamental differences in their explanations. Finally, I indicate the causes that I consider the most crucial for

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the end of the Cold War. Comparing the material and the ideational perspectives I favour the latter, and especially Gorbachev's agency.

Nevertheless, in choosing the agency of Gorbachev I strongly emphasise that this did not mean a planned, rational and carefully prepared scenario of Soviet reforms. On the contrary, I see Gorbachev's perestroika as an unsuccessful attempt to implement ill-conceived, partial and rather chaotic reforms in a dysfunctional Soviet system. In a broader sense, the example of Gorbachev seems to illustrate that the concept of agency in the agent-structure debate does not automatically mean that the course of events will follow the agent's intentions. Things may go in a wrong direction.

Thus, I outline a third, coincidental perspective that in my opinion is necessary to understand the end of the Cold War. I note that the main explanatory perspectives seem to underestimate the elements of coincidence and inconsistency in the events at the end of the 1980s. I do not claim that the end of the Cold War was a mere coincidence. Yet I do not think that it was a rational, planned, negotiated process either. I conclude with some general remarks about the rationality and predictability of contemporary international relations and the lessons that can be learned from the Cold War's end. Finally, the article limits its time-frames to the turn of 1989–90. It accepts that the Soviet Union existed several months in the new post-cold war system, but my aim is not to analyse the complex context of the fall of the Soviet state in 1991.

### **Soviet decline and the primacy of material determinants. The end of the Cold War in material interpretation.**

The material explanation of the end of the Cold War emphasises the primacy of material determinants over ideational factors. The decline of the Soviet Union, and especially the gradual fall of the Soviet economic system, is fundamental to this approach (Åslund 2011, pp. 545, 553). Soviet economic growth stopped in the mid 1960s and began to fall. In the mid- 1970s the Soviet Union faced stagnation and by the beginning of the 1980s it was in absolute decline (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 87; Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 14–16, 19). The dynamic decrease of growth rates highlighted the weaknesses of the Soviet economy. Besides, it contributed to the deterioration of Soviet living standards and some negative social

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trends, including demographic problems and alcoholism (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 14–19; Kotkin 2001, pp. 25–26, 187).

Indeed, Anders Åslund indicates that the command character of the Soviet economic system, combined with political control by the communist party, strengthened its dysfunctional nature (Åslund 2011, pp. 546–551, 559). The Soviet economy was rigid and vulnerable to major shocks, and its specific feature was a high level of militarization. IN the mi-1980s, defence expenditures reached 40 percent of the USSR's budget and 20 percent of the Soviet GDP (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 22–23; Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 87). Further, the defence-industrial sector consumed most of the country's scientific and technological capabilities and in practice 'cannibalized' the rest of the Soviet economy. (Wohlforth 2011, pp. 451–452).

Thus, from the material perspective, Soviet economic decline in the 1980s was not a temporary slowdown. It was a deep structural problem (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, p. 16; Wallander 2003, p. 145). Internal inertia could keep the Soviet economy alive for some time but its structural weakness made it vulnerable to a potential shock (Åslund 2011, pp. 551–552, 559). There were several external sources for this shock in the middle of the decade. The first was the new phase of arms race initiated by the United States. The second revolved around the 'technological revolution' in the West and changes in the structure of global production—as identified by Brooks and Wohlforth (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 25–27, 34–37; Åslund 2011, pp. 551–552). The third was a sudden fall in global oil prices in 1986 that reduced the inflow of 'hard currency' from Soviet gas and oil exports (Åslund, 2011, pp. 551–554; Kotkin 2001, p. 66).

The competitive U.S. foreign policy initiated by President Ronald Regan was a real problem for the declining Soviet economy. Opinions on the decisive character of the Regan's pressure differ (Knopf 2004, pp. 1–4, 11–12; Schweizer 1994, pp. xi–xiii) yet the influence of Regan's strategy on Soviet policy is obvious in the material approach (Schweizer 1999, pp. 409–411). The aim of Regan's strategy was to exploit US technological superiority, weaken the strength of Soviet conventional forces and undermine Soviet Union's potential for innovation. The United States increased defence spending and introduced new, technologically advanced weapons systems, including the Strategic Defence Initiative (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 92–93). SDI (even if not fully credible) revealed the technological backwardness

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of the Soviet economy and signalled high costs, and a huge amount of new resources, that Moscow would have to engage to compete with the U.S. military program (Knopf 2004, p. 5; Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 92–93). Such a perspective was devastating for the Soviet economy, especially if combined with the fall of oil prices (Åslund 2011, pp. 552, 559).

Furthermore, the ‘technological revolution’ in the West contributed to the Soviet ‘technological gap’. In the 1980s, Western economies entered a phase of innovation in their most advanced sectors, include in electronics, communication and information technology. Most of these became fundamental for military purposes (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, p. 25; Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 92–93). The decline of the Soviet economy made the Soviet Union’s participation in this ‘revolution’ highly problematic (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 25–27; Åslund 2011, p. 559). Besides, the USSR began to miss changes in the structure of global production, including its geographical dispersion and a new role of inter-firm alliances. Each reflected the signs of globalization and each was crucial for further innovation. In the case of the Soviet state, however, it was hardly possible that the Soviet Union, with its secrecy, centralization and risk aversion, would follow the pattern of small and decentralized enterprises necessary for innovation (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 25–27, 34–37). Finally, the sudden fall of global oil prices in 1986 brought about a considerable drop in Soviet budget incomes (Åslund 2011, pp. 551–554, 558). Peter Schweitzer suggests that the fall was a result of President Reagan’s influence on Saudi Arabia’s oil policy and a kind of the (unofficial) Saudi-U.S. deal (Schweitzer 1999, pp. 412–413). This interpretation is still controversial yet, regardless of the actual reason, the fall of global oil prices led to a further deterioration of Soviet economic conditions in the mid-1980s (Åslund 2011, pp. 558–559).

Thus, the material approach argues that Soviet decline and external pressures during the 1980s created strong material constraints on Soviet foreign and domestic policy. They limited Gorbachev’s agency as well. In addition, the material perspective notes a clear systemic context that made the Soviet Union even more sensitive to the consequences of its economic problems (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, p. 21). First, the logic of bipolarity itself (with the bipolar distribution of power) reduced the availability of ‘alliance policy’ and made the United States ‘a single reference point’ for the Soviet state in every aspect of bipolar rivalry (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01,

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pp. 14, 19–21; Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 96–97). Second, the Soviet Union suffered serious ‘imperial overstretch’ at the beginning of the decade, together with the cost of ‘friendly assistance’ to its Third World clients and subsidies for communist regimes in East-Central Europe (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 22–24). Finally, Reagan’s anti-communist doctrine and the ‘Solidarity’ revolution in Poland weakened Soviet propaganda and its claims about the ‘superiority’ of the Soviet social model (Wohlforth 1994/95, p. 110; Knopf 2004, pp. 3, 8–9).

Further, the material approach notes a clear awareness of the Soviet Union’s decline among the Soviet leadership even before Gorbachev. It was in fact Brezhnev who first urged control of growing Soviet military expenditure and Andropov who emphasised the need for some reforms to reduce the cost of the Soviet empire. Their perception of the Soviet power, however, was as something still stable and strong (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 27–30). The Soviet Union’s decline in the mid 1980s made this perception more complicated, especially when confronted with the recovery of the Western economies and the Western ‘technological revolution’ (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 109–110). It contributed to a growing sense of a need to be ‘doing something’ with weakening Soviet power, but there was no consensus among the elites on what should be done—apart from repeating the ‘standard’ military complex demands for new resources (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, p. 26).

In consequence, Gorbachev’s coming to power in March 1985 was not a ‘liberal’ revolution. He was fully aware of the Soviet Union’s problems, including the challenge of the global ‘technological revolution’ that would pass the Soviet Union by if no reforms were initiated (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 110–111). Besides, Gorbachev was conscious that maintaining the international status quo would require a new massive investment in the Soviet military (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 28–29; 37–38). Yet Soviet economic decline made this barely possible. Hence, as Schweller and Wohlforth conclude, ‘A leader who promised to extricate the Soviet Union from its impasse while preserving the country's essential status as a superpower was sailing with the wind. This is precisely what Gorbachev's policy promised to do.’ (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 88–89)

Nevertheless, economic constraints considerably affected the course of Gorbachev’s reforms and his political ideas, from the material perspective, were secondary. Besides, as Åslund indicates, Gorbachev himself and the reformers in his camp were not Western-style liberals. They were still members of the Soviet

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establishment and despite their reformist aims they suffered, at least initially, similar ideological shortcomings (Åslund 2011, p. 554). In fact, Gorbachev's initial political strategy was still a mixture of old and new (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 111–112). He was determined to move beyond Soviet inertia and to propose some bolder reforms to revive the Soviet economy. He was committed to reducing overwhelming Soviet secrecy and as well as the primacy of the military perspective in Soviet economic and political life (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 89; Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, p. 39). Yet, Soviet military expenditures increased during the first months of Gorbachev's presidency and only negative signals indicating further decline in the Soviet economy made Gorbachev more determined to reduce them (Åslund 2011, p. 553; Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 22–23, 30–31, 39).

Furthermore, the material explanation argues strongly that Gorbachev's policy did not intend to challenge the foundations of the Soviet system, at least in its first phase during 1985–87, or to risk Soviet strategic interests. Gorbachev was more reform-oriented than his predecessors yet his initial aims were generally similar—to keep the Soviet Union's international position while reducing its burdens (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 30–31). More simply, Gorbachev's reforms, and the adoption of the strategy of 'retrenchment', were a reaction to the further decline of Soviet material capabilities and the failure of the initial phase of his own perestroika (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 95–96, 111–115; Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, p. 50).

Finally, the material approach does not overestimate the force of hardline opposition. It notes that many old thinkers in the Soviet leadership were aware of Soviet decline and of the need for some response (Wohlforth 2011, p. 450). Both reformers and old thinkers differed over the means to be used, but even the hardliners could not deny the existence of serious negative trends undermining Soviet power in the 1980s (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 42–48, 50–51). As a result, awareness of Soviet decline made the old thinkers' criticism of Gorbachev's reforms 'haphazard, ineffectual, belated, and intellectually weak' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 45–50).

The Gorbachev's reforms followed, according to Schweller and Wohlforth, three phases and each of them reflected further Soviet decline. During the first, competitive phase in 1985–1987, Gorbachev expected that the policy of economic 'acceleration' would revive the Soviet economy. He believed that the Soviet Union would be able to keep its international position and the status quo with the West.

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These assumptions, however, were too optimistic. The strategy of ‘acceleration’ brought about no increase in Soviet economic growth. On the contrary, the anti-alcohol campaign boosted inflation and the budget deficit and led to the further deterioration of Soviet material capabilities (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 90–91; Wallander 2003, p. 149). The deficit increased from the previous 2–3 percent of Soviet GDP to 6 percent in 1986 and the dramatic fall of world oil prices in the same year only strengthened this trend (Åslund 2011, pp. 554–555, 558).

The failure of the policy of ‘acceleration’ resulted in the second phase of Gorbachev’s reforms, in 1988–89. It was more clearly associated with Gorbachev’s ‘new thinking’ and the strategy of ‘retrenchment’. As Brooks and Wohlforth indicate ‘... only in this later period did he begin to rely on the more radical intellectual proponents of new thinking and to start a serious effort to radically redefine Soviet foreign policy practices and the country’s international role’ (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, p. 31). Yet, again, it was a consequence of the deterioration of Soviet material capabilities and not Gorbachev’s ‘revolutionary’ ideas. Indeed, material pressure made it difficult to maintain the status quo and encouraged a redefinition of Soviet foreign policy aims. In practice, the Soviet Union faced a need for ‘retrenchment’. The policy of ‘retrenchment’ offered a mitigation of Western competitive pressure and a reduction of international tensions (Wohlforth 1994/95, p. 111). It gave more time for real reforms and the possibility to reduce the Soviet imperial burden. Yet, it required some conciliatory moves by the Soviet Union towards the United States and some uncomfortable trade-offs that translated into a series of unilateral Soviet concessions, especially during the arms control negotiations in 1986–88 (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 31–33, 45–46; Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 111–115, 121).

The acceptance of ‘retrenchment’ influenced Gorbachev’s views on the Soviet Union’s international role and its foreign policy goals. The principle of the bipolar confrontation gave way in Gorbachev’s ‘new thinking’ to new ideas about the ‘exit from the Cold War on favourable terms’, a kind of settlement with the West, and a preservation of a newly-shaped leading role for the Soviet Union in the new international order (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 89-90). As Wohlforth concludes:



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‘... Gorbachev had been seeking a favourable change in the status quo. He expounded a vision of a demilitarized, denuclearized Europe in which a reforming Soviet Union and wealthy Europeans could co-operate on all matters from the economy to the environment. Such a situation would be vastly superior to the status quo in which a powerful NATO held a long list of trade restrictions against the Warsaw Pact.’ (Wohlforth 1994/95, p. 122)

Yet, even in the second phase of perestroika the strategic aim of Gorbachev, was not to undermine the existence of the socialist system. ‘Gorbachev did not want to retreat from the world stage, give up socialism, make endless concessions to the West, or become liberal democrat’ (Wohlforth 1994/95, p. 115).

The policy of ‘retrenchment’ offered more time for economic reform. It marked Gorbachev’s efforts to change the management rules for Soviet state enterprises (Åslund 2011, p. 557). Besides, Gorbachev favoured more active Soviet participation in global economic processes, to include new rules for Soviet foreign trade and the state’s openness to foreign investment. The latter meant a legalization of foreign capital shares in Soviet joint ventures (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 38–40; Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, pp. 8–9). Yet, the results of these reforms were modest and did not stop further Soviet economic decline. They proved both the dysfunctional nature of the Soviet economic system and its incompatibility with the Western standards. Together with low oil prices, a boost of consumer subsidies and a rapid growth of wages, they increased the Soviet budget deficit to 9 per cent of GDP in 1988 (Åslund 2011, pp. 545, 555).

Similarly, Gorbachev’s decision to partially liberalize the Soviet political system, together with the 1989 elections to the USSR Congress of the People’s Deputies, provoked an unexpected outcome. The elections brought to power some new political forces, mainly republican elites, and further complicated the picture of Soviet domestic politics. They confronted Gorbachev with the pressure of growing popularity of some ambitious republican leaders, not least Boris Yeltsin (Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, p. 9; Wallander 2003, p. 152). Gorbachev’s competition with the new republican forces translated into a wave of populism that led to a further deterioration of the already catastrophic Soviet finances. It increased the deficit of the Soviet budget to 12–14 percent of the GDP in 1989 (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 90–91; Åslund 2011, p. 555).

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Nevertheless, it was the wave of democratic revolutions in East-Central Europe in late 1989 that made the implementation of Gorbachev's 'new thinking' extremely difficult. Together with falling Soviet finances they actually introduced to the final stage of Soviet reforms—the acceptance of Western terms of the Cold War's end (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 90–91). In December 1988 Gorbachev decided on a unilateral reduction of Soviet troops in East-Central Europe and declared non-intervention in defence of communist regimes in the area. In was in practice the rejection of the 'Brezhnev doctrine' (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 113–114; Kotkin 2001, p. 86). The Soviet Union's withdrawal from East-Central Europe, however, was neither planned nor intentional. Gorbachev's aim was not to lose control over the region 'until after Europe's security architecture was remodelled Gorbachev-style' (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 89–90). Yet the dramatic decline of Soviet material capabilities and huge costs of potential Soviet intervention left Gorbachev little choice (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 116, 118; Kotkin 2001, pp. 85–86, 89–90). In fact, together with the deficit of the Soviet budget that peaked at 20 percent in 1990 and the recession that reached 5 percent in the same year the consequences of the Soviet military intervention in East-Central Europe would be disastrous (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 90-91). As Wohlforth indicates, when the events led to a 'spill blood or lose socialism' situation 'the amount of blood that would have to be spilled was already great and the weakness of socialism had already been revealed in new and disturbing ways' (Wohlforth 1994/95, p. 119).

Finally, the Western attitude towards the Soviet Union at the final stage of the Cold War was not favourable and consensual. The United States and its allies were cautious and moderate yet their politics was Realist. They took care of their own interests and, despite their dialogue with Gorbachev, the Western strategy towards the Soviet Union was still competitive (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 97). It was hardly 'a story of cooperation between equals' (Wohlforth 1994/95, p. 121). The negotiations on German reunification were the best illustration in this regard. The reunification of Germany reflected Western, and in fact U.S. conditions, including the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the participation of a reunified Germany in NATO and Western military presence on its territory (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 90–95). The Soviet Union had to accept Western terms and Schweller and Wohlforth conclude that, 'The harshness of these terms reflected the West's arrogance of power. The Soviets of course would oppose such a settlement, however Soviet leverage to

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influence the fate of Germany was marginal' (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 94–95).

Thus, if we accept that the Cold War finished with the reunification of Germany and the beginning of the Soviet military withdrawal from East-Central Europe in 1990 (Wohlforth 2011, p. 445), then the end of the Cold War was a Soviet defeat. It was '... not a compromise, there was no reciprocity; it was instead a series of outright victories for the West ...' (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 97). It involved the acceptance of Western terms and Western interpretations of Europe's security and political problems (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, p. 33). The withdrawal from East-Central Europe contributed to further Soviet domestic problems. The last stage of perestroika marked growing resistance by the republics towards central Soviet authority. Under this pressure, Gorbachev rejected the first real program of market reforms in the Soviet Union prepared by Grigory Yavlinsky (Åslund 2011, pp. 555–556). The Soviet budget deficit peaked in 1991 at 31 percent, the recession reached 10–15 percent and the inflation rate rocketed to 2–5 percent per week (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 90–91). It was in fact a collapse of Soviet finances (Åslund 2011, p. 556).

To conclude, the dynamic decline of Soviet material capabilities in the 1980s, and the pressure it exerted on the Soviet leadership, are crucial for the material explanation of the end of the Cold War (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 107–108, 124; Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 77–78, 106). Gorbachev's ideas, if taken into account, are secondary and the primacy of material determinants is indisputable. In this regard, the evolution of Gorbachev's reforms reflects escalating Soviet decline, and mainly the demise of the Soviet economy. It is more an accommodation with deteriorating political and economic reality than a set of novel ideas and political concepts (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 99–104).

This material determinism is not overwhelming and notes Gorbachev's readiness to recognize Soviet decline. Without his acceptance of the hard reality of power, a peaceful end to the Cold War would have been difficult. Yet material pressure limited Gorbachev's agency and 'retrenchment' seemed a logical response to material constraints—much more attractive than devastating nuclear war with the United States. Paradoxically, the rapid Soviet decline gave Gorbachev enough information about the hierarchy of power in the international system for him not to think about checking it in a more confrontational way. It helped Gorbachev to accept

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the Western terms of the Cold War's end (Wohlforth 2011, pp. 447–448, 453–454; Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 77–78, 84–85).

### **The power of ideas. The end of the Cold War in ideational perspective**

The ideational explanation of the end of the Cold War privileges ideas over material determinants. It emphasises the role of Gorbachev's agency and a causal role of ideas in general (English 2000, pp. 1–5). From the ideational perspective, the Soviet Union's economic decline in the 1980s was not a compelling reason for Soviet 'retrenchment' and radical concessions to the West. The end of the Cold War was not unavoidable, at least at that time (English 2002, pp. 70–72; Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, p. 7). Besides, the Soviet Union's decline in the mid 1980s was not a 'terminal collapse' and further deterioration of Soviet economic conditions was in fact more a result of Gorbachev's inefficient reforms than direct external pressure (Wallander 2003, pp. 149–150; Lebow 1994, p. 266).

Thus, if Gorbachev had decided to reduce his reforming ambitions to the contours outlined earlier by Andropov, and if he had chosen to maintain a consensus with the military-defence coterie in the Soviet leadership, then the Soviet Union would have survived much longer (Brown 2004, pp. 48–49). The dysfunctional nature of the Soviet economic system made its further existence hardly possible (Åslund 2011, pp. 551–552) yet Archie Brown argues that the Soviet Union '... could surely have muddled through or muddled down into the twenty-first century ...' (Brown 2004, p. 48).

Furthermore, the ideational explanation indicates potential alternatives to Soviet 'retrenchment' if another leader had led the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s. The ideational perspective rejects a 'determinism' of Soviet material decline and points out that another candidate (s) elected by the Politburo as the CPSU Secretary General could have chosen a quite different political strategy to that of Gorbachev. It could potentially have been more hardline and less willing to deal with the West (English 2002, pp. 70–71; Brown 2004, pp. 31–32). Robert English notes in this regard the voices of some Soviet military leaders which called for a more reasonable arms procurement policy, focused on selected weapons systems, which could have kept strategic parity with the United States and could have preserved the Soviet Union's existence (English 2002, p. 89). Their arguments confirm intellectual

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opposition to Gorbachev's strategy which, if successful, could have reversed most of his reforms (Brown 2004, pp. 53–54).

Indeed, the ideational approach indicates that the old thinkers' opposition was much stronger and potentially more dangerous than the material perspective suggests (English 2002, p. 73). It was neither 'haphazard' nor 'intellectually weak'. The hardliners' defence of their position in the Soviet system was active from the beginning of Gorbachev's reforming initiatives. The nature of the Soviet system limited the open forms for this opposition, yet criticism of Gorbachev's ideas accompanied perestroika from its very outset (English 2002, pp. 73–75). The old thinkers' resistance was effective enough to complicate Gorbachev's plans and to delay implementation of his concepts, especially those in arms control negotiations. As English emphasises, 'Given the Soviet military's tradition of strict subservience to the party, its oppositional efforts during the mid-to-late 1980s were actually extraordinary' (English 2002, pp. 76).

As a result, Gorbachev's relations with old thinkers in the Soviet leadership reflected a more complex game of structure and agency. Brown indicates in this regard some constraints inherent in the construction of the Soviet system which Gorbachev faced as the CPSU Secretary General. Despite his highest post in the Soviet nomenclature, he was still accountable to the Politburo and he could not directly dictate his political will. 'If Gorbachev had openly espoused in 1985 or 1986 policies he implemented in 1988 and 1989 his term in office would have been short...' (Brown 2004, p. 39). Besides, the 'traditional' role of the KGB and defence ministry in the state's foreign and defence policy reduced the flexibility available to Gorbachev in foreign affairs and, in general, all ideas that could affect the interests of the military and defence-industrial complex (Kotkin 2001, pp. 59–60; Brown 2004, pp. 39–40). Yet the logic of the Soviet system offered some opportunities as well. The hierarchical CPSU structure, party discipline, and a tradition of subordination helped Gorbachev to implement some of his political concepts. Similarly, as Brown notes, the Secretary General's right to appoint his personal advisers and propose candidates for the highest state and party positions could change the 'balance of influence' within the Soviet political leadership (Brown 2004, pp. 40–43).

Thus, the structural and institutional constraints explain the gradual nature of Gorbachev's perestroika and the need for a careful policy able to neutralize the old thinkers' resistance (Brown 2004, p. 39). Besides, in many cases it was less a question

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of persuasion and more a strategy to outmanoeuvre hardliners by setting a specific political agenda or, at a later stage, mobilizing public support for Gorbachev's political aims (Snyder 2011, p. 566; Evangelista 2005, p. 7). Yet, the use of these opportunities required Gorbachev's specific political and personal skills, his ability of persuasion and political flexibility. This further emphasises the Gorbachev's agency, his political concepts and his will to implement them.

In the same vein, the ideational explanation accepts the existence of some international determinants of Soviet foreign policy, including the fall of the world oil prices, but rejects external pressure as the main and direct cause of Soviet reforms. Especially, it doubts the effectiveness of Reagan's rollback policy, including the SDI initiative. To be sure, the Strategic Defence Initiative could potentially have encouraged Gorbachev to participate in arms control negotiations. Yet, again, it was Gorbachev's independent and individual decision to launch such talks (Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, pp. 16–17, 39). Besides, even from a purely military perspective, SDI, if effective, could have threatened the Soviet Union's military position and, in the long term, could have changed the balance of power in favour of the United States. The Soviet arsenal of inter-continental ballistic missiles in the mid-1980s gave the Soviet Union enough time to search for an adequate response (Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, p. 19).

In consequence, it was more Reagan's commitment to accommodation and his treatment of Gorbachev as a partner for negotiations rather than a hard-line American policy that contributed to the peaceful end of the Cold War (Brown 2004, pp. 50–51; Fischer 1997, pp. 2–5). Henry Nau argues in this regard that, despite the stereotypical emphasis on an arms race, Ronald Reagan's political strategy integrated both arms competition and diplomacy from the very beginning. It combined three parts successfully—a tough ideological stance, a massive military build-up and 'a negotiating strategy aimed at reducing nuclear weapons and fostering economic cooperation' (Nau 2011, pp. 470–471). Thus, '...Reagan's message was an arms race not detente, the medium was negotiations not military victory and the goal was reduced nuclear weapons and Soviet participation in a revitalized global economy (Nau 2011, p. 470). Finally, the peaceful end of the bipolar rivalry was less a case of power relations and more an evolution of Regan's perception that Gorbachev was a more credible person to do business with than previous Soviet leaders (Herrmann and Lebow 2004, p. 12; Brown 2004, pp. 50–51).

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Indeed, rejecting the domination of material pressure, the ideational approach emphasises several non-material sources of Gorbachev's 'new thinking'. One of them was Gorbachev's interactions with Western officials during a number of his international meetings. Gorbachev's involvement in international affairs and his open-mindedness during these contacts contributed to his learning process. It resulted in Gorbachev's openness to the arguments and ideas of Western partners, his broader perspective on international problems, and his final rejection of the old Soviet 'ideological blinkers' (Brown 2004, pp. 42–43). The ideational perspective emphasises Gorbachev's debates with reformers in his camp, including Shevardnadze, Yakovlev and Shakhnazarov, about world politics and the general philosophy of international affairs (English 2002, pp. 78–79, 90–91; Deudney and Ikenberry 1992, p. 135). It notes the new openness in the Soviet public life that helped to initiate the circulation of ideas (Herrmann and Lebow 2004, p. 15; Brown 2004, p. 50). Furthermore, it indicates some other non-material factors, including the revival of cultural links with the West and the evolution of Soviet society—it was better educated and certainly quite different from that during Stalin's age. (English 2002, pp. 79–80; Brown 2004, p. 47; Deudney and Ikenberry 1991/92, pp. 111–112).

Finally, Gorbachev's specific personality played a role in both perestroika and 'new thinking'. Vladislav Zubok highlights, in this regard, Gorbachev's self-confidence and optimism but also some naivety. He indicates the Soviet leader's tendency to Westernism and faith in the 'common European home'. Another specific feature of Gorbachev was a 'deep aversion to the use of force' and a 'scepticism about military force' in general (Zubok 2007, pp. 311–312, 316–318). Even some realists note that Gorbachev understood tough systemic constraints for the Soviet Union but, as William Wohlforth indicates, he was more '... a romantic who found the mundane details of policy boring' (Wohlforth 2011, pp. 455–456).

Thus, the ideational explanation emphasises the role of Gorbachev's agency in both Soviet reforms and the end of the Cold War. It was fundamental for the peaceful ending of bipolar rivalry and much more important than any material (structural) determinants. The ideational perspective rejects the image of the initial stage of Gorbachev's perestroika as 'orthodox' and full of 'ideological ambiguities' (English 2002, pp. 80–83). It claims that, when coming to power, Gorbachev was much more ambitious in his ideas than any other member of the CPSU central authorities. To be sure, Gorbachev did not want to dismantle the Soviet system. Yet he thought about



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more openness in Soviet domestic policy and the revival of the Soviet economy, including some market elements to stimulate its competitiveness (Brown 2004, pp. 46–49). In the area of foreign policy, however, his plans were bolder. Brown indicates in this regard that:

‘He intended to make plain to East European leaders that there would be no more Soviet military interventions to keep them in office; it was up to them to satisfy the aspirations of their peoples. He wanted to end the Cold War *both* because he wished to divert resources from the wasteful arms race to the civilian sector of the Soviet economy *and* because he believed that high tension in East-West relations increased the chances of Cold War turning into hot war, if only by miscalculation or accident.’ (Brown 2004, p. 49)

Gorbachev’s policy evolved in the second half of the 1980s but the pressure of the Soviet material decline was a secondary cause. It was more a reflection of his own conclusions and a result of domestic political game with old thinkers (both in the CPSU leadership and party’s regional authorities) that affected the pace and gradual nature of Gorbachev’s reforms (Snyder 2011, pp. 568–569). In any case, however, Gorbachev’s agency was decisive and his general political ideas, despite some tactical retreats and compromises, remained unchanged (Brown 2004, p. 51).

Indeed, the opposition of old thinkers made Gorbachev’s initial moves cautious. Yet, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the failure of the Reykjavik summit with Reagan (both in 1986) served as a catalyst for Gorbachev to make bolder decisions in foreign and domestic policy. Both cases contributed to his departure from ‘traditional’ Soviet thinking about politics, including the rejection of secrecy and militarism (English 2002, 83–84; Snyder 2011, p. 569). Besides, as Brown says, ‘By October 1986 Gorbachev had espoused a dramatic change in Soviet doctrine whereby “all-human values” had a superior authority to “class values” and universal interests had to take precedence over class or other sectional interests’ (Brown 2004, p. 50).

Further, the talks in Reykjavik (despite their collapse) prepared the ground for the 1987 INF Treaty. Gorbachev’s agency prevailed over material determinants and the elimination of intermediate range missiles in Europe became more important for Gorbachev than strict balance with the United States—irrespective of unilateral Soviet concessions in some categories of missiles to be eliminated. Gorbachev took this decision despite the old thinkers’ outrage and resistance to his arms control policy. Besides, the incident with Matthias Rust’s unsanctioned flight over Soviet territory



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and his landing in Red Square gave Gorbachev an excellent opportunity to change the hardline Soviet military command and the Ministry of Defence's leadership. It also helped to make some changes in Soviet military doctrine reflecting the Gorbachev's 'new thinking' (Snyder 2011, p. 569; English 2002, p. 84).

The idea of non-confrontational international relations, much more than economic constraints, encouraged some further cuts in Soviet military forces, including the unilateral reduction of Soviet troops in East-Central Europe in 1988 (English 2002, pp. 84–85). It was accompanied by Gorbachev's rejection of the 'Brezhnev doctrine' and his acceptance of the states' rights to decide about their political and economic systems (Brown 2004, p. 53). The latter was a reflection of Gorbachev's belief in an equal and peaceful Soviet co-operation in Europe with the Western powers. It was a step towards the end of the Cold War motivated by Gorbachev's intellectual evolution and not material pressure. Finally, Gorbachev still believed that, despite Soviet decline, shifting resources to the civilian part of the Soviet economic system would reinvigorate and modernize the Soviet economy and help it participate in global economic processes (Brown 2004, p. 48).

The decision to abandon East-Central Europe escalated the old thinkers' resistance as did Gorbachev's plans to liberalize the Soviet political system through partially free election to the Congress of the People's Deputies (Wallander 2003, p. 152; Brown 2004, pp. 48–49, 53). Both exacerbated the reformers' competition with the hardliners. In fact, Gorbachev's idea of shifting the political centre of the Soviet Union from the communist party to new state institutions (including the Congress itself) served the reformers interests (Jones 2009, p. 230). Gorbachev played this game with the cards of glasnost and the Soviet public opinion that supported his ideas with a vast majority, at least in 1988–1989 (Snyder 2011, pp. 570–571; Brown 2009, pp. 507, 513). Also, as English notes, 'The pace of events was also critical; the changes came so quickly during 1987–89 that by the time the old thinkers dug in on one issue, the battle had already shifted to another' (English 2002, p. 86).

Nevertheless, the dynamic events of 1989 presented Gorbachev with some challenges too. The democratic revolutions in East-Central Europe and the reunification of Germany reflected more American terms than Gorbachev's idea of a common Soviet-Western order. Similarly, domestic political pluralism appeared starker than the reformist expected. Thus, according to Brown:

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‘If up to the end of 1988 what had occurred was a “revolution from above”—or, more precisely, a struggle over the direction and intensity of reform within the higher echelons of the Communist Party—open political contestation and debate in the mass media were given a huge stimulus by the 1989 elections and the live broadcasting of the parliamentary proceedings that followed. These changes *radicalized the society* and brought new actors on to the political stage, including the leaders of national (and, in a number of cases, separatist) movements. All of these internal changes had implications for Soviet foreign policy, but the Cold War had ended more than two years before the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist.’ (Brown 2004, p. 53)

Indeed, Gorbachev’s control over the final stage of Soviet reforms became much more illusory and the events of 1990–1991 much less intentional. Both illustrated

a gradual departure of Soviet political reality from the Gorbachev’s ideas and plans. Henry Nau says in this regard that, ‘There is no guarantee that one choice, such as democratic politics, or one outcome, such as material progress, necessarily prevails. History can go in reverse’ (Nau 2011, pp. 463–464). It was the case for Gorbachev, but the course of events that contradicts the agent’s intentions does not undermine the role of Gorbachev’s agency and ideational determinants of the end of the Cold War (Garthoff 1994, pp. 3, 753–755).

Thus, the ideational approach prioritizes ideas over material constraints. It emphasises Gorbachev’s agency—even if his decisions at the final stage of perestroika led to the unintended fall of the Soviet state. From this perspective, the Cold War ended because of the new Soviet leader’s ideas and will to reform the Soviet system, to reduce international tension and to re-build Soviet relations with the West. It was the Gorbachev’s vision to find a place for the Soviet Union’s in the new international order free from nuclear madness, secrecy, ‘ideological blinkers’ and a military burden that suppressed the state’s development. The material pressure of Soviet economic decline was recognized but its role was secondary.

### **The end of the Cold War—intensions or a mere coincidence?**

The dichotomy of material and ideational perspectives presented above has intentionally been exaggerated and overdrawn. Some scholars in both camps could agree that agency and structure (material pressure) interacted dynamically in the 1980s. The material determinants created a complex context within which the individual agency acted and imposed some limits on the independent role of ideas (English 2002, p. 91; Brown 2004, p. 38). Nevertheless, there was still a considerable

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space for Gorbachev's individual decisions that could or could not follow the stimuli from his (internal and external) environment (Herrmann and Lebow 2004, p. 18; Snyder 2011, pp. 565–568). Similarly, most scholars would agree that a debate on the end of the cold war must combine both structural (international) and domestic levels of analysis (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 107–108).

Thus, this logic may provoke a conclusion that both the material and the ideational determinants mattered in the comprehension of the Cold War's end. To some extent it is true and the explanation of the end of the Cold War certainly needs a multifaceted approach. It is also true that each variable, including material, ideational or institutional ones, played their role during the events of the end of the 1980s. Finally I would easily agree that a moderate approach that accepts the dynamic interactions of material and ideational factors could help in a dialogue between different theoretical attitudes, including realism and constructivism (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, pp. 50–51; Herrmann and Lebow 2004, p. 18).

Yet, I note some problems with the theoretical conceptualisation of the end of the Cold War highlighted by Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth and I agree with some of their conclusions. First (despite its significance), the Cold War's end remains a 'single case problem' through which 'many lines can be drawn'. It means that many theoretical explanations may offer logically coherent accounts of this event that 'pass the test of consistency' (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 97). Second, the simple claim that power, ideas or institutions 'matter' in the explanation of the Cold War's end seems meaningless and the statement that structure and agency codetermined the event seems trivial as well. As Schweller and Wohlforth indicate, such minimal causal claims '...are often complementary rather than competitive', their diagnostic utility is limited and the debate between them recalls a 'pseudo-competition' (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, pp. 67, 98–99). As a result, the first and fundamental question to be answered in the context of the end of the Cold War is how these variables 'mattered and which of them was the most important (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 67).

Thus, this article notes serious material pressure together with the decline of the Soviet economy. Yet, if faced with a choice of a single cause for the end of the Cold War, I would choose Gorbachev's agency. The fall of the communist system in 1989–1991 was not inevitable (Deudney and Ikenberry 1992, p. 123). Gorbachev's 'new thinking' gave the nations of East-Central Europe a chance for greater political

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sovereignty and perestroika brought increased confidence such that the Soviet Union could not reach for its 'traditional' military instrument to discipline its 'socialist allies'. To be sure, Soviet economic problems made this option very costly but on many occasions the Soviet Union proved that economic calculations lose their significance when confronted with political aims. Hence, a new wave of Soviet imperial rhetoric could have appeared at the end of the 1980s, cementing the weakening empire and keeping the military option alive. Brown is right that, 'If expectations in East Central Europe had not been raised in the way they were by Gorbachev and his allies in the Soviet leadership, even the *threat* of the use of force might have preserved Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe for a few decades longer' (Brown 2004, p. 38).

Similarly, although communist rule in East-Central Europe weakened in the 1980s (especially in Poland), still it retained its power and control. It was in fact Gorbachev who suggested some reform in the area in order to overcome stagnation (Wallander 2003, pp. 151–152; Lebow 1994, p. 262). The communist regimes in states like Poland or Hungary never received considerable popular support and their rules were based on a mixture of violence, opportunism and inertia. Hence, even if weakened by economic decline, they could endure with some limited social reforms and concessions. Besides, the 'Solidarity' movement in Poland certainly had an impact on opposition forces in Hungary or Czechoslovakia, although its impact on Romania or Bulgaria was limited.

Finally, a material explanation seems to overestimate the significance of Soviet economic decline. A focus on economic mechanisms seems natural to a Western scientific approach accustomed to a liberal-democratic logic of social and political relations. For East-Central Europeans, the Soviet Union, even if bankrupt, still had enough oil for its tanks to threaten East-Central European 'allies' and force them to stay in the Soviet zone of influence, at least for a few years more. Thus, I share Richard Ned Lebow's conclusion that:

'... Gorbachev could have permitted domestic change in Eastern Europe but made it clear that the Soviet Union expected postcommunist governments to remain within the Warsaw Pact. Neither the United States nor the European members of NATO would have opposed such a compromise; they would almost certainly have welcomed it and displayed sensitivity to Soviet security concerns.' (Lebow 1994, p. 267)

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Furthermore, some scholars correctly raise the argument about the stabilizing role of nuclear weapons that limited the political options in the Soviet leadership's hands (Craig 2012, pp. 384–385; Deudney and Ikenberry 1991/92, pp. 76–77, 92–93). Indeed, if faced with the choice between national suicide, in the form of the nuclear war with the United States, and the loss of the Central European zone of influence, Gorbachev's choice was obvious. It does not, however, change the conclusion that in the case of East-Central Europe the course of events could have been different with a Soviet leader other than Gorbachev. Some kind of a buffer-zone between reunified Germany and the modernized Soviet Union was still possible and, facing tensions inside NATO on its policy towards Moscow (Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, p. 25), Western European powers could have agreed to such a deal without hesitation.

Nevertheless, highlighting Gorbachev's agency as the leading cause of the Cold War's end, I emphasise that this did not have to be a positive, planned and carefully conceived scenario either for the Soviet Union or for Gorbachev himself. As Nau argued, '... while in a sense everything is up for grabs (choice is real), not everything works in terms of outcomes' (Nau 2011, pp. 463–464). Thus, agency does not automatically mean a result consistent with the agent's intentions. The states of East-Central Europe took their historical chance to escape from the Soviet empire. In the case of Gorbachev, however, history revealed a picture of a Soviet leader trying to implement a set of partial and inconsistent political moves. These reforms illustrated Gorbachev's actual will to go beyond the Soviet 'traditional way' of solving the empire's problems. Yet, they were less a result of a clear plan and more a reflection of ragged and rather chaotic concepts compounded by the dynamic game of interests inside the Soviet state (Snyder 2011, p. 570; Åslund 2011, p. 557). Hence, Gorbachev's agency was still key even if the implementation of ill-conceived reforms to the dysfunctional system appeared suicidal for the Soviet Union (Lebow 1994, p. 277; Kotkin 2001, pp. 62–67).

Indeed, Åslund notes that the Soviet economic system was inefficient and rigid, but in some sense 'consistent'. The Gorbachev's attempts at haphazard but relatively radical reforms destabilized this specific 'stability' and opened the Soviet 'Pandora's box'. Besides, the economic dimension of perestroika reflected no complex program and revealed the ignorance of liberal economic mechanisms among the Soviet leadership. In a way, it was a partial and ill-conceived effort to reform the Soviet system that was (structurally) hardly reformable. Thus, the Soviet economy

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would probably not have survived the global changes in the longer perspective yet Gorbachev's reforms contributed to its faster and final collapse (Åslund 2011, pp. 552–553, 556–559; Kotkin 2001, pp. 62–67).

Jack Snyder explains further the problem of inconsistency and ambiguity in Gorbachev's reforms. He discusses the role of playing a domestic coalition game that made the implementation of Gorbachev's policy difficult and forced reformers to undertake political manoeuvres in the face of the old thinkers' opposition (Snyder 2011, pp. 563, 566). This domestic competition contributed to the (at least partly) improvised nature of Gorbachev's reforms and Snyder explains '... why Gorbachev moved cautiously at first, too radically later, and inconsistently at all times' (Snyder 2011, p. 568). The need for political manoeuvring against hardliners led Gorbachev '... to go further and faster in the direction of free speech, democratization, and dramatic changes in foreign policy than he otherwise might have' (Snyder 2011, p. 570). It affected the final results of perestroika and made the process (in some sense) an unintended by-product of Gorbachev's political tactics (Snyder 2011, pp. 563, 569–570). Finally, Gorbachev's skills to 'circumvent' the old thinkers' resistance helped him tear down old Soviet structures of power (the shift from the party to the state's administration) but did not translate into the ability to build new and coherent ones (Snyder 2011, pp. 563–565).

Furthermore, the course of the Gorbachev's reforms illustrates a clear gap between his intentions and final, unintended results. In the economic sense, the anti-alcohol campaign at the initial phase of perestroika partially reduced a plague of alcoholism in Soviet society but it brought about a drop in budget incomes and the 'production' of bootleg alcohol in private apartments (Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, pp. 8). The partial liberalization of Soviet foreign trade allowed a group of selected enterprises to establish foreign trade contacts yet, as Stoner-Weiss and McFaul indicate, '... the result of this incomplete reform was to encourage favouritism and corruption of the process of selecting the enterprises that could participate in the program' (Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, pp. 8–9). Similarly, The Law on State Enterprises reduced central control over their management yet it resulted in a fall of tax revenues and a creation of the 'perfect rent-generating machine' as managers focused more on '... tunneling state wealth out of public enterprises to private offshore havens' (Åslund 2011, p. 557; Jones 2009, pp. 230–233). It contributed to 'black



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market' and shortages of goods in the legal sale (Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, pp. 8–9).

In the political sense, Gorbachev's decision partially to liberalize the Soviet system following the elections to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies caused some unintended outcomes as well. This liberalization aimed at broadening the number of reformers to be represented in the new legislature. Yet, most of the strong candidates failed in open competition and the elections yielded a group of activists independent from Gorbachev, including the representatives of republican national fronts (Stoner-Weiss and McFaul 2009, p. 9). Together with a wave of declarations of republican sovereignty (still in the frames of the Soviet Union), initiated by the Estonian SSR in November 1988, the new republican élites strove to reduce the power of Soviet federal institutions and Gorbachev himself (Lieven 1994, pp. 227–228). Indeed, a growing independence of union republics revealed the role of 'national question' in Soviet domestic politics. It increased competition between Gorbachev's camp and republican authorities, and especially his rivalry with Yeltsin. It shifted political emphasis from the 'reformers versus hardliners' line of division to a new 'all union versus republican' arena of political contest (Wallander 2003, p. 153; Brown 2004, pp. 40–41).

Thus, the claim that the end of the Cold War was a mere coincidence is provocative but of course exaggerated. To some extent it was a process determined by accumulating structural determinants as indicated by the material explanation. Yet, the timing, form and consequences of the Cold War's end were certainly determined by the Gorbachev's agency and the events inside the Soviet Union. More importantly, the end of the Cold War was hardly a planned, negotiated and controlled process. It had more a 'trial-and-error' nature (Wohlforth 1994/95, p. 111). It was a rather chaotic sequence of events and a game played by political actors uncertain about the outcomes of their moves. As a result, the elements of coincidence and inconsistency cannot be removed from the analysis of the end of the Cold War. Finally, the example of ambiguous and unwieldy reforms by Gorbachev confirms again that the concept of agency in the agent-structure debate does not automatically mean that the course of events will follow the agent's intentions. Things may go in a wrong direction.

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### **Conclusion: coincidence, generalizations and predictions in international relations after the Cold War's end**

The end of the Cold War was unique and had no historical analogies (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 93–94; Gaddis 1992/93, pp. 51–52). The material and ideational perspectives propose its opposite explanations but illustrate the complexity of events at the end of the 1980s and the coincidental perspective indicates their uncertainty. Besides, my emphasis on Gorbachev's agency must accept the ambiguity of his reforms and unintended outcomes of his political action. Hence, I would easily agree with Michael Cox that the next generation could potentially learn '... perhaps the more interesting lesson that points to the almost inescapable conclusion that policy-makers appeared to have far less control over what was going on around them than they now seem to be claiming in their memoirs'. The lesson that the end of the Cold War is not '... how much policy-makers were masters in their own house, but rather the degree to which they were pulled here and pushed there by developments over which they seemed to have very little real control at all' (Cox 2011, pp. 17–18).

Furthermore, the inconsistent course of Gorbachev's perestroika poses a fundamental question about political rationality. Ambiguity, tactical manoeuvring and ill-conceived reforms hardly fit the concept of rationality if defined as an intentional and carefully calculated action to achieve an intended goal. The end of the Cold War was in this regard more a story of Gorbachev's uncertainty and mistakes than any rational, well-considered political tactics. Similarly, the end of the Cold War provokes a question about generalizations in international relations. It seems that the incoherence of Gorbachev's foreign and domestic politics escapes any general conclusions and laws. Even in standard theoretical renditions, it is neither purely liberal, nor realist or even constructivist (although constructivism has gained in prominence after the end of the Cold War). Schweller and Wohlforth note in this regard that 'The end of the Cold War is an equally poor fit for all theories that aspire to generalization, whether they are of the structural-systemic, domestic politics, or decision-making variety' (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 65). In addition, Wohlforth correctly indicates that 'too many important novel elements in the Cold War story' make its explanation extremely difficult in an 'ideal-scientific manner' (Wohlforth 1994/95, pp. 93–94). Nevertheless, the question for the future is to what extent the complexity and uniqueness of events allows for general conclusions and when they allow for only a particular explanation.



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Finally, the end of the Cold War contributes to some questions about the predictive function of international relations theories. As Gaddis notes, almost all IR theories after Morgenthau tended to a ‘scientific’ approach that could enhance their ability to predict future events, including the intentions of political leaders (Gaddis 1992/93, pp. 8–10). The focus of IR theories on their predictive function was to a certain degree justified by the Cold War’s logic, especially during the peak of the bipolar confrontation. Yet, none of them was able finally to foresee either the timing or the form of the Cold War’s end (Gaddis 1992/93, p. 6). Their predictive abilities failed when they were needed most. In the same vein, the tendency to create a precise and verifiable ‘science of politics’ brought unimpressive results when confronted with the dynamic and unpredictable course of events at the end of the 1980s (Gaddis 1992/93, pp. 53, 56–57).

John L. Gaddis rightly indicates that, ‘Despite our awareness that abrupt change occurs frequently in history and in personal experience, despite our understanding that intellectual breakthroughs more often result from sudden flashes of insight than from the diligent piling up of evidence, we rarely find a way to introduce discontinuities into theory, or to attempt to determine what causes them to happen’ (Gaddis 1992/93, p. 52). Thus, the focus of IR theories on ‘scientific’ certainty and the precision of predictions resulted in their blindness for some less tangible and less predictable aspects of international affairs. The case of Gorbachev’s agency and his political dilemmas is highly illustrative in this regard. Finally, the ‘science of politics’ seems not to accept that the course of international relations may sometimes be a question of coincidence, and even some luck.

Once again, Gaddis makes some valuable conclusions here. He indicates that seeking objective and precise social sciences led to the adoption of the scientific methods of the natural (‘hard’) sciences right at the time when the latter ‘... were abandoning old methods in favor of new ones that accommodated indeterminacy, irregularity, and unpredictability—precisely the qualities the social sciences were trying to leave behind’ (Gaddis 1992/93, p. 54). As a consequence, natural (‘hard’) science have been able to develop ‘... a new understanding of complexity, chaos and catastrophe’ that provides ‘... ways to anticipate otherwise unexpected shifts in what had seemed to be gradual evolutionary processes’ (Gaddis 1992/93, p. 52). In the case of social sciences (and especially international relations), however, the end of the Cold War has left them at a turning point.

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Considering post Cold War international relations, generalizations are still a key to IR theories. Nevertheless, previous attempts to formulate universal laws of politics with one or two variables, or a single level of analysis, seem exaggeratedly parsimonious in ontological, epistemological and methodological terms. To be adequate, today theories need a broader and more flexible approach able to consider leaders' mistakes, inconsistencies, paradoxes and coincidence in political processes (Gaddis 1992/93, pp. 57–58). They need to accommodate, to use Wohlforth's words, 'periods of revolutionary change' with their unpredictability and complexity (Wohlforth 1994/95, p. 128). In the same vein, the predictive function of IR theories is still important as it links the theory and practice of international affairs. Yet, again, contemporary international affairs require methodological flexibility and a departure from positivist dogmatism. They also suggest a predictive cautiousness and a deep analysis of a variety of determinants and political trends before a single prediction is to be made (Herrmann and Lebow 2004, p. 5). In the first edition of his *Politics among Nations* Morgenthau argued that, 'The best the scholar can do, then, is to trace the different tendencies which, as potentialities, are inherent in a certain international situation' (Morgenthau 1948, p. 6). Even if exaggerated, Morgenthau's words remind us that a credible prediction is preceded by a deep analysis—not the reverse.

Richard K. Herrmann and Richard Ned Lebow suggest that 'Lessons can be a useful tool when they identify problems and strategies appropriate to them. They are counterproductive when they are based on a faulty understanding of the events that gave rise to them or are applied to situations where they are inappropriate' (Herrmann and Lebow 2004, p. 2). My lesson from the end of the Cold War is that we need a precise knowledge of the material conditions that determine our political action. They may create tight and difficult frames for actors' foreign and domestic policies. Nevertheless, I consider that agency is no less important. In the case of the Cold War it was, from my perspective, even more important than material constraints. Finally, I have learned that politics will never be fully logical and consistent, and that an adequate analysis of contemporary international affairs needs to accept some elements of chaos and ambiguity. The extent to which they will or will not reverse general trends depends on any given specific case but, as the example of Gorbachev's reforms illustrates, they may influence considerably the final shape of events.

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