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## Original Article

# Ideas have consequences: The Cold War and today

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**Abstract** In this essay, I make the case that the Cold War was caused by a competition of ideas rather than by a struggle for power or a failure of international institutions. The Cold War started when two sets of ideas diverged sufficiently – capitalism and communism – that they precluded either a realist – spheres of influence – or liberal – United Nations – solution to postwar differences in Europe. It ended when one set of ideas prevailed, and democracy and markets spread throughout the whole of Europe, eclipsing realist and liberal outcomes. The Soviet Union disappeared, which realists never expected; whereas the United Nations, which functioned briefly as a classic liberal collective security operation in the first Persian Gulf War, was quickly replaced by a democratic NATO in Bosnia and Kosovo. The competition of ideas did not end in the 1990s, however. It continues today in other forms and will shape the contours of military conflict and international cooperation in tomorrow's world, no less that it did during the Cold War.

*International Politics* (2011) 48, 460–481. doi:10.1057/ip.2011.19;  
published online 10 June 2011

**Keywords:** ideology; Cold War; Reagan; Gorbachev; détente; arms race

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After 20 years, do we understand any better the end and hence also the origins of the Cold War? In this essay, I make the case that the Cold War was caused by a competition of ideas rather than by a struggle for power or a failure of international institutions. The Cold War started when two sets of ideas diverged sufficiently – capitalism and communism – that they precluded either a realist – spheres of influence – or liberal – United Nations – solution to postwar differences in Europe. It ended when one set of ideas prevailed, and democracy and markets spread throughout the whole of Europe, eclipsing realist and liberal outcomes. The Soviet Union disappeared, which realist perspectives never expected; whereas the United Nations, which functioned briefly as a classic liberal collective security operation in the first Persian Gulf War, was quickly replaced by a democratic NATO in Bosnia and Kosovo.



The competition of ideas did not end in the 1990s, however. It continues today in other forms and will shape the contours of military conflict and international cooperation in tomorrow's world, no less that it did during the Cold War.

In broad terms, scholars draw on three sets of independent variables to explain international events – power or material factors, interactive or institutional factors and ideational or identity (constructivist) variables. These variables come from a variety of levels of analysis – individual, domestic, foreign policy and systemic. Scholarly explanations differ for the most part in the weight they give to these respective variables and levels of analysis (Nau, 2011). Thus, power-based studies explain the end of the Cold War primarily in terms of a competitive power struggle (Wohlforth, 1994–1995), institution-based studies in terms of diplomatic initiatives such as *détente*, the Helsinki Accords and trade interdependence (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1991–1992), and ideas-based studies in terms of Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' or Reagan's and Thatcher's revitalization of western classical liberalism (Haas, 2007). Each of these explanations in turn may come from different levels of analysis. For example, 'New Thinking', an ideational explanation, might come primarily from an individual level of analysis such as Gorbachev (Stein, 1994), from a domestic level of analysis such as the broader reform movement within the Soviet Union (English, 2000), or from a systemic level of analysis such as the transnational exchange of ideas between social democratic and communist parties in Europe (Evangelista, 1993) or the argumentative discourse between governments in international negotiations (Risse-Kappen, 2000).

Careful explanations address all variables and levels of analysis but they cannot address them evenly because such explanations would then be vastly overdetermined. Nor can they address them completely because reality consists of never-ending facts and there are always omitted variables. Thus, to draw any significant conclusions and to inform future policy of the most important factors to leverage, scholars make judgments about which causes and levels of analysis are most important. Honest scholarship openly recognizes these differences of judgment and, while always seeking more facts to adjudicate differences, accepts the reality that facts alone are not likely to resolve scholarly debates definitively.

## **Ideas Drive Power and Institutions**

In this essay, I will be up front about the analytical framework that guides my judgments about what factors caused the beginning and end of the Cold War. I am drawing here principally from my own works, as each scholar was asked to do in this project (Nau, 1990, 1991, 2002). The bedrock force in international affairs, in my view, is not power or institutions but ideas – differing cultural,

social, religious, moral and ideological orientations – which define the identities of various groupings of people and motivate the way they behave in institutions and what they seek to do with their power.<sup>1</sup> Group identities form and change both by internal reflection (for example, individual or national experiences) and external discourse (for example, intersubjective or international experiences). They aggregate today for the most part at the level of nation-states, although subnational (Kurds in Itaq), transnational (Al Qaeda) and supranational (European Union (EU)) actors also exist. As national identities crystallize and shift, the degree of convergence or divergence among them sets the basic conditions under which power and institutional factors operate and limit what these factors can achieve. When identities converge, communications and cooperation become easier. When they diverge, misperceptions and misunderstandings multiply.

Constructivist studies elaborate the mechanisms by which relative identities impede or facilitate conflict and cooperation. As Mark Haas (2005, p. 13) emphasizes, political identities limit communications. President Kennedy wrote Chairman Khrushchev in November 1961:

I am conscious of the difficulties you and I face in establishing full communications between our two minds ... neither of us will convince the other about our respective social systems and general philosophies of life. These differences create a great gulf in communications because language cannot mean the same thing on both sides unless it is related to some underlying purpose.

Iain Johnston (2008, p. 199) explains further the structural constraints that relative identities impose:

The greater the perceived identity difference, the more the environment is viewed as conflictual, the more the out-group is viewed as threatening, and the more that realpolitik strategies are considered effective. Conversely, the smaller the perceived identity difference, the more the external environment is seen as cooperative, the less the out-group is perceived as fundamentally threatening, and the more efficacious are cooperative strategies. Most critically, variation in identity difference should be independent of anarchy.

Professor Johnston's last point is critical. Identity shifts have to precede and cause power shifts; otherwise, as realists assert, identities derive from, not drive, power realities (for example, small states think one way, large states another).

In this sense, as constructivists claim, the identities of states make anarchy what it is. In a world where national orientations significantly converge, for



example today in the EU or North Atlantic region, traditional balance of power forces recede in importance from interstate relations, whereas interactive (for example, trade), institutional (for example, common centralized institutions such as the EU or common decentralized institutions such as NATO), and ideological (for example, human rights of terrorist detainees) factors play a more significant role. In a world of sharply diverging sociocultural and political orientations, on the other hand, the balance of power assumes preeminence to mediate security and wider disparities (for example, in Arab–Israeli relations). Military and economic balances do not themselves guarantee stability; but states are unlikely to feel safe or comfortable in a world of widely differing state identities unless they have an independent capability to defend themselves. The security dilemma, in short, is primarily a function of diverging identities not decentralized power. International institutions help in these circumstances to identify and manage what common interests may exist at the systemic level, such as US–Soviet interests in limiting nuclear arms races and so on. But in neither situation of converging or diverging identities do institutions play a primary role in creating common interests, nor do power realities, such as nuclear weapons, play a primary role in reducing identity disparities.

Thus, at root, my approach is ideational or constructivist. But it is not social constructivist; agency is as important as society.<sup>2</sup> Identities are not embedded in thick discourses that minimize individual autonomy and initiatives. Instead, identities are constructed from the bottom up by autonomous actors and may always be shifted over time by individual and group participants. People and states are mostly ‘free to choose’ (Friedman and Friedman, 1980). They weigh the moral and material consequences of their choices and decide what best fulfills their human aspirations (Legro, 2005).

My ideational framework does not mean that people and states necessarily get what they choose. Advocates of communism, in particular Gorbachev, did not get what they wanted. Ideas do not ‘go all the way down’. An objective world of moral and material reality remains *out there* in the case of social science, just as an objective world of material reality is *out there* in the case of natural science. But that objective world can be accessed only through the subjective and intersubjective frameworks that individuals and societies choose and apply to the world. And in the case of social science, the world itself is subjective. Researchers study themselves. They are part of the countries and political parties they analyze. Thus, objectivity is particularly elusive (Nau, 2008a).

Nevertheless, social scientists and citizens continuously test their propositions against material and social realities. Some choices prove more effective than others, where effectiveness is a function of both moral and material constraints. Moral constraints limit what people accept, and material

constraints limit what they do. Therefore, while in a sense everything is up for grabs (choice is real), not everything works in terms of outcomes, any more than any type of science works to take us to the moon. In the end, a moral and material universe that we can never know objectively or definitively adjudicates human social choice and competition telling us whether we are moving ‘toward the moon or not’. In this universe, there is no guarantee that one choice, such as democratic politics or one outcome, such as material progress, necessarily prevails. History is not only ‘not over’; it can go in reverse. Although the rules of the universe may be set (determined), whether and how human beings decipher and test the rules are completely open.

### **Origins of the Cold War**

From this explanatory framework, the Cold War had its roots in ideological divergence between free capitalist societies and totalitarian communist ones. How do we know when ideological divergence is great enough to cause a Cold War, rather than just a normal great power rivalry over spheres of influence? One answer is when leaders on both (all) sides perceive it to be so. By March 1947, President Truman made it clear that US–Soviet relations was not just about rival power but about ‘the choice between alternative ways of life ... [o]ne way ... based upon the will of the majority, ... distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. ... [t]he second way ... based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority ... [which] relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of human freedoms’ (Truman, 1947).<sup>3</sup> By 1947, Stalin also saw the relationship more in ideological than geopolitical terms. He decided that eastern European countries had to be communist countries not just geopolitical allies. As Thomas Risse (Risse-Kappen, 1996, p. 372) argues, ‘had Stalin “Finlandized” rather than “Sovietized” Eastern Europe, the Cold War could have been avoided’. But Stalin’s ideological commitments ran too deep to separate domestic ideological aims from geopolitical foreign policy concerns. Liberal governments in eastern Europe threatened the communist government in Moscow, whatever their foreign policies. As a result, ‘Soviet power became threatening as a tool to expand the Soviet domestic order’ (1996, p. 374). Thus ideological divergence preceded and precluded a more moderate ‘spheres of influence’ solution to superpower relations in Europe. Ideas gave meaning to power balances rather than the other way around.

But ideological conflict does not necessarily equal military conflict. As I wrote in 1991 (p. 16), ideological ‘differences, if recognized, can be managed – most safely by mutual attention to balancing competitive military and



economic capabilities or, alternatively [I should have said “additionally” since force and diplomacy always work together], by careful and delicate diplomacy to identify sufficient or overlapping interests (especially in a nuclear age, for example, to avoid mutual destruction)’. Therefore, power balances are not irrelevant. But they take their cue from ideological divergence. They can mitigate or exacerbate such divergence.

In the late 1940s, they exacerbated it. The United States and Soviet Union had asymmetric military and economic capabilities, leaving each side vulnerable to the other side’s strength. The Soviet Union had massive military forces in central Europe from 1945 on, whereas the United States precipitously withdrew its military forces from Europe – in 1946 alone, from 12 to 1.5 million troops. When the Soviet Union threatened Berlin in 1948, Clark Clifford informed President Truman that there was nothing standing in the way between Berlin and the Belgium coast if Soviet forces decided to march to the North Sea (McCullough, 1992, p. 547). Conversely, the United States, which suffered no homeland damage in the war, had massive economic resources available to rebuild central Europe, whereas the Soviet Union, whose economy was decimated by the war, looked to central Europe for reparations to rebuild the Soviet Union. When the United States and its allies launched the Marshall Plan, the Soviet Union saw an economic dagger pointed at the heart of the Soviet security buffer in eastern Europe (Nau, 1991). These material imbalances intensified but did not cause the Cold War. The cause derived from the fear in both Washington and Moscow that the ‘other way of life’ might prevail (the demonstration effect in constructivist accounts – see Haas, 2005), foremost in a unified Germany but also in western (strong communist parties in France and Italy) and eastern (free elections in Poland and Czechoslovakia) Europe.

## End of the Cold War

The Cold War became a series of deadly armament contests to equilibrate these imbalances. The United States and its allies created NATO and the European Community and vastly expanded western defense outlays and economic cooperation. The Soviet Union built countervailing alliances and remained confident of its military position through the Sputnik era. By the end of the 1950s, however, Moscow discovered that it had fallen seriously behind in the arms race. This realization precipitated the Cuban Missile Crisis and a decade-long expansion of Soviet nuclear capabilities to catch up.<sup>4</sup> From 1961 to 1971, the number of Soviet warheads increased by 439 per cent, whereas US warheads increased 12 per cent (Norris, 2008). Détente was possible in part because by the early 1970s the Soviet Union had caught up and felt more confident about its military safety. Notice how, in the perspective outlined

here, institutional possibilities such as détente derive from power balances, which in turn are a function of relative identity differences. Between sharply diverging identities, arms races stabilize the relationship so that détente can occur. Had power balances been less asymmetric in the late 1940s, détente may have occurred sooner.

By the late 1970s, however, the United States had lost confidence. Stung by defeat in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal, it feared Soviet gains in the correlation of forces. The Soviet Union had deployed SS-20 missiles in Europe and intervened militarily in Africa and Afghanistan. Oil crises and inflation further crippled American resolve. However, brilliant their diplomacy, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger played from a weak hand. And Jimmie Carter conceded that the country was in malaise and warned against an inordinate obsession with the Soviet Union.

Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan reversed these conditions. They did not single handedly alter identities (reality is not that malleable) but they spotted and galvanized new ideological sentiments that challenged the prevailing orthodoxies of détente and western economic decline. The new ideas called for a tougher stance against Soviet aggressiveness and renewed faith in classical political and economic principles of free markets and free societies. These ideas had consequences and rebuilt American and western military and economic power. The Soviet Union kept pace militarily right up to the end of 1988 (Wohlforth, 1994–1995; Norris, 2008), but the massive arms efforts acted like a giant ‘sucking machine’ progressively bankrupting the Soviet economy. We now know the Soviet economy peaked in 1970 at around 60 per cent of the American economy. After that, it was all downhill for combined Soviet military and economic power.

## **Military and Economic Competition**

Did the Cold War end, then, because the United States outcompeted the Soviet Union, as a power-based explanation might contend? Yes, in significant part, it did. Too many accounts ignore the way in which western military and economic revival in the 1980s challenged Soviet policy and progressively drained Soviet economic strength (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2000–2001).

Although Soviet economic decline started in 1970, it did not impede Soviet military expenditures or interventions in Africa and Afghanistan. Soviet defense outlays as a percentage of GDP climbed from 13.5 per cent in 1976 to 18 per cent in 1988, and Soviet nuclear warheads increased from 2471 in 1961 to 39 000 in 1989 whereas US warheads remained the same, around 22–24 000 (Norris, 2008). Old thinking drove Soviet policy even as economic capabilities sagged. Meanwhile, American and western power were in significant retreat;



military morale flagged, and economic prospects stalled. There were no inklings let alone guarantees that the western and world economies would revive and fuel the information revolution of the 1980s and 1990s.

Therefore, if one projects the trends of Soviet aggressiveness and US malaise from the 1970s into the 1980s, the end of the Cold War by 1989–1991 seems much less likely. The Soviet Union would not have faced a new arms race with the United States, the deployment of INF missiles in western Europe, or Mujahedeen freedom fighters in Afghanistan armed by the CIA with deadly Stinger missiles that crippled Soviet helicopter forces. And if both the United States and the Soviet Union had stagnated and declined during the 1980s, who knows what might have happened to world markets, which tend to close during periods of economic decline. The information revolution might not have arrived at all or arrived much later, or if it did arrive exogenously, might have been much less robust than it was. It is at least conceivable that the Cold War would have dragged on for a much longer period of time and that the United States or the Soviet Union or both might have ended up on the ash heap of history. Indeed, sophisticated studies predicted even as late as 1987 that America was more likely to decline than the Soviet Union (Kennedy, 1987).

Instead, the United States recovered and the Soviet Union declined. The ‘correlation of forces’ turned decisively against the Soviet Union. As noted, the Soviet Union kept up in the military sector (which led some analysts to conclude that the balance of power did not shift and therefore did not account for the end of the Cold War – Stein, 1994), but it did so only at greater and greater cost to its economic wellbeing (Oye, 1995). The broader balance of power, including economic capability, did shift. Within 6 months of taking office, Mikhail Gorbachev saw the handwriting on the wall. He told his Politburo colleagues that the Soviet Union could not sustain the military competition (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2000–2001, p. 29):

Our goal is to prevent the next round of the arms race. If we do not accomplish it, the threat to us will only grow. We will be pulled into another round of the arms race that is beyond our capabilities, and we will lose, because we are already at the limits of our capabilities. Moreover, we can expect that Japan and the FRG [West Germany] could very soon join the American potential ... If the new round begins, the pressure on our economy will be unbelievable.

Therefore, it is hard to account for the collapse of the Soviet Union without reference to the economic and military resurgence of the United States and its allies in the 1980s. US and western policies upped the ante on Cold War competition. These policies were not the only influence causing the Soviet



collapse when it occurred, but they may have been the decisive ones. John Lewis Gaddis (2005, p. 375) assesses Reagan's strategy to end the Cold War as follows:

What one can say now is that Reagan saw Soviet weaknesses sooner than most of his contemporaries did; that he understood the extent to which détente was perpetuating the Cold War rather than hastening its end; that his hard line strained the Soviet system at the moment of its maximum weakness; that his shift toward conciliation preceded Gorbachev; that he combined reassurance, persuasion, and pressure in dealing with the new Soviet leader; and that he maintained the support of the American people and of American allies.

Alexei Arbatov (2009, p. 57), a Soviet official at the time, confirms Gaddis' assessment:

Reagan's course in the early 1980s sent a clear signal to Gorbachev and his associates of the dangerous and counterproductive nature of the Soviet Union's further expansion, which was overstretching its resources, aggravating tensions, and provoking hostile reactions across the globe.

The Soviet Union might have collapsed eventually, to be sure, but why not already in the 1970s when it faded economically or several decades later if the United States had not escalated the economic and military challenges in the 1980s?

## **Détente and Information Revolution**

What about the arguments that détente, transnational networks, global economic interdependence and the onset of the information revolution did the Soviet Union in? These events preceded and therefore too might have caused the end of the Cold War. Begun in the mid-1970s, détente cultivated greater openness and transnational ties (Helsinki process), and by the mid-1980s the information revolution took off, accelerating pressures for domestic reform in the Soviet Union. But, to be persuasive, such accounts have to show that these factors were more decisive than the renewed ideological and material competition ignited by Reagan–Thatcher policies. Détente was not linear from 1975 to 1985. In fact it weakened substantially in the early 1980s. The so-called 'new Cold War' did not give Moscow much reason to trust in the prospects of détente. US and European policies rallied support for NATO, and INF deployments went ahead in 1983 despite massive peace protests in Europe



backed by Soviet propaganda. Secretary of State George Shultz (2009a) credits the successful INF deployments as the turning point of the Cold War, because it signaled to Soviet leaders ‘the strength and cohesion of the NATO countries’. As Gorbachev’s remarks to the Politburo cited above suggest, the strengthened western alliance was indeed a formidable factor in Soviet calculations.

Moreover, the information revolution did not emerge out of nowhere. Unless economic factors are exogenous in our models, the electronics revolution sprang from renewed market-based incentives created by Reagan–Thatcher policies (Nau, 1990). The Reagan economic program and the so-called Washington Consensus (based substantively on the appendix of the Williamsburg G-7 Summit Communiqué in May 1983) ushered in an unprecedented 30 year period of world growth. From 1980 to 2007, real world GDP increased by more than 145 per cent or 3.4 per cent per year, lifting hundreds of millions of poor people in China, India and elsewhere out of poverty (Becker and Murphy, 2009). These results have not been substantially altered by the recent economic recession. The world economy grew by 3.0 per cent in 2008 and, after declining by 0.9 per cent in 2009, grew by 4.2 per cent in 2010 and is projected to grow by 4.3 per cent in 2011 (International Monetary Fund, 2010).

Thus détente and the information revolution seem to act more as intervening than causal variables.<sup>5</sup> Détente facilitated communications between Reagan and Soviet leaders, even as the new Cold War heated up, unlike the situation in the 1950s when arms races accelerated but there was little détente and hence communication. But détente provided the medium not the message. Reagan rejected the message of détente long before he came into office and made clear that an arms race was integral to successful arms negotiations. In 1963 (yes, 1963), he said: ‘One way to peace is to surrender without fighting ... the other way is based on the belief that in an all out arms race our system is stronger, and eventually the enemy gives up the race as a hopeless cause’ (Anderson and Anderson, 2009, p. 42). In the campaign in 1980, he said: ‘we are going about the business of building up our defense capability pending an agreement by both sides to limit various kinds of weapons’ (p. 41). Therefore, the message was competition not détente but the medium was negotiations. Notice the commitment to ‘pending’ agreement to reduce arms. The defense buildup did not preclude but presaged arms control negotiations.

Uniquely, Reagan embraced both an arms race and diplomacy. In March 1981, Reagan drafted a letter to Brezhnev calling for negotiations, which hard line advisers dismissed as ‘sentimental’ and ‘maudlin’ (Hayward, 2009, p. 144). Then in March 1983, he announced the Strategic Defense Initiative, which soft line advisers opposed (Shultz, 1993, p. 250). And already in March 1982, he made clear what his objective was, to eliminate all nuclear weapons. He reiterated that objective more than 150 times over the next 7 years (Anderson and Anderson, 2009, p. 94). The frequency with which the media disregarded Reagan’s remarks

makes one wonder who was ‘sleepwalking through history’ at the time, Reagan or his media critics (Johnson, 1991). In short, Reagan’s message was an arms race not détente, the medium was negotiations not military victory and the goal was reduced nuclear weapons and Soviet participation in a revitalized global economy.

Therefore, accounts that Reagan changed his stripes after his first term and abandoned the arms race for diplomacy are not supported by the evidence (for such accounts, see Diggins, 2007, Wilentz, 2008 and Fischer, 1997). Newly declassified documents and materials Reagan wrote in his own hand before and after coming into office (some 10 000 letters and still counting, closing in on Thomas Jefferson who wrote 16 000 letters in an era when letters were the only long distant way to communicate) show unmistakably that Reagan had a strategy all along that tightly integrated arms competition with diplomatic objectives.

### **Ideological Competition Is Decisive**

Nevertheless, competitive material pressures do not provide a fully satisfactory answer to the end of the Cold War. If changes in power balances were primary causes, one would expect the Cold War to end by the United States and Soviet Union becoming more normal rivals, retreating from a Cold War ideological confrontation to continuing competition over spheres of influence. That is what realists such as George Kennan expected. Realists did not expect the Soviet Union and its empire to break up or to evolve toward a western-style democracy. Similarly if détente and institutional variables were the decisive factors, one might expect the Cold War to end by the United Nations assuming the role it was assigned in 1945, a superpower concert under the UN Security Council exercising primary responsibility for global peace and security. Briefly, while the Soviet Union still existed, this outcome seemed at hand. The UN functioned in the first Persian Gulf War in 1990–1991 as a textbook case of collective security. But the Soviet Union did not continue to exist, and the UN cooperation faded quickly after 1991.

Clearly something else was affecting events at a much deeper level, and that something else was competitive ideological and moral factors. Political revolutions swept across Europe in the 1980s (starting with Poland and Solidarity in 1981), liberating the Warsaw Pact countries and eventually breaking up the Soviet Union. The ideological plates shifted and rearranged the geopolitical crust of world politics. Instead of the Cold War ending in a moderated balance of power or a UN collective security arrangement, it ended in a tidal wave of political and commercial liberalization that swept across Europe as well as large parts of the rest of the world.



Here, again, Reagan's role was critical, although alone not determinative. Had anyone else been president (say, Jimmie Carter or Walter Mondale), it is inconceivable that American policy would have consisted simultaneously of three seemingly incompatible parts: a tough ideological stance toward the Soviet Union, a massive arms buildup, and a negotiating strategy aimed at reducing nuclear weapons and fostering economic cooperation. The tough ideological stance was the most critical. At his very first press conference in February, 1981 Reagan asserted that 'the only morality they [the Soviets] recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that'. In March 1983, he branded the Soviet Union as 'the evil empire'. In between, on January 17, 1983, as Paul Lettow reveals on the basis of now declassified materials, Reagan issued NSDD-75, a comprehensive statement of US policy toward the Soviet Union. NSDD-75 'went beyond what any previous administration had established as the aims of its Cold War approach' (Lettow, 2005). NSDD-75 stated explicitly that US policies toward the USSR are 'to contain and over time reverse Soviet expansionism ... [and] to promote, within the narrow limits available to us, the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system' (for a summary of NSDD-75, see Matlock, 2005). On the fortieth anniversary of Yalta in 1985, Reagan stated this objective publicly: 'there is one boundary that can never be made legitimate, and that is the dividing line between freedom and repression. I do not hesitate to say we wish to undo this boundary ... Our forty-year pledge is to the goal of a restored community of free European nations' (Kengor, 2006).

Critics dismiss Reagan's ideas as mere rhetoric or worse. But then to be fair, they have to dismiss Gorbachev's ideas too. You cannot just pick and choose the ideas you like. You have to measure them against consequences. Reagan's ideas long preceded and in arguable ways gave meaning to and matched the material events that followed. They significantly altered military and economic trends from the 1970s, and they presaged outcomes that followed in 1989–1991. Surely, in this sense, Reagan's ideas had causal consequences. That is not to say that they determined events 'all the way down'. Reagan exploited conditions in the Soviet Union that existed before he came into office, and he had a lot of help from other western leaders, especially Helmut Schmidt (who first called for INF missiles before Reagan took office), Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl and, on the big issues such as INF, Francois Mitterrand. But Reagan's grand strategy, carefully mapped onto observable conditions and consistently executed, did test out pretty well against the moral and material realities that followed. Although causation is always impossible to establish definitively, Reagan's ideas mobilized events in certain directions, which then made it possible to exploit other events such as the arrival of new leadership in the Soviet Union and the pending information revolution.

What about Gorbachev's ideas of 'New Thinking'? Did they map out as well onto subsequent events? A few counterfactuals might help. Why did Gorbachev come to power in 1985 and not 1975 or 1995? It is not implausible to argue, judging from Arbatov's comments quoted above, that Reagan's challenges in the early 1980s had a lot to do with Gorbachev's selection. For the first time, the Soviet leadership reached deep into its pool of younger leaders, convinced that the country needed something different to confront the revitalized west. Or, as another counterfactual, why did Gorbachev not succeed in reversing the Soviet Union's fortunes, as Reagan and Thatcher did in reversing the fortunes of the West? His aim until the very end was to reform communism not to give it up. Yet the Cold War ended with the spread of liberal democracy and the expansion of NATO, not the revival of communism and the creation of a 'common European home'.<sup>6</sup> If material constraints dictated such outcomes, then at the very least Gorbachev's ideas were inconsistent with those constraints. None of this is to diminish Gorbachev's contributions. He made courageous decisions, especially to end Soviet imperialism in eastern Europe and Afghanistan without using force. And those decisions cost him both in terms of a military coup targeted against him in summer 1991 and a disastrously low approval rating in Russia today. But these decisions were more likely consequences of deeper forces, not the precursors and drivers of events that actually followed.

An identity perspective therefore offers the most complete and compelling explanation for the end of the Cold War. The decisive shifts that ended the Cold War were ideological not material or institutional. The United States and western countries revived confidence in democratic ideals (after the alleged malaise and governability crisis of western societies in the 1970s), while the Soviet Union lost further confidence in communist ideals. Shifting ideological orientations encouraged government (Helsinki) as well as non-governmental institutions (for example, peace research institutes) to cultivate cooperative ideas of a non-threatening NATO, human rights and more open economic markets. Reagan like Gorbachev was a visionary. He intensified the Cold War but, as the evidence now abundantly corroborates, he did so not to defeat the Soviet Union in some conventional military showdown but to close off military options favored by hawks in both Moscow and Washington and empower diplomatic solutions favorable to the west.<sup>7</sup> Reagan's strategy allowed for mutually beneficial outcomes, including a nuclear-free world protected by shared missile defenses and an integrated prosperous world economy open to Soviet participation (Anderson and Anderson, 2009). The objective was to find common ground not primarily by *détente* (institutions) or competition (power) but by engineering a convergence of identities (ideas) closer to western ideals of liberty and markets than communist ideals of police states and command economies.



## Implications for the Post-Cold War World

For a brief moment in 1990–1991, the ideological plates of world politics converged sufficiently to enable the world community to behave just as institution-based visions of collective security projected. For the first time in history, a universal organization, the United Nations, acted to expel an invading army of one country, Iraq, from the territory of another country, Kuwait. History finally vindicated the dreams of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. The UN action reflected a perfect storm of favorable factors, however. The Soviet Union was preoccupied with what was going on in central Europe – Gorbachev and Soviet leaders clearly gave priority to cooperation with the United States in Europe rather than competition with the United States in the Middle East. And the United States basically called the shots at the UN providing the overwhelming share of forces to accomplish the mission. The United States, of course, could have acted unilaterally. It was suddenly the world's first and, so far in history, only unipolar global power (Wohlforth, 2003). But, to its credit, it followed the code book of multilateralism. It acted only with the unanimous consent of the UN Security Council, and it did not exceed the instructions of that institution, which called for the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait but not the overthrow of the Iraqi regime in Baghdad. Here one sees the influence of international institutional factors overriding to some extent the unilateralism that power-based arguments might expect to apply given the unipolar distribution of power. But both institutional and power factors were not primary causes. Converging ideological orientations were more important and, once they diverged again, institutional and power factors exerted less influence over outcomes.

After 1991, the favorable conditions faded, not because of a willful unilateralism on the part of the United States or a significant shift in the relative power of the United States but because ideological orientations stopped converging and in critical areas drifted apart once again. By the mid-1990s, Russia was reeling backwards from its initial rush to economic and political liberalization. Ethnic divergences in the former Yugoslavia were growing and causing escalating violence, and the United States was re-absorbed by domestic political concerns constraining its unipolar power and leading it to stand down in Somalia, Rwanda and until 1995 in Bosnia. Thus, by the time the world called upon the United Nations a second time to stop the violence in Bosnia and then a third time in Kosovo, the ideological chasms were too wide to accommodate UN action. Russia vetoed action in the Security Council and NATO took center stage, a community in which ideological convergence persisted and indeed widened to include new members during the period after the Cold War. NATO operations quelled conflicts in both Bosnia and Kosovo and created the security framework for nation-building in those areas under

the auspices of the EU and other international organizations. But a price was paid for this success by alienating Russia. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia moved decisively away from the economic and political liberalization policies of Boris Yeltsin and reinstated more traditional policies of authoritarian government at home and spheres of influence interventions abroad (for example, in Ukraine and Georgia). The specter of traditional great power rivalry reemerged, also in the steady rise of authoritarian China's presence on the world scene.

Such was the state of the world before 9/11. The twin tower and other terrorist attacks did not change all that, as Bush officials perhaps too often asserted, but added a devilish, complicating factor. They signaled both a new ideological threat to a western-oriented world, jihadism, and a new vulnerability of the American homeland that the United States had not experienced since 1814. Whether the ideological and military threats were overblown or not is still hotly debated. But the combination clearly sidelined international institutions, this time including NATO.

The new threat was not standing armies or missiles in Russia or China, though that threat was growing incrementally particularly in China, but an invisible threat associated with weak not strong actors. Terrorist cells incubating in failed states and possibly assisted by rogue states seeking weapons of mass destruction constituted the new danger. This danger had to be either prevented *before an attack* by aggressive intelligence collection, counter-insurgency measures and potentially preventive war or dealt with *after an attack* by criminal prosecution and counter-terrorism (punishment) measures directed against specific individuals or states responsible for the attacks. The ideologically united world, that is the world of NATO, divided over this issue, not to the extent of resurrecting the balance of power among democratic nations (the convergence of basic values among the North Atlantic states and Asian democracies remains historically unprecedented) but to the extent of preventing a consensus on whether and how to use NATO to cope with terrorist groups and states (Iran, North Korea and so on) abetting terrorism in the Middle East, southwest Asia and other parts of the world (Nau, 2008b).

European allies, with the occasional exception of Britain, strongly favored an 'after an attack' approach relying primarily on diplomacy and conventional foreign aid to temper terrorism. The United States took a more aggressive 'before the attack' approach, waging preventive war in Iraq under the Bush administration and vigorous counter-insurgency campaigns in Afghanistan under both the Bush and Obama administrations. Similar differences divide the allies over rogue states seeking nuclear weapons, such as Iran and North Korea.

Here the lessons of the Cold War come into play. What was the relative role of military, diplomatic and strategic (conceptual) factors in ending that confrontation and what relative role should each of these factors play in ending or mitigating the divisions in the new post-9/11 world?



## Democratic Unipolarity and International Institutions

Unipolar power is not the most impressive feature of today's world; unipolar identity is. Democracy reigns in the world's only superpower and in more than half of all the states in the world, including *all* the world's most industrialized countries. If you doubt that such unipolar identity is more important than unipolar power, imagine what the world would be like today if it were unipolar and fascist or communist powers dominated. In unipolarity, more than any other configuration of power, what type of country or country group holds unipolar power matters much more than the fact that that country or group is unipolar. Identity overlays the power structure and to the extent that identity is shared and considered to be legitimate, countries do not have to exercise power to realize their aims. International politics acquires a status more like domestic politics in which common law and institutions replace the balance of power and anarchy. Peace reigns, but the character of that peace depends on the substance of the system's identity. The present world enjoys a democratic peace, not a fascist or communist one.

The key question for the future, therefore, is not whether unipolar power is sustainable but whether unipolar identity is sustainable. In theory, as we observe domestically, unipolar identity is durable; civil war is the exception rather than the rule. But ideological unity at the domestic level depends on all groups feeling comfortable with the national government's monopoly of force. To what extent will all states and non-state actors continue to feel comfortable with democracy's monopoly of force at the international level, such that they will not seek to reduce or replace it?

In today's world, there are four sources or settings of discomfort or divergence from democracy's political and military preeminence. Each setting creates a different environment in which power balances and institutions operate. The first setting involves America's democratic allies in Europe and Asia. These allies are uncomfortable not with America's identity but with America's dominance. Under the democratic peace, they do not fear military attack from the United States, but America's power constitutes in effect a one-party rule within the democratic world. There is no effective competitor to check and balance US interests. The allies would prefer a more balanced distribution of power within the democratic world, although it is not clear yet that they would accept the responsibilities of such a shift, particularly the need to exercise greater military responsibility. This arena of divergence within today's democratic world order is least severe and constitutes a normal competition among rival 'parties' within the democratic peace.

The second setting of ideological discomfort is from authoritarian states, principally Russia and China (secondarily, Venezuela). This source of rivalry is well known from traditional international affairs (nineteenth century Europe),



but it is less dangerous today because of unipolarity. Unipolar democratic power provokes counterbalancing by non-democratic Russia and China, to be sure, but because unipolarity remains overwhelming it also buys time in which to assimilate these countries through engagement and integration. The third setting of ideological rivalry is from rogue states, foremost Iran and North Korea. They too seek to counterbalance unipolar democratic power but, unlike Russia and China, do so with more opaque and totalitarian political systems and with less respect for international rules, especially regarding non-proliferation. The fourth setting of ideological rivalry is jihadism or Islamic extremism and the failed states in which it breeds and trains. This setting involves new non-state actors but is not totally unfamiliar in interstate relations – for example, transnational anarchism before World War I. The third and fourth settings of discontent produce prospects of violence. Although smaller than the violence common to traditional great power orders, such violence takes on added significance because of the potential access to weapons of mass destruction.

Within these different settings of discomfort with the dominant democratic ideology, power balances and international institutions play different roles. China poses perhaps the greatest potential threat to the unipolar democratic order, but much depends on how China evolves internally. Because threats are smaller in a unipolar environment, international institutions have an unprecedented opportunity to assimilate China (Ikenberry, 2008). The West in effect has bet on one institution, the World Trade Organization, to mediate economic and political transition in China. The bet is that when China reaches a more equitable (and potentially threatening) level of power, it will no longer be so authoritarian or inaccessible that it cannot be integrated into a world system that does not differ significantly in substance from the present one. Russia poses a lesser threat at this point because it has yet to make a similar bet on the WTO. Its prospects of great power status are limited by its largely resource-driven economy. And the Muslim world in which jihadism breeds is only beginning the long struggle to modernize and integrate with global market institutions.

Highly unequal power balances, however, impede the functioning of other international institutions. China and Russia are reluctant to work through the UN Security Council or International Atomic Energy Agency, as are, at times, France and Great Britain if they think they are simply rubber-stamping US initiatives. This reluctance impairs UN responses to rogue states (Iran, North Korea), failing states (Libya, Yemen) and ethnic violence (Sudan, Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo). Sadly, the UN institution that could potentially do the most to spread wealth and combat the part of terrorism that breeds in poverty, the WTO, is largely neglected in present world diplomacy, shackled by global economic crisis and the indifference of western leaders, particularly the new American president.



Regional organizations take up the slack. Although divided in the Iraq war of 2003, NATO functions today as a combat unit fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and Libya (recent no-fly zone) and, after this year, as a training unit grooming local forces in Iraq. The EU marches steadily onward, although creepingly, moving past its recent constitutional crisis and assuming greater civilian responsibilities in out-of-area conflicts such as Kosovo and Afghanistan. Asia is experiencing a renaissance of regional institutions, even though institutional legalism is less common in Asia than the West. Regional free trade agreements, such as NAFTA, shoulder on, but new ones languish amidst the 'angst' of global recession.

The picture of the contemporary world, then from the perspective outlined here, is one in which democracy dominates but is experiencing a recent blowback. From 2005 through 2009, the number of free or partly free countries has gone down (Freedom House, 2010). Recent upheavals in the Middle East – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain – signal renewed aspirations for freedom, and incremental improvements toward more representative governments in that region are possible. Nevertheless, if ideological opposition to democracy accelerates, power balancing will become more intense and opportunities for international institutions more limited. At the extreme, the world could drift back toward ideological divisions in which power and institutions rival one another across the globe. That could happen if China becomes a power equal to the United States, remains authoritarian, and becomes intensely nationalist. It could also happen if jihadist ideology becomes rooted in a number of important states in the Middle East (Iran, Egypt) or south Asia (Pakistan) and, like communism in Russia, sparks a regional if not global confrontation intensified by the spread of weapons of mass destruction. At the moment, global institutions, especially economic ones, stand in the way of such an outcome, holding out the promise of modernization and a better life for all. But these institutions could also atrophy and decline under the impact of the current economic crisis and leadership gap. Current attitudes, which seem oblivious to unprecedented global growth from 1980 to the present, now favor financial regulation and trade protectionism. Nothing could damage the prospects of future peace more than reversing the commitments of the past 30 years to open market policies.

From the perspective outlined in this brief essay, neither institutions nor power substitute for moral and political leadership. Ideological orientations ultimately trump institutional and material realities. Human beings are free to invent, choose and evaluate new ideas and make choices that widen or narrow the prospects of both market modernization and democratic development. Modernization is not an elixir nor is it inevitable, and democracy may be corrupted or rejected. Much depends therefore on the renewal of ideals in the democratic world. Revolutionaries, like most contemporary terrorists, are not

poor or uneducated. They are motivated by rational and moral ideas that they invent, assess and choose. They can be defeated only by comparable moral courage in democracies. The balance of such initiatives, not power or institutional momentum, will determine the prospects for future prosperity and global peace.

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks Dan Deudney and John Ikenberry for perceptive comments on earlier drafts.

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## Notes

- 1 National ideational orientations or identities, as I call them in my work, are multi-dimensional and not the same as national interests. Cultural, religious, moral, ethnic and ideological factors shape and define national interests. Free societies, for example, have national interests in open markets, democratic institutions, independent civil society and inalienable human rights, regardless of their geopolitical situation or institutional affiliations.
- 2 For a more social constructivist approach, see Thomas Risse's essay in this volume.
- 3 There is abundant evidence that other US leaders saw the relationship in ideological terms. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes concluded as early as the end of 1945: 'There is too much difference in the ideologies of the US and Russia to work out a long term program of cooperation' (Trachtenberg, 1999, p. 16). And, as Colin Dueck argues, the liberal democratic culture in the United States was so strong that practically all American policy makers rejected a spheres of influence policy that involved closed, authoritarian domestic systems in eastern Europe (Dueck, 2006). Whether these beliefs were exaggerated or not is not the issue; they had consequences and were subsequently tested against moral and material realities, which is the heart of the ideational argument.



- 4 The Cuban Missile Crisis had many causes, but one was Khrushchev's dilemma about how to defend Cuba in face of American nuclear superiority (Khrushchev, 1970, p. 493).
- 5 For different assessments, see other essays in this special issue by Daniel Deudney, John Ikenberry and Matthew Evangelista.
- 6 See Mary Sarotte's essay in this special issue.
- 7 As Reagan wrote in his diary already in April 1983, 'Some of the N.S.C. staff are too hard line and don't think any approach should be made to the Soviets. I think I'm hard-line and will never appease but I do want to try and let them see there is a better world if they show by deed they want to get along with the free world' (Reagan, 2007, p. 142). The Reagan Diaries, together with other voluminous writings by the former president, put to rest the partisan canard that Reagan was nothing more than a lightweight Hollywood actor. As George Shultz writes in the foreword of the Andersons' book, 'the act of writing is fundamentally an act of thinking. Reagan was a thinker as well as a doer' (Shultz, 2009b, p. x).

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