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# Realism and the End of the Cold War

William C. Wohlforth

Modern realism began as a reaction to the breakdown of the post-World War I international order in the 1930s. The collapse of great-power cooperation after World War II helped establish it as the dominant approach to the theory and practice of international politics in the United States. During the Cold War, efforts to displace realism from its dominant position were repeatedly thwarted by the continued salience of the U.S.-Soviet antagonism: although indirect, the connection between events and theory was undeniable.

Now, the U.S.-Soviet antagonism is history. Suddenly, unexpectedly, and with hardly a shot fired in anger, Russian power has been withdrawn from the Elbe to the Eurasian steppe. A central question faces students and practitioners of international politics. Do the rapid decline and comparatively peaceful collapse of the Soviet state, and with it the entire postwar international order, discredit the realist approach?

Scholars have answered this question in two ways. Most argue that the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s utterly confound realism's expectations, and call into question its relevance for understanding the post-Cold War world.<sup>1</sup> Others—realist and non-realist alike—disagree, maintaining that the

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1. See Charles W. Kegley, Jr., "The Neoidealist Moment in International Studies? Realist Myths and the New International Realities," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (June 1993), pp. 131–147, and the sources cited therein; Richard Ned Lebow, "The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism," and Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil, "Understanding Change in International Relations: The Soviet Empire's Demise and the International System," both in *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994); Friedrich Kratochwil, "The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-Realism as the Science of *Realpolitik* without Politics," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 1993), pp. 63–80; John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 1992/93), pp. 5–58; Thomas Risse-Kappen and Richard Ned Lebow, "International Relations Theory and the Transformation of the International System," draft introduction (September 1993) for Risse-Kappen and

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post-1989 transformation of international politics is not an appropriate test for theory. The end of the Cold War, they argue, was “merely a single data point.” Even if it is inconsistent with realism it is insufficient to falsify it, because international relations theories are capable only of predicting patterns of behavior; they cannot make point predictions. And many scholars are pessimistic about the capacity of social science theory to explain unique and complex historical events involving revolutionary change. Therefore, our evaluation of theory should look to future patterns rather than past events.<sup>2</sup>

Both answers are wrong. Realist theories are not invalidated by the post-1989 transformation of world politics. Indeed, they explain much of the story. Realism is rich and varied, and cannot be limited just to structural realism, which deals poorly with change.<sup>3</sup> Many criticisms of realism based on the post-1989 system transformation contrast the most parsimonious form of realism, Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism, with the richest and most context-specific alternative explanations derived from liberalism, the new institutionalism, or constructivism. This is not a fair or convincing approach to the evaluation of theories.

Instead, a thoroughly realist explanation of the Cold War’s end and the relatively peaceful nature of the Soviet Union’s decline that relies entirely on the propositions of pre-1989 theory is in many ways superior to rich explanations based on other theoretical traditions. But to carry on as if there are no lessons in this series of events for international relations theory in general and realist theories in particular is as indefensible intellectually as the claim that

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Lebow, eds., *International Relations Theory and the End of The Cold War*, forthcoming; Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein, “Beyond Realism: The Study of Grand Strategy,” in Rosecrance and Stein, eds., *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993). Other important works in the post-Cold War debate are discussed below.

2. On theory and revolutionary change, see Peter J. Katzenstein, “International Relations Theory and the Analysis of Change,” in Ernst-Otto Czempiel and James N. Rosenau eds., *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1989). Lebow attributes the “data point” quotation to a “prominent participant” in a 1991 conference on international relations theory in Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism,” pp. 251–252. The two most important collections on international theory published after the Cold War look almost entirely to the future (especially of the European Union and NATO) to evaluate competing theories: Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, eds., *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace—An International Security Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); and David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

3. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). For analyses, see Robert Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); and Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

the post-1989 transformation single-handedly invalidates any and all realist theories. As critics of realism rightly note, the events of the last half-decade highlight the indeterminacy of realist predictions about state behavior. Realist theories can be made more determinate, but only in *ex post* explanation rather than *ex ante* prediction. Realist theories are terribly weak. They are too easy to confirm and too hard to falsify. They do not come close to the ideal of scientific theory. Their strength is only evident when they are compared to the alternatives, which suffer from similar or worse indeterminacy but do not possess comparable explanatory power. The proper attitude toward the realist approach, even on the part of its defenders, ought to be reluctant acceptance conditioned on a determination to improve it, or to dispose of it if something better comes along.

I perform four basic tasks in this article. First, I discuss briefly the intellectual challenge presented by the post-1989 changes in world politics. What exactly should we expect this series of events to tell us about international relations theories? How much should we expect such theories to tell us about these events? This issue surely ought to lie at the center of any assessment of the Soviet collapse, but thus far it has not. Second, I outline the realist explanation of recent change in world politics that I elaborate upon further throughout the article. Third, I examine the many critiques of realism based on the end of the Cold War and the Soviet collapse: (a) predictive failure; (b) lack of correlation between independent and dependent variables; and (c) important patterns of state behavior defying realist expectations and explanations. Finally, I suggest some preliminary lessons that ought to be drawn from the post-1989 experience, and outline their implications for further research.

### *The Cold War's End and Social Science Theory*

Like the French Revolution or the decline and fall of Rome, the Cold War's end is an event whose importance commands attention but whose complexity frustrates explanation. Few who took up the study of international politics during the Cold War will be content with the notion that the waning of that conflict is simply a single observation no more important than hundreds of others.

And like other complex events in history, the end of the Cold War is unique. The precise set of antecedent conditions and the precise nature of the outcome never occurred before and are exceedingly unlikely ever to recur. So the case cannot be explained in the ideal-scientific manner, as an instance of a general

law. That is, the Cold War's end cannot easily be characterized as a type of outcome generally associated with a particular set of antecedent conditions: "Given such-and-such conditions, international systems tend to be transformed; since those conditions obtained in 1987, the Cold War ended as a result."<sup>4</sup> There are simply too many important novel elements in the Cold War story and too few other events even roughly comparable for an explanation of this type to work.

However, if we concentrate on the event itself, we face the familiar problem of too many variables and too few independent observations. International relations theories are almost never monocausal. The claim is rarely "A, not B, caused E," but rather "both A and B caused E but A was more important."<sup>5</sup> Establishing whether nuclear weapons, the balance of power, domestic politics, liberal values, the personalities of leaders, or other factors were truly "most important" in bringing the Cold War to an end is a predictably inconclusive business. In the language of statistics, the researcher faces negative degrees of freedom. If we accept the statistician's view of causality, causal inference cannot be made on the basis of negative degrees of freedom, so the causes of a single outcome cannot be established, and a single outcome will be compatible with numerous theories.<sup>6</sup>

The problem is clear: weak theories that at best can make probabilistic predictions confront a single, complex, but fatefully important event. The solution is twofold. First, it is necessary to disaggregate the event.<sup>7</sup> Elements of the larger event may be susceptible to general explanation. Different theories may explain different regularities that came together to produce the end of the Cold War. At the very least, disaggregation simplifies analysis and clarifies the

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4. The impossibility of applying the "covering-law" model to the explanation of complex or "aggregative" historical events is discussed in Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), pp. 568–575; and Carl G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965), chap. 12. David Dessler's paper, "Scientific Realism is Just Positivism Reconstructed," prepared for delivery at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Washington, D.C., March 28–April 1, 1994, alerted me to these sources.

5. See Nagel, *Structure of Science*, pp. 584–588, for the many ways one cause can be said to be "more important" than others.

6. Degrees of freedom are the number of observations minus the number of independent variables minus one. We are all familiar with this logic. Was it worn spark plugs or a dirty air filter that caused our poor gas mileage? We'll never know if we do both repairs simultaneously and only measure gas mileage in one period. We need at least three observations (one with no change; one with new plugs and old filter; and one with old plugs and new filter). But our confidence in any finding would be increased by further observations, to control for different driving conditions, weather, number of passengers, or types of gasoline used.

7. This solution is proposed by Nagel, *Structure of Science*; and Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*.

dependent variable. Second, having selected a piece of the puzzle whose explanation may fall under the purview of a given theory, it is still necessary to go “beyond correlations,” in David Dessler’s phrase, and toward “a direct examination of a theory’s postulated generative processes.”<sup>8</sup> The only way to evaluate theory in each instance is to trace the process through which the posited cause produced (or influenced) the outcome. Having posited a cause, and shown a correlation, it will still be necessary to show empirically the mechanism that connects cause to effect.<sup>9</sup>

For the purposes of international theory, it is reasonable to separate the great-power element of the whole case: dramatic change in Soviet security policy; the emergence of a deep *détente* between the superpowers after 1987; Moscow’s peaceful acquiescence in regime changes in East-Central Europe, and the subsequent collapse of its alliance and the reunification of Germany in 1989 and 1990. These events do not constitute the entire story, but they are an important part of it that is particularly relevant to international relations theory. Realist theories of all stripes highlight a single independent variable: the balance of power. They describe recent international change primarily as the result of declining relative Soviet power conditioned by the global distribution of power. For the purpose of evaluating realism, then, much post-1987 international change can be defined as a single series of events, linked by a single generative cause. A causal analysis of that link implies close examination of the influence of power on great-power decision-making during the Cold War endgame.

Strictly speaking, no particular finding about the Cold War’s end will suffice to “falsify” an entire research program, such as realism. For a single series of events to constitute a critical test of a theory, it must not only be inconsistent with the theory but be unambiguously ruled out by it.<sup>10</sup> However it may

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8. David Dessler, “Beyond Correlations: Toward a Causal Theory of War,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3, (September 1991), pp. 337–355.

9. The “scientific” status of analyzing causal mechanisms is disputed among philosophers and methodologists of social science. Cf. Dessler, *ibid.*; Alexander L. George and Timothy J. McKeown, “Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision Making,” in *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, Vol. 2 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1985); and Alexander L. George, “Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison,” in Paul Gordon Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory and Policy* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), with Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), who maintain that causality can only be understood statistically, and therefore that “process tracing” is merely another method of increasing the sample.

10. See Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 117. I am indebted to David Dessler for helping me navigate Popper’s arguments.

appear to critics of realism, realist theories do not rule out an event-series involving the emergence of deep superpower détente and the relatively peaceful contraction of Soviet power. But the importance of the exercise goes beyond formal arguments about theory-testing. If realism can be shown to have nothing to say about the Cold War's end, its relevance to the postwar world can be called into doubt. And a rigorous search for the causal mechanisms at work in important cases adds to our historical understanding. The clash of theories over the explanation of important events leads to a better understanding of those events.

### *An Outline of a Realist Explanation*

Recent changes in world politics can be explained by realist hypotheses, derived from classical realism and from theories of hegemonic rivalry and power-transition, which have been obscured in recent years by the more influential structural variant.<sup>11</sup> The account I offer is simply an extension of the general realist system of explanation to a specific case with inevitably unique features that could not be anticipated and probably will not recur. Its power derives from the fact that it captures central causal relationships and is connected to a set of theories that have proven their utility in a great many different instances.

The Cold War was caused by the rise of Soviet power and the fear this caused in the West. The end of the Cold War was caused by the relative decline in Soviet power and the reassurance this gave the West. Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev may have had many reasons for competing with the United States, ranging from genuine fear to ideological conviction, but a necessary condition for competition was their perception that they had the *capability* to do so. Gorbachev may have had numerous reasons for seeking to withdraw from the rivalry with the United States, but a necessary precondition was the perception of *reduced capability* to continue competing.

Realists of all kinds view change in state behavior as adaptation to external constraints conditioned by changes in relative power. The best way to make

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11. This kind of analysis is applied to the entire Cold War in Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993). The only other effort to apply realist ideas systematically to an analysis of the Cold War's end that I have located is Kenneth Oye's "Explaining the End of the Cold War: Morphological and Behavioral Adaptations to the Nuclear Peace," draft chapter (December 1992) for Risse-Kappen and Lebow, eds., *International Relations Theory and the End of The Cold War*. I share Oye's emphasis on relative Soviet decline, but focus less on nuclear weapons, while introducing new arguments for the absence of war.

sense of the recent international change and to think about the future of world politics is to view the Cold War as a credible but ultimately failed Soviet challenge to U.S. hegemony.<sup>12</sup> What made the Cold War era seem so different from earlier eras in world history was the reduced uncertainty about alliance choices and the consequent stability of central power relations over four decades. The great popularity of structural realism was very largely due to the fact that it seemed to explain this state of affairs. An alternative explanation, truer to classical balance-of-power theory, is that the Cold War was explained by the Soviet Union's near-domination of Eurasia.<sup>13</sup> Of course, the real degree of Russia's power and threat was arguable, but it was clearer in the Cold War than during any other time of peace. Moscow's position resembled France's in 1813 or Germany's in 1917 and 1941, thus accounting for the stability of the opposing coalition. This was a novel situation, and it came to an end in novel ways.

There are three keys to understanding the peculiarities of the Cold War's end and the Soviet Union's sudden but peaceful collapse that have not been addressed heretofore. First, *decision-makers' assessments of power are what matters*. For any balance-of-power theory to explain state behavior, it must specify the mechanism through which capabilities are translated into actions. That mechanism can only be the assessments of the people who act on behalf of states. One reason balance-of-power theories cannot make deterministic predictions about state behavior is that so many factors can influence assessments of capabilities. As Hans Morgenthau argued almost a half century ago, power is composed of a complex combination of material and non-material factors. Even if, unlike Morgenthau, we distinguish carefully between power as *influence* and power as *capabilities*, the basic insight holds.<sup>14</sup> Capability contains vitally im-

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12. Distinguishing features of works on hegemonic rise and decline include a focus on hierarchy as an ordering principle, hegemonic rivalry and power transitions. See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1968); Karl Deutsch, *The Analysis of International Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968); Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); and Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), chap. 1. For an effort to formalize and test power-transition theory, see Woosang Kim and James D. Morrow, "When do Power Shifts Lead to War?" *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (November 1992), pp. 896–922.

13. For theoretical analyses of balance-of-power theory that powerfully explicate this view, see R. Harrison Wagner, "What was Bipolarity?" *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 77–106; and Wagner, "Peace, War, and the Balance of Power," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 593–607.

14. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948), Part 3. I define power as resources throughout this article. For empirical and conceptual

portant non-material elements that make it very difficult or even impossible to measure. Rational decision-makers may revise assessments of capabilities dramatically and suddenly when confronted with new information about non-material elements of capability, even when material measures change only slightly. Crude quantitative indicators of capabilities cannot accurately represent decision-makers' assessments.

The corollary of a perceptual approach to power is the realization that expectations inform policy. All policies are future-oriented. All decisions are bets on the future. A decision to reform, retrench, or go to war reflects expectations about future trends and assessments of the likely effect of today's policies on tomorrow's distribution of relative power. Theories of hegemonic rivalry suggest that during power transitions, sets of expectations that make decisions for war seem attractive are likely to occur. As in the case of assessments of power, it is difficult to make deterministic predictions about decision-makers' expectations in any case. How any state reacts to perceived decline will be determined by decision-makers' expectations. Obviously, if they conclude that decline is reversible, they will be less likely to opt for risky, forceful solutions to decline and more likely to choose retrenchment and reform. Robert Gilpin argued in 1981 that the two superpowers' basic ideological faith in the future was one of the factors that stabilized the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> What is striking about the Cold War's end is how very late in the game the Soviet leaders clung to this faith.

Second, *declining challengers are more likely than declining hegemons to try to retrench and reform rather than opt for preventive war.* It is vital to note that in the 1980s, the Soviet Union was not a declining hegemon, but a declining challenger. From 1917 onward, the Soviet Union stood formally for revision of the international status quo. Its real commitment to revisionism varied, and as its relative power grew its revisionist impulse assumed increasingly typical great-power forms. But the country's post-1945 hegemonic status and consequent conservatism in the Central European region should not be confused with global hegemony. Worldwide, successive Soviet leaderships chafed against an American-dominated system. They never doubted who the real hegemon was.

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analysis of how decision-makers assess power, see Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance*; and Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance," *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (April 1987), pp. 353–381.

15. Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 240. For more on the relationship between risk attitudes and the likelihood of war in power transitions, see Kim and Morrow, "When do Power Shifts lead to War?"

Theories of hegemonic rivalry do not make deterministic predictions about individual states' reactions to decline. But they do suggest that hegemons are more likely to react violently to decline than either a challenger that never became powerful enough to contemplate taking over leadership, or a state not directly contending for leadership. For all such theories, the danger point, when war is most likely (though not inevitable), is a *transition* in relative position, not the rapid decline of a challenger. Soviet power rose and fell without reaching such a transition point. Theorists of hegemonic war, perhaps under Thucydides' spell, tended to concentrate on dynamic challengers and moribund hegemons. They always thought of the problem of peaceful change as one of accommodating the demands of a rising challenger. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union seemed to fit the bill. But roles were mixed in the Cold War endgame. Rigid, Spartan Soviet Russia was the moribund challenger, and dynamic, Athenian America the rising defender.

The third key is that *sudden decline or civil strife on the losing side of a struggle is less destabilizing globally than such decline or strife on the winning side*.<sup>16</sup> Internal strife on the losing side ratifies the previously-existing power relationship; it merely confirms what political actors knew to be the case just prior to the advent of the strife. Thus, it provides no incentive to renew the struggle. Civil strife on the winning side, of course, gives the losing party an incentive to carry on with the struggle. This helps to account not only for the relatively peaceful nature of Soviet decline and collapse, but also for the widespread obsession (both in the West and in Moscow) with U.S. decline during the Cold War. If we accept that the Soviet Union was behind the United States in power terms, then Soviet rise and U.S. decline were much more dangerous in terms of power-transition theory than vice-versa. Unlike structural realism, which insists on seeing the two superpowers as identical "sensible duopolists,"<sup>17</sup> this explanation sees the Soviet Union as occupying a quite different international position than United States and expects different consequences from changes in its relative power.

It follows that the basic hierarchy of the international system—with the United States at the top—has not only not been challenged by the Soviet collapse, but has been decisively reinforced by it.<sup>18</sup> This leads to a portrayal of

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16. This is merely an extension of the logic in Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p. 82.

17. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 203.

18. This conclusion resembles the views of Marxist world-system theorists. See Richard Herrmann, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," draft chapter (July 1993) for Lebow and Risse-Kappen, *International Relations Theory*. It is important to stress, however, that the realist

the near future of world politics as strikingly different from that suggested by structural realism. While structural realists focus on the war-proneness of the emerging multipolarity, theories of hegemonic rivalry highlight the relative stability and order that the existence of a clear hierarchy of prestige and power will impart to great-power relations. In short, there are (non-structural) realist reasons for regarding the near future of great-power relations relatively optimistically, even ignoring such important factors as the existence of nuclear weapons and the unprecedented popularity of liberal and democratic values.

### *Realists and Their Critics*

Together, these non-structural realist arguments help explain change in Soviet security policy, the consequent emergence of deep superpower détente, the Soviet Union's adoption of reform and retrenchment rather than violent opposition to decline, and the ability of the international system to accommodate unprecedented power and territorial changes without great-power war. Objections to such an explanation can be anticipated by examining the post-Cold War debate on international theory. Below, I examine three lines of criticism: (1) egregious predictive failure; (2) lack of correlation between independent and dependent variables; (3) state behavior inconsistent with realist predictions, including the Soviet withdrawal from East-Central Europe, the high levels of great-power cooperation, and a potentially "critical" absence of great-power war. Many of these criticisms point to areas where realist theories must either improve or make more modest claims. Yet most of them are most damaging to the structural version of realism, whose inability to deal adequately with international change is acknowledged even by its most ardent defenders.

#### FAILURE TO PREDICT

Rational actors learn from predictive failures. One can reject the premise that prediction is a necessary condition of explanation yet still conclude that widespread failure to anticipate vitally important events even in general terms should cause us to wonder about the theories on which expectations were based.<sup>19</sup>

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explanation proposed here regards military power, prestige, and security, and thus the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, as central, while world-system theorists see the Soviet challenge as peripheral. See, for example, Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Edition de la Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, 1992), chap. 1, who continues to see post-1989 systems changes as results of U.S. decline.

19. For a general critique of international relations theories, based on their failure to anticipate the Cold War's end, see Gaddis, "International Relations Theory"; on realism in particular, see Kra-

Most scrutiny has been directed at structural realism. The main charge against this theory is that it not only failed to anticipate change, but led those who believed in it to expect the opposite: stability. To the extent that structural realism sought to explain the Cold War by reference to bipolarity, this criticism appears justified. Ambiguity surrounds the definition of bipolarity, but its most common meaning is the concentration of capabilities in two powers, in this case the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> In 1988, Waltz argued that the Cold War was “firmly rooted in the structure of postwar international politics, and will last as long as that structure endures.”<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that any reasonably intelligent consumer of Waltz’s theory in 1988 would have expected the Cold War to last as long as the bipolar structure itself. The Cold War ended over the course of the next two years; however, according to Waltz in 1993, “bipolarity endures, but in an altered state.” In short, the Cold War’s end caused an important amendment to be added to the theory: while bipolarity leads to Cold War, “altered bipolarity” leads to détente.<sup>22</sup>

However accurate, such criticisms miss Waltz’s main contention: that a theory of international politics cannot predict state behavior or explain international change.<sup>23</sup> Waltz and his followers often employed the theory to discuss Cold War statecraft, but its core predictions are only two: balances will form;

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tochwil, “The Embarrassment of Changes”; and Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism.” For a helpful discussion of the relative importance of prediction in assessing theory, see David Dessler, “Explanation, Prediction, Critique: The Aims of Rationalistic International Relations Theory,” College of William and Mary, unpublished ms., May 1994.

20. That was how it was seen by the postwar realists in opposition to whom Waltz first articulated his arguments about bipolarity. See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, chap. 19; Morgenthau discusses the new postwar structure of power in the 1948 edition of his classic text, although he does not use the term “bipolarity”; John H. Herz, *International Politics in the Atomic Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), chap. 7; and Kenneth Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus* (Summer 1964), pp. 881–909. On the vexing ambiguities surrounding the concept, see Wagner, “What was Bipolarity?” Ned Lebow also develops a penetrating critique in “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism.”

21. Waltz, “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,” in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 52. That structure would likely endure for some time because Waltz, like most international relations theorists, believed that “national rankings change slowly. War aside, the economic and other bases of power change little more rapidly.” In addition, “the barriers to entering the superpower club have never been higher or more numerous.” Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 177.

22. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 48–52.

23. “The behavior of states and statesmen,” Waltz states, “is indeterminate.” *Theory of International Politics*, p. 68; “Changes in, and transformation of, systems originate not in the structure of a system but in its parts. Systems change, or are transformed, depending on the resources and aims of their units and on the fates that befall them.” Waltz, “Reflections on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to my Critics*,” in Keohane, *Neorealism and its Critics*, p. 343.

and bipolar systems are less war-prone than multipolar ones, due to reduced uncertainty about alliance choices. The latter prediction seems borne out by the history of the Cold War and even its end. The bipolar structure, it could be argued, was so primed for peace that even German reunification and Soviet dissolution did not upset the great powers' repose. The continued tendency of all the great powers to bandwagon with the United States after the Soviet collapse does contradict the theory's prediction of balancing. But Waltz always allowed that unit causes could delay system incentives for prolonged periods. The epistemological modesty of the theory renders it hard to criticize (and to falsify).

Theories of hegemonic rivalry clearly benefit in this instance from their focus on change. They urge the reader to think of any international system as temporary, and to look for the underlying causes of change, which accumulate slowly but are realized in rare, concentrated bursts. They encourage scholars and policy-makers to be on the lookout for gaps between the capabilities of states and the demands placed upon them by their international roles. It is thus no surprise that the predictions that look best in hindsight came from people who thought in these terms. An example is the sociologist Randall Collins, who identified early the Soviet geopolitical overstretch as the basic harbinger of international change. Relying on a theory whose central variables were relative capability and geopolitical position, he began predicting the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, noting that the loss would result not mainly from ethnic revolt or a single major war but from the geopolitical exhaustion of the imperial center and "a loss of political confidence" among the Russians.<sup>24</sup>

The main criticism of theories of hegemonic rivalry is that none generated the kind of explanation I suggested above—even speculatively—before the fact.<sup>25</sup> In general, realists of all types tended to associate large-scale interna-

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24. Randall Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chaps. 7, 8. See also Randall Collins, "Some Principles of Long Term Social Change: The Territorial Power of States," in Louis Kriesberg, ed., *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, Vol. 1 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1978), pp. 1–34; Randall Collins and David Waller, "What Theories Predicted the State Breakdowns and Revolutions of the Soviet Bloc?" in Louis Kriesberg and David R. Segal, eds., *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, Vol. 14 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1992); and Ted Hopf's letter, "Getting the End of the Cold War Wrong," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 202–208, which alerted me to Collins's work. Another, much better known prediction is Andrei Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), whose scenario of collapse centers on the Soviet leadership's resort to a diversionary war with China.

25. I first put together the argument sketched out above in the spring of 1990, after the collapse of Moscow's outer empire, but before the collapse of its inner one. William C. Wohlforth, "Gorbachev's Foreign Policy: From New Thinking to Decline," in Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, ed., *Emerging Dimensions of European Security Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1991), pp. 47–62.

tional change with war. In particular, those who did contemplate Soviet decline in the context of the Cold War tended to assume that Moscow would not face decline gracefully.<sup>26</sup> The reasons for these assumptions are not intrinsic to the theory. There is no barrier in the theory that prevents one from pulling together various strands and constructing a scenario for the relatively peaceful ending of the Cold War rivalry. Many theorists of power transition and hegemonic rivalry themselves thought that retreat to more defensible positions and domestic reform were quite often the best strategies for a declining state. Indeed, those who thought that the United States was overextended urged precisely such a course on the U.S. government.

One explanation, as Ted Hopf argues, is that curiously little effort was devoted to thinking about how the Cold War might end.<sup>27</sup> At least one reason for that neglect is the difficulty of assessing power. The debate focused like a laser beam on U.S. decline, even as the Soviet Union was entering the initial stages of its final crisis. While many did identify a gap between Soviet capabilities and commitments, very few shared Collins's dire assessment. Most international relations theorists in the 1980s relied on the dominant assessment then prevalent among Sovietologists: the Soviet Union was in deep trouble, but a very long way from collapse. That Sovietological assessment mirrored the prevalent mood in Moscow's policy-making circles. The possibility of precipitous Soviet decline seemed so remote and so speculative up until 1989 that little analytical energy was devoted to working through scenarios involving a declining challenger in the context of a prolonged great-power rivalry.<sup>28</sup>

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26. On the association of war and change see, for a small sampling of quotations, Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 15; A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 333; Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), p. 34; J.W. Burton, *International Relations: A General Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 76–77. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz discusses various roads to structural transformation without explicitly connecting them to war; however, he insisted that the only structural transformation in history, from multi- to bipolarity, was caused by World War II. For mid-1980s thinking on Soviet decline, see Kurt M. Campbell, "Prospects and Consequences of Soviet Decline," in Joseph S. Nye, Graham T. Allison, and Albert Carnesale, eds., *Fateful Visions: Avoiding Nuclear Catastrophe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1988); and Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987), esp. pp. 488–514.

27. Hopf, "Getting the End of the Cold War Wrong."

28. As Raymond Aron remarked to Hedley Bull at a 1982 conference, Soviet decline was "the most important and indeed most neglected question in contemporary international relations scholarship." Cited by Campbell, "Prospects and Consequences of Soviet Decline," p. 153. On the stability assumption in Sovietology, see Thomas Remington, "Sovietology and System Stability," in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (July–September 1992), pp. 239–269. Other good post-mortems on Sovietology include the articles by Robert Tucker and George Breslauer in the same issue; Alexander Dallin, "Causes of the Collapse of the USSR," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (December 1992), pp. 279–302; Peter Rutland, "Sovietology: Notes for a Post-Mortem," *The National Interest*, Vol. 31 (Spring 1993), pp. 109–123.

It is not surprising, then, that when people did contemplate Soviet decline or large-scale international change they took the easiest intellectual route: induction. That is, episodes of rapid international change appeared to be associated historically with war, and empires rarely accepted their decline with graceful resignation.<sup>29</sup> Major international change and precipitous Soviet decline seemed remote enough that writers felt it sufficient to note in passing that analogous events in the past had usually been accompanied by large-scale violence. They did not ponder at length whether the set of perceptions and expectations that had accompanied such violence in the past was really as likely to appear in this instance.

This inductive association of war and major change is an important reason so many scholars failed to prepare intellectually for the transformation of world politics that occurred after 1989. Most analysts assumed, implicitly or explicitly, that the relevant political actors themselves would be constrained by the association of war and change, and precisely for that reason believed that change was most likely to be marginal in the near term. Fearing that radical change would raise the specter of war, the key political actors would endeavor to moderate their behavior in a rational cost-benefit calculation. So all the indications of new Soviet perceptions of power and interest, and of impending revolution in Eastern Europe, that stand out so clearly in hindsight were balanced at the time by the feeling that the magnitude of change would be managed by decision-makers apprehensive about potential instability and war. The notable feature of those analysts now regarded to have "got it most right" about the Soviet Union's fate is their dispassionate consideration of violence as the road to Soviet dissolution.

If scholars had thought more about the problem of how the Cold War system might end, they would not have met insuperable theoretical barriers blocking rough anticipation of the likely nature of international change. Indeed, they might have overcome the danger that always accompanies historical induction: *selection bias*, whereby scholars highlighted only those cases of international

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29. See Jack Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 1988), p. 97. The association between war and change is hard to measure, but Paul F. Diehl and Gary Goertz, "Territorial Change and Militarized Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (March 1988), pp. 103–122, do find that if territorial change is "important" and "among the major powers" it tends to be associated with war. Also relevant here is: Jack Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983). Note that it usually takes a war to convince contemporaries and scholars in retrospect that a state has either become or ceased to be a "great power." See Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System*, p. 24.

change and national decline that were associated with violence, and downplayed or ignored other cases.<sup>30</sup> Because they were accustomed to thinking about the Cold War in terms of rising Soviet power and precarious U.S. hegemony (or, in the 1980s, in terms of two “sensible duopolist” superpowers adjusting to a bipolar structure) they were not inclined to sift the historical record for evidence about declining challengers.

However, if more analytical energy had been devoted to thinking through scenarios of systemic change, exponents of both structural realism and theories of hegemonic rivalry might have focused upon the unique features of the post-World War II international system in terms of both types of theory. For structural realists, bipolarity was a world-historical first. For hegemony theorists, never before had a challenger come so close to dominating Eurasia in peacetime, and never had such a challenger begun to decline well before the main status-quo states. Both theories thus should have led to the suspicion that change might be different this time around, even apart from such important new features as nuclear weapons.

The predictive failure of realist theories, including those that self-consciously addressed the problem of change in world politics, was linked to the difficulty of assessing power. The gap between a state’s capabilities and its international role is easy to identify in hindsight, after capabilities have been put to some test. Before the fact, however, the existence or significance of such a gap will always be a matter of speculation. Any capabilities-based theory which recognizes that capabilities contain significant non-material elements must recognize the impossibility of making precise power assessments.

#### THE CORRELATION BETWEEN “POWER” AND “CHANGE”

Realists see change as the result of the rise and decline of states’ relative power conditioned by the nature of the overall distribution of capabilities. A structural realist account of the Cold War’s end would feature bipolarity, whose simplicity and ease of management might explain the comparatively peaceful nature of the change. Theories of hegemonic rivalry would highlight the U.S.-dominated hierarchy of world politics in explaining the same outcome. For either version, relative decline explains the change in Soviet behavior and interests that was the necessary condition for the emergence of deep superpower

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30. Note Bruce Bueno de Mesquita’s different argument about case selection bias in this theory in, “Pride of Place: The Origins of German Hegemony,” *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (October 1990), pp. 28–52.

détente, the revolutions in East-Central Europe, and the reunification of Germany. In this section, I aim to develop a richer understanding of the connection between decline and international change that defuses many criticisms of realism.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DECLINE AND POLICY CHANGE. Perhaps the central theme of recent challenges to realism is the proposition that the realist emphasis on declining relative power is inconsistent with the “Gorbachev revolution.” While acknowledging that change in Soviet security policy was the key permissive cause of the Cold War’s end, many recent analyses question whether declining power caused that change. Rather, they feature other explanatory variables, such as the emergence of industrial society in the West,<sup>31</sup> emergence of civil society in East-Central Europe and a legitimization crisis of the communist parties,<sup>32</sup> Soviet modernization,<sup>33</sup> the Soviet domestic political competition between hard-liners and soft-liners,<sup>34</sup> domestic politics in both the Soviet Union and Western Europe,<sup>35</sup> Soviet elite or leadership learning,<sup>36</sup> the existence of nuclear weapons and superpower learning about them,<sup>37</sup> or some combination of these factors.<sup>38</sup>

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31. Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The International Sources of Soviet Domestic Change,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Winter 1991/92), pp. 74–118.

32. Kratochwil, “The Embarrassment of Changes”; and Koslowski and Kratochwil, “Understanding Change.”

33. Jack Snyder, “The Gorbachev Revolution: A Waning of Soviet Expansionism?” *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Winter 1987/88), pp. 93–131; and *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), chap. 6.

34. Matthew Evangelista, “Internal and External Constraints on Soviet Grand Strategy,” in Rosecrance and Stein, *Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*; Richard Anderson, “Why Competitive Politics Inhibits Learning in Soviet Foreign Policy,” in Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

35. Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Did ‘Peace Through Strength’ End the Cold War? Lessons from INF,” *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 162–188.

36. George Breslauer, “What Have We Learned about Learning?” in Breslauer and Phillip Tetlock, eds., *Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1991); and Andrew Bennett, “Patterns of Soviet Military Interventionism, 1975–1990: Alternative Explanations and their Implications,” in William Zimmerman, ed., *Beyond the Soviet Threat: Rethinking American Security Policy in a New Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). Janice Gross Stein, “Political Learning by Doing: Gorbachev as Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner,” in *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 155–183, stresses individual learning by Gorbachev.

37. Steve Weber, “Security after the Revolutions of 1989 and 1991: The Future with Nuclear Weapons,” in Patrick J. Garrity and Steven A. Maaranen, eds., *Nuclear Weapons in the Changing World: Perspectives from Europe, Asia and North America* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992).

38. For accounts that combine the learning and the leadership competition/domestic politics approaches, see Sarah E. Mendelson, “Internal Battles and External Wars: Politics, Learning and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (April 1993), pp. 327–360;

This literature faces a basic problem, however: the centrality of economic reform to the rise and demise of the Gorbachev revolution.<sup>39</sup> The problem for anti-realists (and realists) is that the declining-relative-capabilities explanation is difficult to differentiate from the domestic explanation focusing on the need to revitalize the economy.<sup>40</sup> This is the basic dilemma of much international relations theory: the difficulty of assigning relative weight to internal versus international factors when they continually influence one another. For surely no critic of realism thinks that the Soviet leaders would have initiated reforms if their economy had been bounding along at six percent a year while the West was mired in a depression. As Alexander Zinoviev put it in 1989, "if there were no West . . . the state of the communist economy would be extolled as the height of perfection, the communist system of power—as the height of democracy, the population's living conditions—as an earthly paradise."<sup>41</sup> And surely no realist thinks that the end of the Cold War can be explained adequately without reference to the peculiar mix of centralized authority, weakness and brittleness that we now know was characteristic of the Soviet domestic order.

Any realist discussion of international change must combine the domestic and international levels of analysis. A realist explanation cannot offer a comprehensive account of precisely why a given state's domestic political, social, and economic institutions decline in comparison to those of competing powers. Instead, it makes only two claims, both of which distinguish it from an account focusing solely on domestic politics. First, definitions of interests are related to perceived relative power. A given state's leadership seeks greater influence on the world stage when it thinks it can, and resolves to retrench internationally

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and George Breslauer, "Explaining Soviet Policy Changes: The Interaction of Politics and Learning," in Breslauer, ed., *Soviet Policy in Africa: From the Old to the New Thinking* (Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley-Stanford Program in Soviet Studies, 1992). For an argument in favor of combining many of the theories listed above, see Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Soviet Reforms and the End of the Cold War: Explaining Large-Scale Historical Change," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer 1991), pp. 225–250. A convincing effort to combine international influences and domestic institutional and ideational factors is Jeff Checkel, "Ideas, Institutions, and the Gorbachev Foreign Policy Revolution," *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (January 1993), pp. 271–300.

39. Coit D. Blacker, *Hostage to Revolution: Gorbachev and Soviet Security Policy, 1985–1991* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993), makes a compelling case for the primacy of economic reform in the whole story, connecting it to changes in security policy. As Deudney and Ikenberry note in "The International Sources of Soviet Domestic Change," p. 80: "About the character of the crisis there is wide agreement. Virtually every commentator of these events points to economic stagnation as the decisive impetus for change."

40. Most analyses critical of realism acknowledge the importance of economic decline to the whole story, but some authors, discussed below, question its significance compared to other variables.

41. Alexander Zinoviev, "The Missing World War III, the Crisis of Communism, and the Offense of Democracy," *Détente*, No. 15 (1989), p. 5.

when it feels it must. The impetus to address economic deficiencies must be understood in terms of the relative economic efficiency of rival states and the strategic implications of the economy. Second, relative decline is connected to the costs of international competition or security. In the case of the Soviet Union and the Cold War's end, perceived relative decline was a necessary condition for the adoption of perestroika and "new thinking," and decline was connected to the burdens imposed by the Soviet Union's international position.

Many recent criticisms of realism maintain that changes in the Soviet political elite's preferences had little or nothing to do with changes in relative Soviet capabilities. They argue that the Soviet Union was not in decline—or at least that Soviet decline was not noticeably worse than earlier periods—until after Gorbachev began his reforms.<sup>42</sup> They argue that Gorbachev's reforms were a cause rather than a consequence of decline. Since they argue that Soviet decline was not particularly acute, many critics of realism see Gorbachev-era change in Soviet security policy as a willful intellectual revolution, not a reaction to the grim realities of the shifting scales of power.<sup>43</sup> In general, these anti-realists stress Gorbachev's intentionality: he wanted to do what he did because his preferences had changed in ways realists would never expect; he wished to give up "socialism" and join the West.

These arguments do not stand up to scrutiny. Critics of realism contrast a simplistic view of the relationship between decline and policy change against a nuanced and complex view of the relationship between their favored ex-

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42. See, e.g., Lebow, "Stability and Change in International Relations: A Critique of Realism," esp. p. 266; Friedrich Kratochwil, "The Embarrassment of Changes"; and Stein, "Political Learning by Doing." The strongest case against the declining-capabilities view of Gorbachev is Evangelista, "Internal and External Constraints on Soviet Grand Strategy," in Rosecrance and Stein, *Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*. See also John Mueller, "The Impact of Ideas on Grand Strategy," in *ibid.*, p. 53.

43. This is an old debate. See Stephen Sestanovich, "Gorbachev's Foreign Policy: A Diplomacy of Decline," *Problems of Communism*, (January–February 1988), pp. 1–15; and the important sources cited in Richard K. Herrmann, "Soviet Behavior in Regional Conflicts: Old Questions, New Strategies, and Important Lessons," *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (April 1992), pp. 432–465. The debate is surely not over. On the importance of external causes for Soviet retrenchment, see Celeste A. Wallander, "Opportunity, Incrementalism, and Learning in the Extension and Retraction of Soviet Global Commitments," and Richard Weitz, "The Soviet Retreat from Third World Conflicts: The Importance of Systemic Factors," both in *Security Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1992), pp. 514–579, and Celeste A. Wallander and Jane E. Prokop, "Soviet Security Strategies Toward Europe—After the Wall, With Their Backs Up Against It," in Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye and Stanley Hoffmann, eds., *After the Cold War: International Institutions and State Strategies in Europe*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Finally, for a strong argument in favor of a cognitive learning explanation for Soviet retrenchment, see Andrew Bennett, "Patterns of Soviet Military Interventionism, 1975–1990: Alternative Explanations and their Implications."

planatory variable and policy change. They also compare incompatible measures. Their nuanced explanations filled with rich case detail are evaluated against quantitative indicators of "power." They ignore perceptions of power. However, if one wants to know whether change in ideas is caused by changes in power relations, one must investigate changing ideas about power.

A causal evaluation of a power-centric theory would have to trace the influence of power as assessed by the individuals and organizations concerned. Critics of realism, who do not do this, often ignore relative decline. The ABC of realism is that relative gains and losses are what matters. Data on absolute Soviet economic performance or defense expenditures are uninteresting to realists; even Soviet-U.S. comparisons are insufficient. The issue is the Soviet Union's capabilities relative to those powers aligned against it on the world stage.

TRACING THE INFLUENCE OF POWER. Tracing the influence of power assessments on the evolution of policy is a complex task requiring all the historian's skill and care in evaluating evidence, and maximum access to archival materials.<sup>44</sup> The documentary record of Soviet decision-making in the Gorbachev era is sparse, yet a surprising amount of evidence has come to light. This evidence suggests the importance of many factors: the sense of security provided by nuclear weapons; the force of Gorbachev's convictions; the exigencies of domestic politics; luck, chance and caprice. But the available evidence also suggests that the story cannot be told now and will not be able to be told in the future without according an important causal role to the problem of relative decline. The keys to keep in mind in any causal evaluation are that power is always relative; that perceptions and expectations link power to policy; and that rational assessments can change quickly when new evidence becomes available.

What perceptions of power surrounded the initial decisions to opt for reform, and how did feedback from the new policies feed into subsequent decisions? Most Sovietologists were long aware that reform sentiments had existed within and around the Soviet Communist Party elite since Khrushchev's Twentieth Party Congress. But through the 1960s and 1970s the Soviet leadership had a robust view of the Soviet Union's relative capabilities; this view was buttressed

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44. As difficult as it is, it can and has been done, especially for the periods preceding the two world wars. Examples include Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*; Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power"; Risto Ropponen, *Die Kraft Russlands* (Helsinki: Historiallisia tutkimuksia, 1968); and Ernest R. May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessments before the Two World Wars*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

by foreign governments, led by the United States, which viewed it as a rising power that had to be accommodated politically. That set of perceptions contrasted starkly with the views in the early 1980s, when reform ideas began to get through to members of the top leadership.<sup>45</sup>

Two factors helped bring reform notions to the fore in the early 1980s: the system-wide decline in socialism's economic performance—dramatically highlighted by the Solidarity movement in Poland—against a backdrop of economic recovery in the West; and the Soviet Union's awful geopolitical position, with every other major power in the entire world, in every region, allied or aligned against Moscow. Each general secretary from Brezhnev on acknowledged these problems openly in speeches and policy pronouncements, and official concern was detectable even in the pages of the censored press and scholarly journals. Reformist analysts at research institutes penned pessimistic classified assessments arguing for new policies to address both problems.<sup>46</sup> The situation seemed doubly grim because many Soviet analysts were changing the way they measured power. They began to replace the old brute indicators of steel production and energy consumption with new measures that highlighted efficiency and high technology.

The ideas for foreign and domestic policy change that began to get through to the top leadership in this period were not new, but the combination of external and internal problems was. Gorbachev and members of his inner circle date the immediate origins of the reforms precisely to the 1982–83 period. The key issue around which the reformers mobilized was the need to hold a party plenum to consider the issue of the scientific-technical revolution which, they argued, was passing socialism by and would continue to do so in the absence of reforms. The program Gorbachev announced to the April 1985 party plenum one month after his selection as general secretary had been developed in 1983 and 1984.<sup>47</sup>

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45. Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance*, chaps. 7, 8.

46. On open acknowledgment of problems, see Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance*, pp. 224–229, and sources cited therein. For classified institute assessments of the international situation, see Robert English, "Russia Views the West: Intellectuals, Ideology and Foreign Policy," Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, forthcoming in 1994, chap. 7.

47. Transcript of Michael McFaul's summer 1992 interview with N.I. Ryzhkov for the Hoover Institution's oral history project, pp. 127, 136–138. Gorbachev dated the immediate origins of his reforms to 1982: see John Gooding, "Perestroika as a Revolution from Within," *Russian Review*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (January 1992), p. 46, fn. 29. Other accounts concur: Yegor Ligachev, *Inside Gorbachev's Kremlin*, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, Michele A. Berdy, and Dorbochna Dyrz-Freeman (New York: Pantheon, 1993), chap. 1; N.I. Ryzhkov, *Perestroika: Istoriia Predatel'stv* (Moscow: Novosti,

Thus, the impetus for innovation and even the contours of the new policies are inexplicable without reference to the interconnected problems of perceived relative decline and overextension. The policy that emerged from these circumstances sought to bring capabilities and commitments into line while reducing the cohesion and hostility of the opposing coalition of states through careful appeasement. This would reduce the threat, potentially facilitate valuable cooperation with more advanced rival states, and allow a reallocation of domestic resources to assist in the long-term revitalization of Soviet socialism. "New thinking" ideas and policy concepts—many of them western in origin—provided the policy's intellectual undergirding. Two central ideas suggested how Moscow might reduce its massive commitment to military power at minimal cost to itself: recognition of the security dilemma, and belief in the prevalence of balancing behavior in world politics. Together they suggested a simple recipe for successful retrenchment: reduce other states' sense of threat, and they will reduce their commitment to defense and the tightness of their anti-Soviet alignment.<sup>48</sup>

The drive behind the policy contained two elements: the perceived costs that drove intellectual change and the expected benefits to be derived from such change. The more advanced the perception of decline, the higher the perceived costs of the status quo, and the greater the incentive for intellectual change and the willingness to take risks for expected gain. Both elements were important. Perceptions of decline and high costs drove tough intellectual change and the acceptance of uncomfortable trade-offs. The expected benefits made each trade-off easier to stomach. Criticisms of realism ignore or downplay the cost side of the ledger. Tracing the influence of perceptions of capabilities on Soviet decision-making shows that increased awareness of decline and of the high costs of existing policies was associated with change from hallowed precepts.

Though the supporting ideas were well-developed among key Gorbachev aides, the initial foreign policy was an admixture of old and new. What ensued from 1985 was a trial-and-error learning process, with the radicalization of

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1993), chap. 2; Georgy Arbatov, *The System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Random House, 1993), chap. 9; and the interviews in Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina vanden Heuvel, *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers* (New York: Norton, 1989). Jeff Checkel, "Ideas, Institutions, and the Gorbachev Foreign Policy Revolution," analyzes how the early-1980s international situation provided opportunities for policy entrepreneurs at research institutes to get their novel ideas to the leadership.

48. For a concise analysis, see Oye, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: Morphological and Behavioral Adaptations to the Nuclear Peace"; for more detail, Blacker, *Hostage to Revolution*, and Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance*, chap. 9.

policy proceeding in step with mounting feedback about the depth of socialism's competitive disadvantage. What gave new thinking clear meaning and imposed clarity on Gorbachev's preferences were concrete and costly unilateral Soviet concessions. What made these concessions happen was dire perceived necessity. The relative strength of one's country and its international position become more evident when one tries to change these things for the better. The failure of the more conservative versions of perestroika constituted new evidence about Soviet capabilities. As these failures accumulated domestically, Gorbachev became more forthcoming internationally.<sup>49</sup> Feedback about the resilience and reformability of socialism was obviously part of any assessment of Soviet capabilities, and this feedback did not accumulate linearly, but in fits and starts. The concentrated, non-linear nature of change does not mean that it is unconnected to perceived capabilities.

The more conservative the person (in Soviet terms), the greater the need for negative feedback before he or she could retreat from old convictions. Thus, regardless of where Gorbachev "really" stood, it took considerable negative feedback about Soviet power and prospects before large conservative sectors of the ruling elite could stomach retreats. The concessions to the West that led to renewed U.S.-Soviet détente were driven by two factors: the expected benefit in decreased international tensions and increased cooperation; and the high costs of existing security policy. For many moderates and conservatives in the Soviet leadership, such concessions were hard to take. But moderates and even conservatives shared Gorbachev's desire to rescue socialism, which in the immediate situation was largely a resource allocation problem. They all wanted to get their hands on the human and material resources of the defense sector. As Gorbachev lectured the Politburo in a February 1988 session: "Yes, we achieved military-strategic parity with the United States. And no one reckoned how much it cost us. But a reckoning was necessary. Now it is clear that without significant reductions in military expenditures we cannot resolve the problems of perestroika." The general secretary was preaching to the converted, for by 1987 he had assembled a strong Politburo majority on this issue.<sup>50</sup>

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49. Blacker, *Hostage to Revolution*, captures this process brilliantly.

50. From the diary of Gorbachev's principal foreign-policy adviser, Anatoly S. Chernyaev, in his memoir of these years, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym: Po dnevnikovym zapisiyam* (Moscow: Progress, 1993), p. 253. He notes that Gorbachev "examined each one of his major actions (and initiatives) from both angles—internal and external." Former Foreign Minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh recalls, "When Gorbachev came into power in Moscow, the economic statistics already indicated that the economy was doing not so good. So when you were talking about SDI and arms control, the economic element was sometimes, in my view, Gorbachev's number one preoccupation." Fred I. Greenstein and William C. Wohlforth, eds., "Retrospective on the End of the Cold War," *Princeton*

By looking at how the more traditionally-minded members of the Soviet leadership moved toward support for foreign-policy retrenchment, we get a rough measure of the influence of the cost side of the ledger. The budgetary connection turns out to be important in all issues, from regional conflicts to arms control to the reduction of the Soviet presence in East-Central Europe. Policies were changed when they were seen to be too costly. Gorbachev wanted to get out of Afghanistan from the outset of his tenure, but “with honor.” So the question was: on what terms? Washington insisted on its right to continue arming the mujaheddin rebels. While the political costs of the intervention vastly outweighed the material costs, budget constraints did provide an argument for accepting potential loss of prestige. In internal debates, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze argued for massive subsidies to prop up Moscow’s Afghan clients in the face of troop withdrawals and continued U.S. involvement. It was the pragmatic prime minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov, who countered that “the country cannot give up such a quantity of finances. . . . We understand that we must help, but we must reckon with the real situation.”<sup>51</sup>

Similar considerations surrounded Gorbachev’s dramatic arms control concessions. Ryzhkov later reconstructed his view of the perceptions that informed Soviet arms control policy in the 1986–88 period:

The main reason the negotiations broke through and agreement was achieved on intermediate-range missiles was our excessively high expenditures on defense. We understood perfectly well that we had to put an end to this confrontation. The Americans were twice as rich as we were, so we correspondingly felt our expenditures twice as much as they did. If five percent of gross national product was enough for them, we had to devote ten percent. We clearly understood that the country could not bear the share of state expenditures that existed at that time.<sup>52</sup>

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*University Center of International Studies Monograph Series No. 6*, 1994, p. 17. Many scholars who focus on the domestic sources for reform note that arguments about international competitiveness were crucial in getting more conservative members of the Soviet elite to support radical reform. See, e.g., Ed Hewett, *Reforming the Soviet Economy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1988), esp. pp. 365–367; and Jerry Hough, *Opening up the Soviet Economy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1988), esp. pp. 17–26. Concern over relative decline was also critical in obtaining military support for reform. See, e.g., Russell Bova, “The Soviet Military and Economic Reform,” *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (July 1988), esp. p. 394; and Dale Herspring, *The Soviet High Command, 1967–1989: Personalities and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), chaps. 5 and 6.

51. Ryzhkov interview transcript, p. 176; The “with honor” quote is from Gorbachev aide Anatoly S. Chernyaev’s discussion of Gorbachev’s views as of 1985 in *Shes’ let s Gorbachevym*, pp. 57–58. Chernyaev also supports Ryzhkov’s view of Shevardnadze’s position, recounting the foreign minister’s support for deploying special forces to Afghanistan to aid the beleaguered regime in January 1989, pp. 270–273.

52. Ryzhkov interview transcript, p. 179.

The Soviet decision revealed to the world in Gorbachev's December 1988 speech to the UN General Assembly, unilaterally to reduce conventional deployments in Central Europe by 500,000 troops, was not an easy one. After all, it implied a substantially reduced Soviet presence on the socialist allies' territory. Why contemplate such a reduction? Gorbachev explained the reasoning to the Politburo in November, 1988:

If we publicize how matters really stand: we spend two and a half times more than the U.S. on military needs, and not a single country in the world, not to mention the 'less developed' ones we shower with weapons without receiving anything in return, spends more per capita for those purposes than we do. If we bring glasnost to this fact, then our entire new thinking and our whole new foreign policy will go to the devil. . . . *But that's not even the most important aspect.* We cannot resolve the tasks of perestroika if we allow the army to remain as it is. All our best scientific-technical resources go there.<sup>53</sup>

Gorbachev concluded that "the problem of our [military] presence" had to be discussed with the allies as soon as possible, to which Ryzhkov added, "if we do not do this, we can forget about any increase in the standard of living. Appoint any government you want, and it will not resolve that task." According to Chief of Staff Marshal Sergei Akhromeev, even the top brass agreed. He reports in his posthumously published memoirs that "at the beginning of 1988, the leadership of the general staff had practically arrived at a difficult conclusion: a unilateral reduction of our military forces was possible, given the current military-political situation, and necessary, given the country's economic condition."<sup>54</sup>

Not long after the November Politburo meeting, Ryzhkov pushed through a decision to start demanding hard currency for energy shipments to the socialist allies. Once again, the decision to inflict such pain on the allies was tough. And once again, the reason given was the acute state of the domestic economy, which had to assume primary importance. Even Gorbachev's liberal advisers, such as Anatoly Chernyaev and Georgy Shakhnazarov, saw Ryzhkov's decision as brutal and unfair to countries whose energy dependence on the Soviet Union had been imposed by Stalinist hegemony, but they too saw the equally brutal Soviet economic woes as overriding such concerns.<sup>55</sup> These were not decisions they wanted to make, but ones they felt forced to accept.

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53. From Chernyaev's diary, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*, pp. 255–256; emphasis added.

54. Sergei F. Akhromeev and Georgy M. Kornienko, *Glazami Marshalla i Diplomata* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1992), p. 211.

55. Author's interview with Anatoly S. Chernyaev, Moscow, December 1993.

In short, Gorbachev and his colleagues in the leadership did not want to retreat from the world stage, give up socialism, make endless concessions to the West, or become liberal democrats. The evidence we have shows Gorbachev and others in the leadership reluctantly giving up their vision of socialism, the power of the Soviet Union, and the importance of its place in the world only under pressure. Cognitive change was compelled by mounting negative feedback. It is difficult to account for the series of wrenching Soviet decisions that set in motion the forces that ended the Cold War and precipitated the end of the post-World War II international system in the absence of hard perceived necessity. One cannot imagine Gorbachev—much less Ryzhkov or Ligachev—acquiescing in risky moves and retreating from hallowed precepts in the absence of dire need. Preferences clearly changed. The relative value of “socialism’s international positions” or “the Motherland’s international standing” declined in favor of “revitalizing the economy.” But preferences changed under the impact of negative feedback about socialism’s capability to do what was asked of it.

#### ANOMALIES OF THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Many accounts argue that three aspects of great-power behavior in the Cold War’s endgame are anomalous in terms of both history and realism: the Soviet Union’s decision to withdraw from East-Central Europe; the highly cooperative behavior of the other great powers; and the absence of great-power war. However, although it appeared to require an intellectual revolution in Moscow, a policy of careful appeasement and retrenchment is a historically common response to relative decline. The Roman, Byzantine, and Venetian empires attempted such strategies when they confronted the dilemma of decline. The modern cases of Edwardian Britain, Anwar Sadat’s Egypt, and even Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization come to mind.

WITHDRAWING FROM THE OUTER EMPIRE. Many observers would endorse Richard Ned Lebow’s contention that “the Soviet retreat from Eastern Europe went far beyond any conception of retrenchment.” The validity of this contention depends on how advanced Soviet perceptions of decline were when the decision was made to abandon the Central European allies. The less acute the perceptions of decline that surrounded the decision to give up the region, the more anomalous it appears to be. Lebow describes the decision as a conscious one taken by the leader of a country whose international position was no worse than that of Brezhnev’s Soviet Union. “Gorbachev may have been surprised by the pace of change, but not by its results. He and his advisors had been

discussing the possibility of cutting loose Eastern Europe as far back as 1987.<sup>56</sup> The implication is that Gorbachev would not have been surprised in those 1987 discussions by a proposal to exchange the Soviet Union's European alliance—with a reunified Germany joining a still-robust NATO—for a few billion Deutschmarks and a few trainloads of free German foodstuffs. However, the overwhelming bulk of evidence on Soviet decision-making about East-Central Europe contradicts this view.

People undoubtedly discussed cutting the allies loose in 1987, just as Lavrenty Beria discussed abandoning East Germany in 1953. The early discussions about East-Central Europe about which we have evidence have two common features: no concrete decisions flowed from them, and the payoffs of Soviet withdrawal were imagined to be much richer than what Moscow got in 1990. The existing secondary accounts, memoirs, interview-based reconstructions, and such internal documents as are available do not support the notion of a planned withdrawal from East-Central Europe. A more accurate characterization would be that the Soviet leadership tried fitfully to reduce the costs of the alliance while delicately urging reforms on its hard-line member governments. Less than a year after its adoption, the new approach produced unexpected results that forced Moscow to acquiesce in a series of painful retreats, often presented as *faits accomplis* whose reversal by force would have been very costly. The Soviets never resolved to get out until events pushed them out.<sup>57</sup>

The pattern of Gorbachev's policy toward the Warsaw Pact allies is similar to that in other areas. Like the new thinking as a whole, it contained substantial ambiguity, reflecting in part Gorbachev's own ambivalence about facing tough trade-offs. In 1988, the Soviet leadership decided to bring home some troops and reduce the costs of the alliance through a reduction in subsidies. Publicly, the policy proclaimed "non-intervention" and "freedom of choice."<sup>58</sup> What did

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56. Lebow, "The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism," p. 262.

57. For more evidence concerning Soviet decision-making on East-Central Europe, see Blacker, *Hostage to Revolution*; Jeffrey Gedmin, *The Hidden Hand: Gorbachev and the Collapse of East Germany*, (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1992); Ronald D. Asmus, J.F. Brown, and Keith Crane, *Soviet Foreign Policy and the Revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe*, R-3903-USDP (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1991); and Timothy Garten Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Random House), chaps. 3, 6 and 7. Note also the contemporary interviews with Soviet officials reported in Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era* (New York: Poseidon, 1991); Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At The Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993); Stephen Kull, *Burying Lenin: The Revolution in Soviet Ideology and Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992); and finally consult the recollections of Soviet officials in Greenstein and Wohlforth, "Retrospective on the End of the Cold War."

58. The public articulation of the policy is expertly documented in Asmus, Brown, and Crane, *Soviet Foreign Policy and the Revolutions of 1989*.

this mean? Gorbachev maintained that the allies had exercised freedom of choice when they chose socialism. In the immediate circumstances, the policy translated into a convenient "hands off" attitude: Moscow would not intervene to save hard-line regimes in trouble, but neither would it intervene against them or on behalf of reformers. What would Moscow do if a Warsaw Pact member chose capitalism and NATO membership? If the West intervened in the region, would Moscow? How would intervention be defined? The answers were unknown at the time, in the capitals of both NATO and Warsaw Pact member states, and even in Moscow itself. The ambiguity was removed when trade-offs were clearly faced, which in this instance did not occur until late in 1989.

The German issue is illustrative. By 1988, Soviet aides were indeed making suggestions for new thinking on the German question. The more radical among them suggested long-term plans for a confederative solution in return for German neutrality and the consequent de-fanging of NATO. These suggestions were rebuffed by cautious and conservative officials in the Central Committee and the Foreign Ministry and an indifferent or distracted top leadership. As late as the summer of 1989, top decision-makers simply did not think the situation dire enough to warrant risky diplomatic initiatives. East German accounts confirm a hands-off attitude from Moscow throughout.<sup>59</sup> There is simply no evidence for the existence of a long-range plan to "cut loose" East-Central Europe, or even of any planning for such a contingency. When the situation did begin to unravel, the indications are that Soviet policy plunged

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59. On Soviet assessments in 1988 and 1989, see Igor Maximychev (formerly minister-councilor of the Soviet Embassy in the Federal Republic of Germany), "What 'German Policy' We Need," *International Affairs*, No. 9 (September 1991), pp. 53–64, in which he says, "If there is anything to reproach our former 'German policy' with it is immobility and hidebound conservatism rather than a pursuit of any major change in the center of Europe," p. 54; and Maximychev, "Possible 'Impossibilities,'" *International Affairs*, No. 6 (June 1993), pp. 108–117. See also the testimony of new-thinking Soviet German expert Viacheslav Dashichev, whose innovative proposals on the German question were repeatedly ignored by higher-ups in 1988 and 1989, "Dann erhebt sich das Volk," *Der Spiegel*, January 21, 1991, especially pp. 137, 140. Also valuable are the memoirs of Yuly A. Kvitsinskiy, the Soviet ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany, who was continually frustrated in 1989 by the failure of his superiors to share his dire assessment: "In the summer of 1989 no one in the Moscow leadership could imagine that such an economically developed and prosperous member of the Warsaw Pact as the GDR would disappear from the map of Europe one year later." Kwizinskiy, *Vor dem Sturm: Erinnerungen eines Diplomaten* (Berlin: Siedler, 1993), pp. 13–14; see esp. chaps. 1 and 10. Finally, Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*, recounts Gorbachev's ambivalence about the "fraternal allies" and his sense that the problem would be best tackled later. See e.g., pp. 81–82; 268–269. For recollections from within the German Democratic Republic confirming the "hands off" attitude, see especially Egon Krenz, *Wenn Mauern Fallen: Die friedliche Revolution: Vorgeschichte, Ablauf, Auswirkungen* (Vienna: Paul Neff Verlag, 1991); and also Günter Schabowski, *Das Politbüro: Ende eines Mythos* (Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1990).

into rudderless confusion. Gorbachev's top military adviser, Marshal Akhromeev, reported in his memoirs that the Soviets still lacked any planning for German unification as of the December 1989 Malta summit.<sup>60</sup> As late as March 1990, the West Germans perceived a lack of policy definition on the Soviet side.<sup>61</sup>

If there is no evidence of an early Soviet intention to free East-Central Europe, it is clear that Gorbachev made positive decisions not to intervene to prop up collapsing allied regimes during the fall and winter of 1989. But those decisions were made by a leader with new and extremely alarming information about his country's capabilities and prospects. In East-Central Europe, as elsewhere, Gorbachev's strategy was a reaction to the perceived relative decline of the Soviet Union, but it was based on the idea of reforming socialism. Until the fall of 1989, the feedback generated by Gorbachev's policy was mixed but generally favorable. The foreign policy was achieving cooperation, beginning to disassemble the opposing alignment of great powers, and seemed on the verge of facilitating major transfers of resources away from the defense sector. But just as this positive feedback was logged in, the revolutions in East-Central Europe generated the most compelling and disturbing evidence yet about the lack of viability of Soviet-type institutions.

None of this sank in immediately. It is vital not to forget the slowness with which the Soviet leadership came to an appreciation of the meaning of these events. The evidence suggests that both the Soviet leaders and their western counterparts began to absorb the lessons only late in the fall of 1989. Until very late in the game, all sides thought that the Warsaw Pact could be maintained despite regime changes in the region. On September 28, the Politburo approved an analytical paper on the situation in Poland signed by Shevardnadze, Aleksandr Yakovlev, Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, and KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov. The document listed pressures for and against continued Polish membership in the alliance and concluded that the Poles would not raise the question of leaving the alliance "in the near future."<sup>62</sup> Even a month later, as East Germany was reeling under the impact of huge demonstrations and a

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60. Akhromeev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marshalla i Diplomata*, p. 253.

61. They consciously exploited this, according to top Kohl adviser Horst Teltchik in *329 Tage: Innenansichten der Einigung* (Berlin: Siedler, 1991), p. 187.

62. It did acknowledge that Poland's membership might assume a "formal character." "Ob obstanovke v Pol'she, vozmozhnykh viariantakh ee razvitiia, perspektivakh sovetsko-pol'skikh otnoshenii"; and attached note of 29/09/89. Photocopies of Protokol No. P166/23 of the Politburo session of 28/09/89, CPSU Central Committee. In author's possession. Courtesy of David Holloway.

mass exodus, policymakers in Moscow (and the West) believed that a reform communist government would save the country and with it the Warsaw Pact, at least for a time.<sup>63</sup>

When the issue was finally presented as “spill blood or lose socialism,” the amount of blood that would have had to be spilled was already great and the weaknesses of socialism had already been revealed in new and disturbing ways. By the time it became evident that losing socialism meant losing the Warsaw Pact, the constraints on Soviet actions were even greater. It is likely that private assessments of Soviet power were much more pessimistic than public ones.<sup>64</sup> These assessments must already have been quite gloomy by the time of the Central European revolutions of 1989, making the likely costs of any intervention or intimidation very high indeed. Ryzhkov found the aid to Afghanistan hard to bear in 1987, and subsidies to the allies painful in 1988. By then, the whole Politburo thought that the military presence in Central Europe was too costly. It is no wonder that they balked from an intervention that would have been frighteningly expensive in its own right, certainly in money and probably in blood; would have cut off Western credits and markets; and would have saddled them with their allies’ massive hard currency debts.

Assessments of power can change quickly. The Soviet Union’s reversal of external fortunes in 1989 was dramatically sudden. In that year alone, the issue of precipitous decline *vis-à-vis* the United States was transformed from looming threat to pressing reality.<sup>65</sup> What is “core” and what is “periphery” changes with changed power assessments. By August 1989, Shevardnadze, sitting with aides on the Black Sea coast of his native Georgia and contemplating the meaning of events in Poland, concluded that the long-term implications for the integrity of the Soviet Union itself were dire. For them, the Baltics and Georgia had suddenly become the core and the Warsaw Pact the periphery.<sup>66</sup>

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63. See Krenz, *Wenn Mauern Fallen*, Part III and pp. 223–227; See also Gorbachev’s December 1989 summit discussion with Bulgaria’s Petar Mladenov in *Gipfelgespräche*, pp. 143–160, and the sources in fns. 57 and 59 for more evidence on the “perestroika illusion” transferred to East-Central Europe. 64. See, in particular, Akhromeev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marsalla i Diplomata*; and Chernyaev, *Shest’ let s Gorbachevym*.

65. Akhromeev and Kornienko, *ibid.*, p. 254.

66. As related by Shevardnadze’s aide Sergei Tarasenko in Greenstein and Wohlforth, “Retrospective on the End of the Cold War,” p. 29. Here, Tarasenko mentions only the connection between East-Central Europe and Moscow’s inner empire. In a later follow-up interview, he recalled that the beach party was thinking about a much more prolonged process of imperial dissolution than turned out to be the case. In addition, Tarasenko stressed that Shevardnadze’s Georgian nationality led him to be more sensitive to this issue than others in the leadership. Chernyaev reports in detail on Gorbachev’s “illusions” about the survivability of the Soviet Union in *Shest’ let s Gorbachevym*, esp. chaps. 7–8.

GREAT-POWER COOPERATION. To many critics, the high levels of great-power cooperation during the Cold War endgame confound realist expectations.<sup>67</sup> Why did the western powers act so cooperatively rather than exploit Soviet weakness?

The West's cooperative behavior in the late 1980s does not present a puzzle for a realism that differentiates between revisionist and status-quo powers. Status-quo powers only go on the offensive in world politics to nip rising challengers in the bud or to buy the allegiance of allies that have their own revisionist projects. For the United States, sitting atop a global hierarchy that had recently seemed challenged by rising Soviet power, Moscow's decline provided relief without temptation. The only formally revisionist power in the West was the Federal Republic of Germany, but even it restrained itself until all had concluded that the German Democratic Republic was beyond rescue. Until quite late in 1989, the NATO allies wished mainly to keep what they had. If Gorbachev delivered those goods, they were all for him. Such cooperation is no anomaly for realists. They are not surprised when capitulation brings cooperation; it is always available at that price.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, describing western behavior toward the Gorbachev-era Soviet Union as "cooperative" obscures as much as it tells. Cooperation was on offer on the very same terms that had been available for decades: Soviet acceptance of the status quo as seen in NATO capitals. The issue went beyond the territorial status quo in Europe, which had been settled *de facto* since the early 1960s and *de jure* since the early 1970s. The issue was whether Moscow would accept the West's definition of the security problem. What was so remarkable about

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67. Deudney and Ikenberry, "The International Sources of Soviet Domestic Change"; Snyder, "Myths, Modernization, and the Post-Gorbachev World," in Lebow and Risse-Kappen, *International Relations Theory and the End of The Cold War*; Weber, "Security after the Revolutions of 1989 and 1991: The Future with Nuclear Weapons," in Garrity and Maaranen, *Nuclear Weapons in the Changing World*; and Mueller, "The Impact of Ideas on Grand Strategy," in Rosecrance and Stein, *Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*.

68. Structural realism, which does not regard a state's attitude toward the status quo as a necessary part of the theory, also suggests strong reasons for western reluctance to hasten the decline and fall of Soviet power. One of the theory's basic policy messages is how peaceful and easily managed bipolarity is, compared to multipolarity. Conservative western powers thus would not only lack an interest in hastening Soviet decline, but would face an incentive to preserve Soviet power. As Robert Jervis notes, the balance-of-power logic often leads to restraint *vis-à-vis* the loser; "From Balance to Concert: A Study of International Security Cooperation," in Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 65; for evidence on the tradition of restraint as practiced in the Hellenic city-states system, see Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis*, (London: Routledge, 1992), chap. 5.

Gorbachev's diplomacy in the years after 1987 was less its brilliance or strategic acumen than its slowly growing acceptance of the official Western view of the security problem.

Western officials believed that the Soviets were accepting their view of the situation for two reasons: first, because they had been right and the Soviets wrong all along; and second, because the distribution of power was now shifting in the West's favor. Key U.S. officials seemed to believe that not only were broader trends in the correlation of forces moving in their favor, but particularly that President Reagan's arms buildup was pushing Gorbachev toward concessions. An influential section of the administration thought that the Soviet Union was on its last legs, and that the United States should do nothing to slow the process.<sup>69</sup> Even officials inclined to be more forthcoming to Moscow believed that the balance of power was on the U.S. side of the negotiating table. The leader of that group, former Secretary of State George Shultz, wrote:

The Soviets were picking up our ideas and playing them back to us as though they had just invented them. That was fine with me. The more Gorbachev wanted to play the role of "creative world statesman for peace" by *coming toward our agenda*, the more we should stand back and applaud him in that performance.<sup>70</sup>

In 1987, Gorbachev, exasperated by U.S. refusal to make any concessions in negotiations on the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, complained that "U.S. policy is one of extorting more and more concessions. Two great powers should not treat each other that way." "I'm weeping for you," Shultz responded with a smile.<sup>71</sup> This is hardly a story of the emergence of cooperation between equals. It is rather a tale of cooperation emerging on the terms set by the stronger party, and that is how U.S. officials saw things, both at the time and in retrospect.<sup>72</sup>

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69. See Kurt M. Campbell, "Prospects and Consequences of Soviet Decline," pp. 154–157.

70. George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), p. 894; emphasis in original.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 723.

72. Two excellent sources of contemporary U.S. perceptions are Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn*; and Beschloss and Talbott, *At The Highest Levels*. See also: Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*; Thomas Banchoff "Official Threat Perceptions in the 1980s: The United States," and Michael Jochum, "The United States in the 1980s: Internal Estimates," both in Carl-Christoph Schweitzer, ed., *The Changing Western Analysis of the Soviet Threat* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990); Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner, 1990), pp. 30, 34; Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 296–298. Some U.S. officials held to this robust view of U.S. power well before the Gorbachev years. See, e.g., Alexander Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 96, 107.

It is a view shared by moderate conservatives in the Gorbachev leadership, such as Marshal Akhromeev and First Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kornienko.<sup>73</sup> Akhromeev and many other officials on the Soviet side strongly felt the weakness of their position at the December 1989 Malta summit.<sup>74</sup> The U.S. National Security Council's Soviet expert, Robert Blackwill, after perusing the classified minutes of all previous superpower summits, concluded that Malta was the first at which the drive for cooperation outweighed competitive impulses.<sup>75</sup> Realists would say this was not mere coincidence.

Soviet diplomacy changed dramatically in the last quarter of 1989, in rational reaction to new evidence about relative Soviet power. Up to that point, Gorbachev had been seeking, by a series of increasingly bold strokes, a favorable change in the status quo. He expounded a vision of a demilitarized, denuclearized Europe in which a reforming Soviet Union and wealthy Europeans could cooperate on all matters from the economy to the environment. Such a situation would be vastly superior to the status quo in which a powerful nuclear NATO held a long list of trade restrictions against the Warsaw Pact, and a European Community was on the verge of a new wave of exclusionary economic integration. When the revolutions in East-Central Europe began to call socialism's viability into question, Gorbachev's line changed to an emphatic endorsement of the status quo. From December 1989 onward, his policy became increasingly focused on enlisting Western support for stabilizing the Soviet Union's eroding international position. Only at this point did the Western powers, led by the United States, move "beyond containment" to deep cooperation with Moscow.<sup>76</sup>

It is important to note, however, that western governments were uniformly unwilling to take any significant political or security risks to help Moscow, although critics constantly urged such a course on them. The West's behavior was conservative, even when this would be very damaging to Gorbachev. It is true that for a brief period in the fall of 1989, NATO powers endeavored to

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73. Akhromeev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marshalla i Diplomata*, chaps. 6 and 7.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

75. Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, p. 379. Sergei Tarasenko later recalled that at Malta, both his boss, Shevardnadze, and Gorbachev "felt that the Soviet Union was in free fall, that our superpower status would go up in smoke unless it was reaffirmed by the Americans." Quoted in Beschloss and Talbott, *At the Highest Levels*, p. 153.

76. Soviet European policy in general is covered by Blacker, *Hostage to Revolution*, chap. 3; Gorbachev's brief shift to a status quo policy is detailed in Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance*, chap. 9; Beschloss and Talbott, *At the Highest Levels*, chaps. 6 and 7, document the Bush administration's move "beyond containment."

help Gorbachev keep the Warsaw Pact together out of a visceral fear of “instability.” The more evidence accumulated about the weakness of the Soviet Union in general and Mikhail Gorbachev in particular, the more weight conservative “stability” arguments should have assumed in Western calculations. However, they did not elicit increased Western willingness to sacrifice other goals on Moscow’s behalf. Much subsequent Western support was symbolic, while actual Western positions were devastating for Soviet prospects. The most dramatic example is West Germany’s policy on reunification, which continually used the prospect of substantial future German aid and cooperation to Russia as bait for Soviet acceptance of tough concessions now. At Malta, Bush told Gorbachev that he was for perestroika’s success and he promised not to “dance on the remains of the Berlin Wall.” But he bluntly told the General Secretary that the United States would support German reunification and that its position on the Baltic states was unchangeable.<sup>77</sup>

THE MISSING WORLD WAR III. Realism’s association of war and change was undeniable, and widely shared. Indeed, most thoughtful criticisms of realism accepted its fundamental argument that managing change peacefully was the basic problem of international politics. The problem was not the accuracy of realism’s central analysis, but its pessimism about solutions.<sup>78</sup> In the present case, two questions emerge. Why was the international system able to accommodate massive changes in power and territory peacefully? Why did the Soviet Union refrain from resisting its decline violently?

As I argued above, theories of hegemonic rivalry identify power transitions as likely points for war. Leading states express conflicting claims about the governance of the international system, and when states perceive a gap between others’ claims and their capabilities, they may unleash war. A rising challenger may conclude that the defending dominant state no longer possesses the capabilities to sustain its claim to leadership. A defender may conclude that its capability to sustain its status will decline relative to challengers in the future, and so unleash war now. Since military capability can only be measured by fighting, both states may rationally prefer war to negotiation.

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77. See Teltschik, 329 *Tage*, for reporting on contemporary West German views of Soviet stability and Gorbachev’s vulnerability. He describes the process by which small Western grants and large symbolic promises served as a crucial “catalyst” for German reunification within NATO on pp. 230–286. For the Bush-Gorbachev discussions at Malta, see Gorbachev, *Gipfelgespräche: Geheime Protokolle aus meiner Amtszeit*, pp. 94–129, esp. p. 120.

78. Keohane, for example, argued that we needed a theory of peaceful change not despite but because of realism’s pessimism in this regard. “Structural Realism and Beyond,” in Keohane, *Neorealism and its Critics*.

Such a potential for transition never occurred in the Cold War. The Soviet Union was arguably closest to military dominance of Eurasia in 1945, just when it was most exhausted from the war. It regained the initiative in subsequent decades, but even in the darkest Cold War days, the most pessimistic U.S. assessments placed the point of danger years in the future. All U.S. fears over various “gaps” in favor of Moscow concerned reversible trends, not existing relationships. Once Soviet power began to decline relative to the United States and its allies, it should have been evident that, absent a reversal of fortunes, no hegemonic war was in the offing. Soviet decline reaffirmed rather than reversed the existing hierarchy of world politics. Only the re-emergence of Russian power or the rise of new powers would once again set up the kind of contradiction that had governed world politics since 1945. With Russian decline, the system was at least temporarily primed for peace.

Moscow’s reluctance to resist decline violently is connected to the Soviet leadership’s prudent decision to deal with decline by reform and retrenchment. Belief in the necessity and the possibility of reform via resource reallocation smoothed domestic resistance to external appeasement and increased the perceived value of Western cooperation. Declining empires are often very reluctant to use force to arrest decline, aware as they are of their internal fragility. The Byzantine, Ottoman, Manchu Chinese, and Tsarist Russian imperial elites all acutely perceived the risks associated with foreign wars against more efficient rivals.<sup>79</sup> But declining empires also often take the violent path, as Austria-Hungary did in 1914. What explains such different reactions to the same problem?

Realism is on weak ground here, for the choice of how to react to external conditions is made by state authorities who will be influenced by domestic considerations. The argument that international conditions determine domestic choice is impossible to sustain, which is why realists never make it. Nevertheless, existing theories seem needlessly underspecified. International factors about which we may form generalizations surely must play a role. In the present case, the Soviet Union’s position as a challenging power is an extremely important contextual factor in explaining its reaction to decline. The point is obvious but needs to be made: challengers, by definition, do not like the status quo. It is always hard for Americans, whose country sits prosperously atop the global hierarchy, to see the extent to which other states’ elites might resent the existing international order. The popular structural-realist view of the two

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79. Stephen Peter Rosen, “The Decline of Multinational Empires: Introduction and Overview,” Harvard University, unpublished ms., n.d.

superpowers as structurally identical “duopolists” may also have fed the widespread American perception that Soviets shared the U.S. political elite’s attachment to the status quo.

It is true that some Soviet experts and diplomatic professionals came to view NATO, extended deterrence, and the rest of the Cold War panoply as good things. But this is not true of the Soviet elite as a whole, and it certainly does not reflect what we know of the views of Gorbachev and his closest associates. During the Cold War, Soviets saw themselves as endeavoring to increase their influence at the expense of the United States. But they saw the main contours of their policy as a series of reactions to strategic moves by the dominant global power. The great costs of their alliance system and defense complex were seen as imposed in part by the United States. If a hegemonic state believes it benefits from the status quo, its decline leads to the desire to cling to that status quo. A challenger, on the other hand, sees the status quo as unfavorable and is likely to be disinclined to make sacrifices on its behalf.

Critics rightly point to the existence of different domestic factions with different answers to international dilemmas as evidence of the indeterminacy of system-level explanations. In the Soviet case, a harder-line alternative to Gorbachev waited in the wings. But it is necessary to evaluate the influence of international conditions on the domestic struggle. Among the many factors that account for the failure of Soviet reactionaries to seize the political agenda, international ones must be given their due.<sup>80</sup> The Soviet Union’s position as frustrated challenger accounts in part for the frustration of Soviet reactionaries, for the international status quo was widely viewed as part of the Soviet Union’s problem. Its preservation was not an attractive solution. Gorbachev’s new thinking did appear to many as an effective response to the country’s external dilemmas until at least late in 1989. Indeed, to the extent that Gorbachev’s radical diplomacy upset staid NATO foreign ministries and defense bureaucracies, Soviet conservatives could find something in it to applaud.

### *Conclusion*

The post-1989 system transformation does not constitute a critical case for realism. Realist theories emerge from the end of the Cold War no weaker (though certainly no stronger) than they entered it. The end of the Cold War

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80. I consider other factors that weakened the Soviet reactionaries in Wohlforth, “From the Gulf to the Abyss: The Soviet Union’s Last Foreign Policy,” in Wolfgang Danspeckgruber and Charles Tripp, eds., *The Gulf War and the New World Order* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, forthcoming 1994).

international system was occasioned by the decline and collapse (or temporary contraction) of a great multinational state. Whatever the cause, this global transformation was realized when a great power abandoned valuable territory. This is a source of change which is quite consistent with realism. Post-Cold War post-mortems on realism have concentrated their fire on the wrong target—structural realism—whose long-acknowledged inadequacy for understanding change was on prominent display after 1989. The difficulty of conceptually and empirically separating structure from units is especially evident when power relations are in a state of flux. The temptation to measure structure after the fact is strong. It is hard to discern what the structure is at present, or exactly how we will know when it has changed.

The explanation I offer is an amalgam of classical realism and the hegemonic variant of neorealism coupled with a pragmatic empirical focus on decision-makers' capabilities assessments. The weaknesses of such an explanation are numerous. Despite its attention to historical contingency and complexity, it misses important elements of the story. A truly satisfactory account would include the personal strengths and weaknesses of Gorbachev and other central decision-makers, the precise causes of socialism's poor performance, the rise of national sentiments throughout the Soviet world, and many other factors. But to discuss the implications of these events for our general understanding of international politics we need theory, as weak and indeterminate as it may be. My explanation is derived from a set of theories that have demonstrated their utility for understanding a very wide range of diplomatic and military interactions among states and other social groups over very long spans of international history. It therefore provides a useful framework for comparing this episode of change with past and potential future cases. It zeroes in on a single independent variable while examining its impact in a way that accounts for complexity. It provides leverage for understanding the essential process of change in this case. It helps to establish a baseline from which to measure how much and in what ways the essentials of world politics have changed from earlier eras. It passes the twin tests of helping to understand and explain this event-series, and generating lines for further historical and comparative research to answer more basic questions about international politics. In particular, it suggests two lessons for theory, with implications for further research.

The first lesson is that a causal analysis of power is necessary, to enrich (some might say to weaken) realism in order to save it. One can construct rationalist and realist accounts that examine actors' beliefs and ideas, and this is the only way that realism can sensibly account for change in terms of power. There is

no need to jettison all rationalist and realist assumptions the moment ideas are taken into account. Many realist theories escape damage from the post-1989 transformation by ducking out of the line of fire. But if they wish to account for specific episodes of change, they must take a perceptual approach to power. "Power" explains "change" only if it is viewed phenomenologically.

Critics of realism are right that capabilities, as they are usually measured by political scientists, have little to do with what happened in world politics after 1987. There is little reason to suppose that gross capabilities indicators are any better at approximating decision-makers' assessments or expectations at other times. Indeed, such indicators are highly misleading because they lull their users into a false sense that the power curves of nations move gracefully, incrementally, perhaps even predictably. That assumption, more than any other problem intrinsic to international relations theory, is the primary reason for the failure at least to anticipate in general terms the way the Cold War would end.

Most scholars, including most realists, are reluctant to undertake empirical examination of the influence of power on policy. Their reluctance is understandable: studying power assessments is a clear step away from parsimony; it is laborious; and many may doubt whether operative assessments can ever be reliably reconstructed. Further, it reduces the scholar to the level of the decision-maker: rather than issuing all-knowing pronouncements on the invisible structures to which hapless decision-makers must react, the scholar shuffles humbly after the statesman, sharing his flawed views of power, perhaps repeating his mistakes. Many realists will not accept these limitations. On the other hand, those who do favor in-depth historical case studies also appear disinclined to analyze power assessments. We face a familiar contradiction: competing theories seem never to meet on the same methodological ground. This contradiction is costly, for the debate will never be resolved as long as realists and their critics refuse to examine how capabilities actually get assessed by real actors.

The second lesson follows from the first: episodes of revolutionary change must be studied in a theoretically-informed way. Classical realism identified two keys for understanding international politics: the capabilities and the interests of states. The problem is that these variables are hard to measure reliably. Capabilities can only be measured when they are put to some test. Interests can only be reliably gauged when decision-makers accept unambiguous trade-offs. Scholars have therefore assumed that major wars constitute the only opportunity to test the capabilities and intentions of states. Wars generated the most evidence of the highest quality about power and interests, and

since power and interests explain state behavior, major international change was concentrated in periods of war.

However, even in the absence of war, central causal variables can change radically in a short time. Revolutions or civil strife, as well as wars, may exert profound influence not only on scholars but also on the decision-makers they theorize about. Whatever independent variable one wishes to propose as an explanation of these events, it must have somehow varied a lot in a short time in order to account for the change, or else decision-makers must have received information about it unevenly, in concentrated bursts, rather than incrementally. If we accept the proposition that assessments of power and interest may rationally change quickly in certain periods, then such periods possess unique importance for theory. If that is so, it may not be necessary to invoke "intervening" variables, such as norms, regimes, or institutions, to account for the non-linear, concentrated nature of international change.<sup>81</sup> And it may be misleading to exclude periods of revolutionary change from the theoretical enterprise.

One area for further research is how decision-makers updated their assessments of power (and interests) in key historical cases. The temptation is to look immediately at periods of war. But it would be very helpful to sift the historical record with the suspicion that we have been biased toward associating war and change, missing other events that may have equal diagnostic utility for measuring power and interest. Another potentially significant bias may be the assumption that all declining states face the same incentives to use force: we may find that many of our inductive generalizations do not hold water, or we may discover superior generalizations. Perhaps we should weaken the hold exercised by Thucydides' portrayal of the hegemonic struggle between Athens and Sparta; perhaps we have studied the Napoleon Bonapartes too much and the Napoleon IIIs too little.

Looking to the future of world politics, two contradictory conclusions emerge. The first is that there are sound realist reasons to be at ease about the near future of great-power relations. The fact that the challenger rather than the defender exhausted itself in the struggle augurs well for international stability among the major powers. Presumably, the law of uneven growth would have to operate for many years to the United States' disadvantage before new challengers arise. Second, however, if my argument about percep-

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81. Stephen Krasner persuasively presents the opposing view in "Sovereignty: An Institutional Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (April 1988), pp. 66–94.

tions of power has any plausibility, then there are grounds for caution about confident projections of power relations based on the crude indicators so beloved of political scientists. Such indicators can account neither for the Cold War nor for its sudden end. Either power does not matter, or popular indices of power are not even roughly accurate indicators.

This leads to the frankly inductive warning for the West: keep a weather eye on Russia. Russia has often experienced rapid shifts in relative power with dire international consequences. In this century alone, Russia's sudden decline after the 1905 war with Japan and its equally sudden rise in the years before 1914 were important preconditions for World War I; its apparent weakness conditioned the disastrous diplomacy of the 1930s; its sudden rise in apparent power as a result of World War II set the Cold War in motion; its perceived forward surge in the late 1950s and early 1960s set the stage for the dangerous crises of that era; and its apparent sudden decline in the late 1980s was the catalyst for the greatest upheaval in international relationships in half a century. Russia may be down now, but prudent policymakers should not count it out.