
THE "END" OF THE COLD WAR

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No one can deny that the events of 1989 amounted to a sea change. Yet, just as the cold war confrontation was assessed very differently from varying analytical perspectives, analyses of the nature of the emerging international order will elicit major disagreements as well. Those analysts who are more sympathetic to Marxism will drift to one kind of explanation, while those who are more attached to pluralistic western democracy will adhere to another. And those who attach only a very minor significance to ideology and to the nature of domestic political and economic systems will reach still different conclusions.

Unless *glasnost* proceeds very much further, the West will not have as complete a picture as it would like of how Gorbachev and the rest of the Soviet leadership came to allow East Germany and the entire Warsaw Pact to slip out of their control. Were economic considerations the primary factor here? Or was it some kind of belated confirmation of George Kennan's predictions about the impact of external resistance (e.g., by the Afghans) on Soviet ideological self-confidence? Or do Gorbachev's openings to better relations with the outside world somehow suggest that such good relations would have been possible all along with his predecessors, going all the way back to Stalin?

On a practical level, sorting out the likelihood of war or peace around the world may be even more important now than explaining the end of the cold war. Economic tools are replacing military tools as the most important aspects of policy. This trend was already underway even before 1989, with the tearing down of the Berlin Wall merely being a dramatic confirmation of how "international political economy" has now assumed a place alongside "international security" in the typical university curriculum. The global concern in 1990 with how much of the world's oil might slip under the control of Saddam Hussein shows that international relations will remain complicated: military force can still be very relevant when it affects who controls economic resources. Nonetheless, the world seems to be on the threshold of a global conclusion that, as democracy spreads, war will no longer make sense for anyone.

As with Hitler in the 1930s, the behavior of Saddam Hussein demonstrates that a global peace dividend is something of a self-contradictory proposition.

An adventurous dictator can exploit this desire for peace to seize assets and territory. The message of Hitler in 1930 or Saddam in 1990 is essentially the same: "Since you desire peace so much, you will surely wish to stay out of my way as I make my conquests." One of the most important observations of Clausewitz was that "[t]he aggressor always calls for peace."¹ It is the side that resists aggression that produces a war, for if it simply gave in, no one would consider what transpired to be a war. World War II is remembered as having begun in September 1939, because the Poles resisted Hitler's attack, rather than in October 1938, when the Czechs did not.

Yet Hitler, Mussolini, and Saddam Hussein were dictators, never tolerating an opposition in a multi-party election campaign. Western liberals believe in democracy in all aspects, because it works for the happiness of the people involved in domestic life, and because it is assumed to produce peaceful international relations. As it enters the post-cold war years, with a spread of political democracy, the world will see dramatic proof, or dramatic refutation, of this tenet of liberal faith. Just as the wars between Vietnam and Cambodia, and then between Vietnam and China, had to be upsetting for any Marxist who had assumed that there would never be war between two Communist states, so such a war between two democracies could be finally disillusioning for a western liberal.

Economic Explanations

Why exactly did Gorbachev allow the Berlin Wall to fall, and, within the USSR, allow all of what *glasnost* and *perestroika* have amounted to up to the present? Very few western analysts saw Gorbachev, as he rose to power, as some kind of western liberal, as someone who considered Jefferson, Locke, or Wilson to be more relevant than Marx or Lenin. For the first several years of his rule, Gorbachev seemed mainly to be espousing a more honest and strict version of communism, wherein personal corruption would be less tolerated, store-managers would actually have to keep their grocery stores open for the entire advertised time, and alcohol abuse would be reduced, but where the Communist party would continue to rule without having to face opposition in elections, and where central management would still set prices and wages without any guidance from market mechanisms.

As Gorbachev surprised the world with what became an end to the cold war, the logical inference is that he himself had to be shocked at some point into making such moves, and the most plausible source of shock here is to be found in the realm of economics.² At some crucial point, Gorbachev must have been briefed on how totally bankrupt the Soviet economy had become in the years from Lenin to Brezhnev, how incapable of even keeping up with

1. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 370.

2. On Gorbachev's economic problems see Jan M. Lodal, *Saving Perestroika: Gorbachev's Next Step* (Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council, 1990).

the forward progress of the outside world, much less of surpassing it. Since everything else, in some elementary material sense, is derived from the basic economic accomplishments of one's society, the economic debacle Gorbachev had inherited presaged major consumer dissatisfactions, as well as a loss of relative international military power.

At some moment of truth, therefore, Gorbachev and his Soviet advisers realized that economic liberalization would be required if any material improvement of the Soviet economy was to be hoped for, and perhaps that this logically and inherently would require some political liberalization as well.

Around the world, it is not so clear that market economics and political freedom are inevitably linked. Taiwan and Chile suggest otherwise in one direction, and the democratic socialist governments of Scandinavia have at times strived to disprove the linkage in the other. But classic liberals like Friedrich Hayek³ would agree with Marxists like Fidel Castro that there is a sort of iron law by which economic individual freedom and political liberty are tightly linked: if you want socialism you cannot have free elections; if you want free elections, you cannot have socialism. And, if you want the gains of free-market capitalism, you will have to move toward free elections.

Gorbachev apparently concluded that the economic weaknesses of the USSR precluded continued support for the Communist regimes of the Warsaw Pact, and that Poles, Czechs, East Germans, and all others residing inside the Soviet sphere of influence would thus have to be allowed to take the meaning out of the pact and adopt non-Communist rule for themselves. Committed Leninists like Castro and Erich Honecker have argued that these concessions, as well as moves toward freedom of expression, contested elections, and the potential rights of self-determination within the Soviet Union itself, were premature and unnecessary.

As a life-long Communist, Gorbachev may also have had an exaggerated idea of communism's appeal to and popularity among the workers and masses of the countries it had governed, causing him (like Honecker) to realize too late that even a partial opening of exits from East Germany to the West would cause the entire Communist position in Eastern Europe to unravel, and to overrate the Communists' chances of winning any elections in Hungary or holding on to any power in Poland.

It will be a long time before the West knows whether Gorbachev had really anticipated how total the rejection of Communist rule would be all across Eastern Europe once it was made clear that Soviet troops would not intervene again as they had in East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in the past. Communist rulers around the world probably tend to overestimate their own popularity, even while they believe that what they are delivering to the people is so important that one should rarely, if ever, take chances with contested elections.

3. Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).

International Security

If economic factors are powerful candidates as the primary cause of the "end" of the cold war, they are so only because they translated into the effective termination of the Warsaw Pact. For decades, the geopolitical centrality of the USSR has been exacerbated by the forward position at which Soviet tank forces were deployed in the center of Germany, and by the reinforcement potentially offered to such forces by the armies of the Warsaw Pact, particularly the East German army, regarded as the best in the pact in training and discipline. Anyone seeking relief for cold war concerns in the 1960s or 1970s could have found some solace in the hope that under many scenarios the Soviet Union might not have been able to count heavily on the Czech or Hungarian armies. The success of any war between the Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would thus have depended largely on how the war began.

Yet what might have looked like wishful thinking in the pre-1989 years became a sure thing after 1989. The grip of the Soviet military, party leadership, and secret police apparatus on the societies and military potential of the countries of the Warsaw Pact was decisively broken. Whether Gorbachev intended to end the cold war, or merely let the trigger for cold war anxieties slip out of his fingers, the result was the same. The Soviets now have to withdraw their tanks and troops from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, *and* East Germany. If they were to attack NATO in the future, they would first have to fight their way across a zone of neutral or hostile countries, with none of those old Warsaw Pact armies plausibly enlistable as allies.

The Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe does not eliminate the threat to the West completely, but it substantially attenuates it. The total Russian population, some 160 million, still far outstrips the total for any other single nationality on the European side of the Urals (the Germans at some eighty million come next), the total of Soviet tanks remains large, and the USSR still sits at the center of the continent. Yet NATO has lost adversaries and gained allies in the transformation of the Warsaw Pact, and it has certainly gained room for maneuver. As the Soviet conventional threat to Western Europe is much reduced, so is the need for western threats of nuclear escalation, contemplation of substantial conventional force expansions, or fear of Soviet intimidation or "Finlandization."

It is possible that Gorbachev actually *intended* to terminate the cold war, rather than simply having this come as the by-product of pressing domestic economic adjustments. In the latter part of the 1980s, when most people would still have regarded the reunification of Germany as an impossible dream, Soviet defense analysts, especially the civilians attached to various research centers advising Gorbachev, had begun to endorse notions of "defensive defense" or "defensive sufficiency."⁴ This was part of a more open discussion of

4. For some very valuable Soviet statements on this subject see the 1987 IMEMO Yearbook, Institute for

the confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, in which the Soviets were for the first time admitting that a large part of the tension between the two alliances had been caused by the heavy Soviet investment in tanks and other tools of offensive warfare. While continuing to assert that the Soviet Union had always maintained only peaceful and defensive *intentions*, these analysts, joined ultimately by Gorbachev himself, conceded that offensive *capabilities* were by themselves enough to cause other states to be fearful. While noting that the geographical centrality of the USSR was something over which the Soviets had never had any choice, these statements now admitted that the investment in military mobility had exacerbated and worsened the inherent threat.

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There are several alternative explanations of why these statements, ultimately reflected in Gorbachev's unilateral commitments to reductions in Soviet tanks and total conventional forces and in the Conventional Forces in Europe agreements, were forthcoming. These may, as argued above, merely have been a reflection of the pressing demands of the Soviet economy and the need for economic *perestroika*, as the maintenance of conventional forces is the most expensive of military investments. They may similarly have been a reflection of the political *glasnost* which seemingly had to accompany *perestroika*; if all Soviet discussions were now to be freer and more open, it was certainly possible that fair-minded Soviet defense analysts would stop claiming that NATO and the cold war were simply the products of Wall Street propaganda. The new Soviet statements about the need to restructure land forces toward the defensive have in effect amounted to a plea of guilty to decades of western accusations about the threats posed to Western Europe.

Yet apart from the demands of economic restructuring which require military cutbacks and the free flow of ideas among Soviet intellectuals, Gorbachev and his associates may also have been weary and frightened of the threats they had to face in response to the challenges the USSR had posed in the cold war—the continual threat of nuclear escalation if a war were ever to break out. If Gorbachev ever wanted to see the end of western nuclear trip wire

deployments across the center of Europe and head off the enormous western military buildup launched in the Reagan years, he would first have to pull back the Soviet tank divisions against which these nuclear trip wires had been installed.

It will be a long time before scholars can establish whether Moscow would have been willing to withdraw its armor from its forward positions even if the Soviet economy had not been in such dire straits. The West indeed saw some evidence of a new Soviet reasonableness on international security issues in the admissions that Soviet tank forces were a cause for concern before the West was exposed to the full signs of the Soviet economic collapse; but the early warnings on the economy were already becoming visible in the mid-1980s.

Democracy vs. Geopolitics

The mature cold war could support the realist theory of simple power politics, by which all states behave the same and any power holding the central position on the world's largest continent would be a threat to the balance of power. It could also support the liberal view that instead viewed the major threat as stemming from the expansionist ideological imperatives of Marxism.

The events of 1989 are seen around the world as a dramatic confirmation of the liberal democratic view of the world. Woodrow Wilson spoke in 1917 of "making the world safe for democracy," but he really also meant making it safe *by* democracy.⁵ If the Soviet Union has come to believe that the workers of the world are not waiting for the Red Army to come and liberate them, will this produce peace in the world, regardless of geopolitics? And what if democratic practices and democratic government actually come to govern the Soviet Union itself? Could there be a cold war or a hot war between two political democracies?

Many liberals will say that they cannot conceive of any such war between two democracies. Power politics-oriented analysts will scoff in reply, noting that, until very recently, there were only some eighteen or so democracies in the world. Perhaps, they may suggest, democracies have not fought each other because they were not given a fair chance.

While the possibility of war between democracies remains an unresolved question, what is clear is that a nondemocratic state in a largely democratic world can still threaten the entire world order. If the aggressiveness of Saddam Hussein is truly curbed by a coalition of nations which are increasingly democratic and peace-minded, something will be established that would have warmed Woodrow Wilson's heart: a world made safe both by and for democracy.

5. The Wilsonian world-view is discussed in Edward H. Buehrig, *Woodrow Wilson and the Balance of Power* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1955).

Oil and Economic Factors vs. Geopolitics

The geopolitical theories of Sir Halford John Mackinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan were in flat disagreement about whether the seas or the Eurasian land-mass were the key to power.⁶ But these two writers totally agreed on the one question which defines them as geopoliticians, namely that the land/water boundary is crucial. In the years since World War I, however, a new geographic determinant may have arisen—the location of oil.⁷

More generally, the arguments have often enough been advanced, especially in the wake of the American disillusionment with the uses of military force in Vietnam, that the currency of economic power and the issues of economic interdependence will be much more important now than defense questions and the tools of military power.

But this may be an empty distinction. If the war with Iraq was “economic,” it was also certainly “military.” In many ways the cold war ended or at least abated because of economic factors; but the linkages are uncertain and complicated, and one could argue as well that it was western military preparedness that finally caused Moscow to rein in its ambitions and reduce its latent threat.

Should much less attention be paid to military questions in the post-cold war era? If economic interdependence grows in significance, the linkage by which this *replaces* military questions is hardly so straightforward or proven.

Nuclear Weapons vs. Geopolitics

The ultimate western response to the threat posed by geopolitics and/or by Soviet ideology was, for more than four decades, to rely on the threat of nuclear escalation, always amid doubts and fears about how this could work. Very possibly this deterrent threat did prevent aggressions that would otherwise have occurred. North Korea, with Stalin’s probable agreement, had indeed invaded South Korea in 1950, and this was the fate West Germany thereafter had to fear.

Once the first form of nuclear proliferation occurred, when the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons, doubts about the reliability of this American deterrent emerged. The French acquisition of such weapons by 1960 was rationalized as a means of overcoming such doubts, based on the argument that France would surely use its own bombs to retaliate against Moscow if Soviet tanks were crossing into France, even if the Soviet nuclear threat deterred the United States from unleashing its nuclear arsenal.

But what if every country were to imitate France and acquire its own nuclear weapons? If nuclear proliferation continues, the risks of local conventional aggression may decrease, but the risks of a nuclear war will surely rise,

6. Halford J. MacKinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962); Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1890).

7. For an interesting overview of the importance of the oil factor see Daniel Yergin, *The Prize* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

for accidents, madness, or military coups could all cause such weapons to come into use.⁸ Was the outside world's resistance to Saddam Hussein's Iraqi dictatorship primarily based on the rumors that Iraq has been reaching for weapons of mass destruction?

If the spread of nuclear weapons is not contained, issues of geopolitical structure will not be as important, nor will issues of ideology, the spread of democracy, or trends of economic interdependence. The mere fact that so much will be changed in a proliferated world (and almost always changed for the worse) has driven most of the powers of the world to cooperate for quite some time in discouraging such proliferation.

When people speak of the cold war being over, they often use 1989 as the benchmark. But Soviet-American cooperation on the nuclear proliferation issue has been quite remarkable ever since the 1960s.

Some Conclusions: The Relevant Factors

In summary, the realist analyst might be correct in asserting that the geopolitical situation was indeed a paramount cause of the tensions of the cold war. But the influence of ideology on each side certainly served to exacerbate these tensions: the cold war would most probably not have been as intense between a NATO alliance and a Russia ruled by a Kerensky or a Czar. And in light of the tensions produced by geography and ideology, nuclear weapons played a crucial role as a deterring stabilizer.

The events of 1989 have very much defused, and confused, this confrontation. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the weakening of the Soviet Union amount in many ways to a triumph of western ideology; our faith in free choice in economics and politics is dramatically confirmed.

But we now face a new set of concerns. Rather than worrying about the geopolitical details of where the continents stop and the oceans begin, our anxieties about material geography now may have to pertain more to the location of oil. Rather than worrying about whether democracy can survive, we may have to be more concerned about whether democracies will really be as inherently peaceful as we have always assumed. And rather than regarding nuclear weapons as the solution to the military problems facing NATO, we may dread their existence or proliferation around the world as the cause of new tensions and anxieties about responsibility and command and control.

8. On the dangers of nuclear proliferation see Leonard Spector, *Nuclear Ambitions* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990).

