Identity and the Cold War

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The question for this chapter is how Soviet and American national identities shaped and were shaped by the Cold War. Defining identity is not easy, however. Is it the same as self-image or self-perception? How does it relate to ideology and political culture? Can we treat national identity as singular in the face of internal differences? What evidence can establish the content or even the existence of identities, and how do we go about determining their causes and effects?

Although in the end perhaps we have to settle for the Potter Stewart definition of knowing it when we see it, more formally national identity can be seen as the set of values, attributes, and practices that members believe characterize the country and set it off from others. Identity is the (shared) answer to central if vague questions: Who are we? What are we like? Who are we similar to and different from? Identity is at work when people say "We must act in a way that is true to what we are," as Jimmy Carter did in his 1978 state of the union address when he declared that "the very heart of our identity as a nation is our firm commitment to human rights."3 Identities thus carry heavy affective weight, and this helps explain why scholarly arguments about the Cold War are often very bitter because the stakes include what the Soviet Union and the United States are like or should be like.

Soviet and American identities

As the preceding paragraph indicates, identities are like stereotypes in being over-generalizations. With this in mind, I think it is fair to say that characteristics of the American identity during the Cold War included democracy; individualism and voluntarism as contrasted to strong direction – let alone compulsion – from the government; opposition to concentrated power, especially when wielded by the government; the belief in a supreme being that supplies meaning to life; and a faith that this model or "way of life" can, should, and eventually will be adopted by others as well. To say that the United States saw its model as potentially universal is not to say that it was viewed by Americans as yet widely shared. Quite the contrary: the idea of American exceptionalism is not merely an academic construct but has deep roots in American society. The United States was founded to be different from the rest of the world (meaning Europe), and it would or at least could remain uncorrupted. As Thomas Paine explained, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again."4 Much of this can be traced back to the fact that the thirteen colonies were dominated by a middle-class fragment which, as Louis Hartz argued, meant that unlike Europe the United States never had a bourgeois revolution or a strong socialist movement, and this in turn helps explain why the United States feared and failed to understand revolutions and radicalism abroad.5

The Soviet identity also held out its system as one that would eventually spread throughout the world, but its content was very different in being built around the proletariat, the centrality of class conflict, and the transformation of individuals and societies. As Stephen Kotkin puts it: "From its inception, the Soviet Union had claimed to be an experiment in socialism, a superior alternative to capitalism, for the entire world. If socialism was not superior to capitalism, its existence could not be justified."6

1 For a good review, which also includes a discussion of methods for determining the substance of identities, see Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott, "Identity as a Variable," Perspectives on Politics, 6 (2006), 695-712. For identity and political conflict, see, for example, Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Consuelo Cruz, Political Culture and Institutional Development in Costa Rica and Nicaragua: World-Making in the Tropics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).


3 See www.let.rug.nl/~usa/F/jc39lspeeches/su78jec.htm, 8.

4 Thomas Paine, Basic Writings of Thomas Paine (New York: Willey, 1942), 65.


An additional aspect of Soviet identity, one about which Soviet leaders were ambivalent, came from interaction with the United States. This is the Soviet Union as a superpower, equal in status and rights to its rival. The ambivalence stemmed from the fact that at least some Soviets associated being a great power with behaving like a "normal" state – i.e., seeking narrow advantage and exploiting others rather than behaving in accord with socialist principles. But as Soviet power grew and a global reach became possible, the sense of the Soviet Union as being an equal of the United States became much more important. It increasingly rankled Soviet leaders that the United States consistently upheld a double standard and denied them the right to do things that the United States did routinely – for example, intervene in the Third World, establish bases all over, and play a central role in the Middle East. The Soviets then bent their efforts less to restricting American activities than to establishing the right for them to behave in the same way. Leonid Brezhnev and his colleagues placed great store in the Basic Principles Agreement of 1972 because it seemed to ratify their equality (Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did not take the agreement seriously and signed it just to humor the Soviets); détente broke down in part because of disagreements over whether the Soviets could emulate American behavior in the Third World. Status as well as specific privileges were involved. As Kissinger put it in a memo to prepare Nixon for a possible meeting with Aleksei Kosygin: "It has always been one of the paradoxes of Bolshevik behavior that their leaders have yearned to be treated as equals by the people they consider doomed."7

Symmetries and asymmetries in Soviet and American identities

Soviet and American identities had four major similarities or parallelisms, but they heightened rather than dampened the conflict. First, each implied a form of universalism in that there was nothing unique about the country that meant its values could not spread. Some countries do have identities that are founded not on nationality or myths of blood and common heritage, but on ideas. The United States is famously a country of immigrants, one in which it was possible to be "un-American" by believing incorrect ideas. For the Soviets, universalism was built into the ideology from the start. There was nothing particularly Russian about Marxism, and indeed the triumph of this doctrine in a backward country was regarded as a fluke. Indeed, for the Soviets, and to a lesser extent the Americans, the validity of the founding principles would be upheld only if they triumphed elsewhere.

Second and relatedly, both the United States and the Soviet Union saw themselves as the standard-bearers of progress and modernity. It was taken for granted that historical advancement is real and that while there might be setbacks, other peoples would eventually follow the same path that they did. Furthermore, within the world and within each country, there were progressive and regressive forces, and the former deserved encouragement if not active support.

Third, in a break from traditional European thinking about international politics, both the Soviet and the American ideologies implied that states' foreign policies were deeply influenced by their domestic systems. In the framework of Kenneth Waltz, they were "second-image" thinkers.8 A balance of power might temporarily yield peace and security, but because of the primary role of the nature of the domestic regime, the world could be made safe for democracy (for the United States) or for Communism (for the Soviet Union) only if it became dominant if not universal throughout the world.

Finally, perhaps because the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the result of revolutions, each was prone to expect and seek transformations of politics. For the USSR, the nature of the class struggle meant that gradual change was unlikely. Politics was not about small advantages and adjustments of interests, but about the basic question of Kto-Kogo – who-whom, who is going to dominate and who is going to be dominated. Transformationism was not as prominent an element in the American worldview, but President George W. Bush did not have to conjure it up from nowhere. As Steven Sestanovich has argued, during the Cold War the United States often reacted to setbacks not by limiting its goals or adjusting its tactics, but by seeking major changes, and this approach had deep roots in American history.9


8 Kenneth Waltz, Man, the State, and War (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

These similarities created a malign environment. Most fundamentally, they meant that while temporary agreements were possible, especially to minimize the danger of war, deep and long-run cooperation was not. A second-image view of international politics implies that the international conflict can end only when the other's fundamental beliefs and domestic arrangements change.¹⁰

One shared belief restrained conflict, however, and indeed may have saved the world from war. Each side believed that time was on its side, and that if war could be avoided, the long term would bring not only survival but victory. The most dangerous combination of beliefs is short-run optimism coupled with long-run pessimism, which gives great impetus to preventive wars; fortunately, most of the Cold War was characterized by long-run optimism even as predictions about the short-run oscillated.

As important as these similarities are four asymmetries between Soviet and American identities. First, Soviet identity came from the top down, and it remains unclear exactly how much of it was adopted by the population at large. This made Soviet leaders wary of permitting contact between their citizens and outsiders, and indeed their worries were well founded. Second, the American identity was much less self-conscious than the Soviet self-image. The lack of American awareness gave a certain flexibility to policy and a resilience to its sense of self. Third, Soviet identity pivoted not on what Soviet society was, but what it could be, and, relatedly, on what it should lead the world to be. American identity, although also looking to the future, was based on a view of what American society actually was (of course an idealized one). Because the Soviet identity represented beliefs about what would develop, it could lead to grave disappointments. Fourth, Soviet identity grew out of an explicit ideology, one that both predated the Soviet state and was formed in explicit opposition to capitalism, the main force it would confront during the Cold War. American identity developed more slowly, and, although it could readily be pressed into service against the Soviet Union, originated in differentiation from Europe, and especially Britain, which was seen as tyrannical.

Perhaps the most important implication of the asymmetries was that domestic reverses and the failure of the world to move in desired directions would be corrosive to the Soviet regime and identity. This also helps explain what I think is the fact that the American identity was left relatively unscathed by the Cold War. This conflict left its mark on US domestic society, politics, and economy, but sense of self was altered relatively little. Hartz hoped that its encounter with the world in the Cold War would lead the United States to better understand itself and the range of social processes operating in the world. This turned out not to be the case, however.

The theoretical context

At first glance, the disputes over the importance of identity as a cause of Soviet or American foreign policy would seem to be a classic example of what international relations (IR) scholars call the level of analysis question and historians talk of as "Primat der Innerpolitik" versus "Primat der Aussenpolitik." Much traditional IR and diplomatic history argues that the main determinant of states' foreign policies is their external environments. This means not only the general context of international anarchy (i.e., the lack of sovereign power above national governments), but also the particular landscape of adversaries and allies through which the state must navigate. The fundamental contrast is to arguments asserting that internal characteristics and domestic politics are crucial, that different states will behave differently despite similarities in their external situation, and that foreign policies are guided by domestic factors and often aimed at producing domestic change in others.¹¹

How identities operate

While identity is internal, in two crucial ways it operates differently from the factors discussed in the previous paragraph. By its very nature, an identity cannot be completely internal because it forms in response to others. To hold an identity is to set a boundary, to separate Self from Others, to exclude as well as include. Furthermore, the very act of separating people into groups, even without any rational basis, leads to an in-group bias. Conversely, conflict usually leads the actor to see the adversary in a way that maximizes contrast with it. Thus, differences between the United States and the Soviet Union, great as they were, were often exaggerated in the United States, especially at

¹⁰ This is why I think the Cold War can be described as a "deep security dilemma" in which each side was an inherent threat to the other's security: Robert Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?" Journal of Cold War Studies, 3 (2001), 36-60.

¹¹ For more discussions of the empirical implications of theories at different levels of analysis, see Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), ch. 1.
the start of the Cold War when differentiation was most necessary. Although
the totalitarian model of the USSR had significant validity and was readily
accessible because of the previous experience with Nazi Germany, its wide-
spread acceptance owed at least something to the contrast it provided to
American individualism, freedom, and lack of state control.

The links between seeing others as different and having a hostile relation-
ship with them are reciprocal. To paraphrase Charles Tilly, "identity makes
conflict, and conflict makes identity." Although more attention has been paid
to the influence of identity on conflict, the reverse is at least as strong. Thus,
while feelings of racial superiority may underlie much imperialism, the
perception of racial differences and their central importance often follows
rather than precedes conflict and domination. For the United States in much of
the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when leaders or countries became
targets of enmity or acquisition, they developed darker skins. Similarly,
conflict can magnify, or even create, a collective sense of self. Catholics and
Protestants in Northern Ireland deepened their communal ties and identity
when they were attacked for being Catholic or Protestant; Bosnians had little
sense of this as a meaningful category and held a relaxed view of Islam until
they were driven from their homes for being Bosnian and Muslim. Identity
can then come from how others define you.

In the modern era when states must claim and believe to be fighting for
more than simple material advantage, the need to differentiate will entail both real
and perceived changes. Thus, with the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbs and
Croats tried to develop distinct languages from what had been a shared Serbo-
Croatian. They claimed to be purging "their" language of words introduced by
the other and to be returning to the ancient and pure version but in fact often
achieved the differentiation by developing new words. In the Cold War, each
side shunned anything that smacked of the other. In the mid-1950s, in addition to
adding the phrase "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, Congress replaced
"E pluribus unum" as the official national motto with "in God we trust," which
was also put on paper money. Arguments against increased federal spending for
education received added power from the association of central control of
education with Soviet indoctrination, and measures of community that smacked
of compulsion rather than voluntarism had to be avoided. Along with actual
changes came perceptual changes and exaggerations. The degree to which
American society was in fact individualistic was exaggerated and episodes and
areas that were communal or communitarian were downplayed. The role of
government, including state governments, in American economic development
was slighted and the quality of American democracy was exaggerated.

The conception of democracy was also at least marginally influenced by the
Cold War, just as American ideas on this topic had been shaped by previous
encounters with enemies. For scholars in the 1930s influenced by the Great
Depression, democracy had a significant economic dimension, and substan-
tive outcomes were included. As the Cold War developed, scholars came to
define democracy solely in terms of procedures such as competitive elections
and a free press. There are good intellectual reasons for this formulation and it
might have been adopted in any event, but it was no accident that it provided a
sharper contrast between the United States and the Soviet Union than did the
older one.12

Tensions, détentes, and identities: the limits
of sustainable claims

If identities can be shaped by conflict, perhaps one of the root causes of conflict
is the need of one or both sides to establish and maintain an identity, which is
difficult to do in a relaxed international system. This need could be conscious
or unconscious and could arise either from popular pressures or elite manip-
ulation. We should then expect the Cold War to be at its most bitter when
identity is under most pressure and, conversely, cooperative policies to be
pursued when identities are secure. The argument is not without some
plausibility, and we could see the early Cold War years as ones in which
each side, having been challenged by world war and domestic upheavals,
felt a loss of self and turned to a foreign enemy for confirmation and consolidation.
But it is difficult to see later periods of détente as arising from secure
identities,13 and counterfactuals illustrate how the supposed connections
between posited identity considerations and foreign-policy behavior can all
too easily be fitted to any history that unfolded. Had the United States and the
Soviet Union reached out to each other in the early period, one could attribute
this behavior to the social and psychological security that came from winning
the world war, and if the Cold War had coincided with extensive immigration
into the United States, this line of thinking would lead us to conclude that
American elites conjured up a foreign threat in order to Americanize the
newcomers.

12 Ido Oren, Our Enemies and Us: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science
13 Indeed, it can be argued that it was domestic unrest that forced the leaders into détente;
Jeremi Suri: Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détené (Cambridge, MA:
If the argument that conflicts are created in order to differentiate between populations and produce unity within them is too Machiavellian, the less extreme claim that conflict induces homogeneity is worth more consideration. This claim implies that conformity will rise and fall with international tensions. There is something to this, especially on the Soviet side. At the start of the Cold War, Iosif Stalin launched a campaign to denigrate the West and ensure that Soviet citizens had no contact with it. But we should not be too quick to accept the common claims for a parallel process in the United States. Although the stereotype of the late 1940s and 1950s is indeed one of conformity, it is far from clear that this is accurate. Abstract Expressionism, often held up as an example of the way in which the United States differentiated itself from the Soviet Union and sought to win over the Europeans by showing them that it had a significant culture, was transgressive and met with fierce resistance, not least from conservatives who strenuously objected to government-sponsored exhibits of it abroad.  

While McCarthyism policed the liberal flank of acceptable views, its success was less attributable to widespread domestic sentiment than to calculations and maneuvers by the mainstream Republican leaders. The foundations for the later success of the civil rights movement were also laid down in the early Cold War years, and Cold War concerns were largely responsible for the limited support for racial equality that was provided by the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration. International tension did not consistently solidify a narrow identity or slow social change in the United States.

The early Cold War years also saw heightened homophobia, justified in part by the claim that homosexuals were security risks, which was a self-fulfilling prophecy because as long as being gay was stigmatized, homosexuals were vulnerable to blackmail. But the subsequent changing course of American attitudes toward homosexuality does not track with increases and decreases in international tensions. Here as elsewhere, the influences on American culture were numerous and the Cold War was not the most potent one.

Even more strikingly, the economic policies not only of Harry S. Truman but even of Eisenhower did not maximize the differentiation from socialism. Although the onset of the Cold War may have diminished liberal impulses, the role of the government in the economy in the 1940s and 1950s looks very

large from today's perspective, with vigorous anti-trust measures, a degree of economic planning, the consolidation of the welfare state, and high taxes on upper-income brackets. Many of the measures undertaken to meet the perceived Soviet threat increased federal direction of the society, most obviously the increased role of Washington in education, and an interstate highways project that literally reshaped the American landscape. Two general conclusions follow. First, international competition can lead to measures that do not easily fit with identity or can undermine it. Second, the fact that the United States, unlike the Soviet Union, has a relatively strong society and a relatively weak state means that many of the forces acting on it came internally, and, while not unaffected by the course of the Cold War, had much autonomy from it.

Identity and the standard view of the Cold War

Arguments for the importance of identity come through most clearly by contrast with what is the standard account, at least in IR, which is that the United States and the Soviet Union were "enemies by position," to use the felicitous phrase by Raymond Aron. They emerged from World War II as the only superpowers; no other state could menace them and each by its capabilities menaced the other. The normal frictions of international politics, the desire by each country to ensure its own security, and perhaps expansionism by one or both sides then made the latent Cold War manifest.

This story is not all wrong, but it is incomplete. First, although both the United States and the Soviet Union were potential superpowers by dint of their size, they were able to play this role only when they mobilized significant domestic resources and placed themselves at the head of their respective blocs, something that only followed their clashes. Second and relatedly, bipolarity may tell us that each superpower will view the other warily, but structure and even specific instances of friction do not automatically produce the degree of hostility and fear that characterized the Cold War. Would hostility have grown as it did if the two superpowers had had compatible identities? Third, while it is true that each side thought that the other was menacing its interests, only to some extent can we explain how each conceived of its interests by reference to uniform and unchanging factors of

16 Raymond Aron, Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations, trans. by Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 198, see also p. 544. I am indebted to Marc Trachtenberg for noting that this phrase does not fully reflect Aron's views of the conflict, which is less deterministic than this.
Stalin claimed that the creation of NATO led to an enemy encirclement of the Soviet Union. Some Western cartoonists saw it differently; here is Leslie Illingworth’s illustration from 1949.

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Identity and the Cold War

Conflict in the Third World

At first glance, it might seem that Soviet–American competition in the Third World can be readily explained by traditional IR theories. These tell us, after

all, that major states struggle for power and advantage, that each will try to match what the other does, and that clients will be sought. Just as the European powers divided Africa and much of Asia during the period of imperialism, so the United States and the Soviet Union sought to spread their influence around the globe. But in fact the competitive logic of international politics does not lead to this conclusion. The most prominent IR theory, Waltz’s neorealism, argues that because the superpowers were so much stronger than everyone else and able to balance against the adversary by mobilizing their internal resources, they did not need to pay much attention to the Third World. The power of identities and the related fact that each side understood the Cold War as a clash of social systems explains much here. With Europe and China having chosen one way of life or the other, the Third World represented the uncommitted states and peoples. What was at stake was nothing less than each side’s view of the rightness of its cause, the universalism of its values, and the answer to the question of whose side history was on. Kissinger’s reaction to Salvador Allende’s election in Chile was particularly telling: “I don’t see why we have to let a country go Marxist just because its people are irresponsible.” The idea that an educated and sophisticated country would choose a different path was deeply upsetting for reasons that go beyond standard interstate power competition.

The Soviets felt that supporting revolutionary forces was not only good international politics because it weakened the adversary, but also a revolutionary duty. The whole purpose of the Bolshevik Revolution was to lead others to the same path. One of the great surprises in Soviet archives was that the elites spoke the same way in private as they did in public. Politburo stationery bore the heading “Proletariats of the world unite!” and while this did not mean that Soviet security was to be risked to help foreign comrades, this mission was a central part of Soviet identity. Class conflict was the driver of politics, and without its revolutionary mission the Soviet Union would have no convincing self-justification.

The sense of being on the right side of historical forces and the duty to help them along come out nicely in the Kennedy–Khrushchev discussions – a mild word for the exchange – at Vienna. To the president’s plea that events in the


Third World had to be managed so that they were not unduly upsetting to either side.

Mr. Khrushchev said that the West and the U.S. as its leader must recognize one fact: Communism exists and has won its right to develop ... The Soviet Union is for change. It believes that it is now in the political arena and it is challenging the capitalist system just as that system had challenged feudalism in the past. Mr. Khrushchev ... wondered whether the United States wanted to build a dam preventing the development of human mind and conscience. To do such a thing is not in man's power. The Spanish Inquisition burned people who disagreed with it but ideas did not burn and eventually came out as victors. Thus if we start struggling against ideas, conflicts and clashes between the two countries will be inevitable. Once an idea is born it cannot be chained or burned. History should be the judge in the argument between ideas ... Did the President want to say that Communism should exist only in those countries that are already Communist and that if Communist ideas should develop the U.S. would be in conflict with the USSR? Such an understanding of the situation is incorrect, and if there really is such an understanding, conflicts will be inevitable. Ideas do not belong to any one nation and they cannot be retracted.

Although Nikita Khrushchev may have enjoyed tweaking his younger and less experienced counterpart, there is no reason to doubt his sincerity, just as there is no reason to doubt that he shared the sentiment that Mikoyan expressed to him that meeting Castro made him feel young again.

Since the Third World started out as non-Communist, if not always friendly to the United States, the main American objective was to keep it that way. Although it always hoped for the spread of democracy and American values, the primacy of blocking the Soviet Union meant that it was relatively open-eyed in its support of tyrannies when this proved necessary, as it often did. As President John F. Kennedy explained in the aftermath of the assassination of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic: "There are three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime, or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we really can't renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third."

The Soviets were also willing to be pragmatic and often supported friendly Third World countries that repressed the local Communist parties, such as in Egypt. But on these occasions they had to tell themselves that these regimes, as bourgeois nationalists, were historically progressive and would eventually lead to socialism. This helps explain their continuing faith in the Third World despite the almost unbroken record of disappointment.

Of course, neither side reacted to the Third World as it actually was, but to what they perceived, and each saw events and possibilities through the lenses of their own experiences, hopes, and fears. For both sides, modernization was crucial, but in quite different ways. The United States believed that revolutions and Communism grew out of poverty and despair. If countries could be launched on the path of economic development, and if the difficult years of destabilizing transition could be weathered, then they would begin to resemble the West. Walt Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth* was the clearest statement, but it was only one of a whole shelf of related volumes. The Soviet Union also placed great faith in modernization, which it was undergoing itself. The model of how it was leading its Asian populations to modernity was...
particularly important to it. This produced optimism, the sense that many Third World regimes were or soon would be ripe for revolution, and led to the perception that many Third World leaders had the skill and will to lead their countries to socialism at home and alignment with the USSR. If the United States suffered from exaggerated fears, the Soviet Union held exaggerated hopes. Both saw the Third World through the lenses of their understanding of their own history.

Khrushchev, the thaw, and the Third World

Both Soviet identity and its response to the Third World changed more than the American, and this was not a coincidence. Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization was built on a less rigid view of the role of class and class conflict, just as the earlier perception of great threat from the capitalists made it seem dangerous to permit domestic relaxation. As Ted Hopf explains, acknowledging difference at home made the acceptance of differences abroad less threatening. When the distinction between workers and members of the bourgeoisie was taken to be either-or, with no mixtures or complex combinations possible, compromise was difficult at home and abroad; by making class only one of many possible identities for another state, the Soviet Union multiplied its possible relationships in the world. The wider scope for what it meant to be a good Soviet citizen or to be on the path to socialism made it much easier for Khrushchev to see the bourgeois nationalist regimes as potential allies, as countries that were moving in the right direction rather than being irretrievably non-Communist. Indeed, local Communist parties could be sacrificed to permit domestic relaxation.

The relations among the thaw, modifications of Soviet identity, and external relations bring us back to interactions. Identities are shaped by existing and desired relations abroad as well as shaping them. The realization that the Third World was the best ground on which to compete with the West and that this would be possible only if the USSR courted regimes that were constituted differently was conducive to constructing a less rigid Soviet identity. What the Soviet New Times said in its retrospective survey of 1995 also characterized the changes in domestic attitudes: “The desire to find what unites countries, not disunites them, became a universally accepted slogan.”

Similarly, the pressing need for relaxing tensions with the West in order to decrease the danger of war and gain access to Western economic resources and technology not only provided a strong impetus to peaceful coexistence, but also made it more likely that Soviet leaders would adjust their self-image to be consistent with the new policy. People want to think of themselves as principled and consistent, and so their beliefs about many things, including themselves, will be modified to justify their behavior.

Détenue, identity, and the end of the Cold War

The relations between identity and foreign policy are brought out well by the 1969–1975 détente and the end of the Cold War, and to compare them brings us back to the asymmetry between the Soviet and American identities. What is most important for my analysis is the decline of détente, but this cannot be examined without some discussion of its origins and course. As usual, we know more about the American side, for which Vietnam was central. Nixon inherited a bloody and unpopular war and, like Lyndon B. Johnson before him, could neither win it nor afford a defeat. For Johnson and Nixon, what was at stake was the credibility of American commitments around the world, and the importance of credibility was greatly enhanced by a nuclear strategy that stressed the role of resolve and signals in producing deterrence in an era when nuclear war meant total destruction. This also meant that it was not so much defeat that was unacceptable as it was defeat of a type that would produce these unfortunate effects. Thus, if the Communists won not by pushing out American troops, but only after a decent interval following their removal, the harm to the United States would be less and the domino effects could be greatly attenuated. Furthermore, if the Soviet Union could be pressured into helping end the war, it might not take the American actions as indications of weakness.

Such a “soft landing” was also needed for reasons more closely related to identity, as an open defeat in Vietnam could undermine the self-confidence of the American public, and perhaps of US leaders. From the start of the Cold

24 Quoted in Hopf, Social Construction of International Politics, p. 94.

25 For further discussions of US policy, see the chapters by Frank Costigliola, Robert D. Schulzinger, and Marc Trachtenberg.
War, the US elite worried that the public lacked the steady nerves that the struggle required and was prone to vacillate between defeatism and excess fear on the one hand and unwise bellicosity on the other. Defeats were particularly dangerous because they could lead to an over-reaction in either direction, and if the United States was to keep on track, the war had to be ended in a way that minimized its adverse consequences.

The Nixon administration also sought to limit Soviet advances in the Third World through the policy of linkage—i.e., making arms-control agreements, treaties formalizing the European settlement, and access to American economic resources contingent on Soviet restraint in the Third World. This assumed that the United States could afford to withhold these benefits if the Soviet Union did not cooperate. And that, of course, was the problem. Although in earlier periods the United States had resisted negotiating from a perceived position of weakness, Nixon and Kissinger had no choice. American opinion had turned against the war in Vietnam and it simply had to be ended. Furthermore, the war had undercut the domestic support for vigorous defense programs and measures to counter Soviet penetration of the Third World.

Soviet motives for détente both overlapped and differed, and also in part related to identity. For them, Vietnam was both a danger and an opportunity. The danger was that the war could spread, Chinese influence could grow, and chances for economic relations with the West would decline. (In fact, Soviet-American relations entered such a deep freeze that President Johnson and Soviet ambassador Dobrynin were reduced to discussing whether the Broadway musical Hello Dolly would be permitted to travel to the USSR.) The benefits of the war were equally obvious: the United States was wasting its efforts, dividing its alliances, and alienating much of the Third World. Furthermore, for the Soviets, Vietnam had intrinsic value as a revolutionary movement, and they had the duty to support it as this was the raison d'être for the Soviet existence. Even had it not been for competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC), it would have been very difficult for the Soviets to cooperate with the United States in a way that kept South Vietnam non-Communist.

For them, as for the Americans, the Third World was also important, but in a quite different way. As Brezhnev explained in 1976: détente did “not abolish or alter the laws of class struggle.”26 The Soviets hoped that by stabilizing the central issues of arms and Europe, détente would allow them to proceed with competition in the Third World from a position of equality. Being treated as an equal was both a necessary part of a robust policy in the Third World and a valued end in itself. The Revolution had truly arrived: Moscow was recognized as a power equal to Washington; the capitalists finally realized that communism was permanent; this would now set the stage for its eventual triumph. For the Soviets, détente offered a great opportunity to confirm what they were.27

The decline of détente

At bottom, détente failed because the two sides had incompatible expectations.28 The United States saw the easing of tensions as a way to maintain the status quo in the face of American weakness; the Soviets saw it as a way to attain equal status and gains in the Third World. Although a variety of calculations, miscalculations, and accidents were at work, even under the best circumstances détente could not have brought the Cold War to an end because the United States and the Soviet Union, being founded on such different principles, were inherently a threat to each other as long as they were what they were. For the Soviets, there were then real limits beyond which détente could progress if it meant restraining itself in the Third World; the policies that were dictated by the Soviet conception of its interests and duties meant that it would be hard to maintain good relations for long in the face of US resistance.

It remains unclear whether Nixon and Kissinger pursued détente in truly cooperative terms and thought that it might be semi-permanent. This is the view expounded by Kissinger in the first two volumes of his memoirs and vigorously attacked by Raymond Garthoff, who argues that the administration never ceased pursuing unilateral advantage.29 In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, however, Kissinger dropped his earlier stance and endorsed Garthoff’s, using the third volume of his memoirs to argue that he saw détente as a way of gaining breathing space until the public would support a harder line, and claiming that the United States made no concessions in the hope of establishing long-run cooperation. For our purposes, what is crucial is


27 For Soviet policy, see William Taubman and Svetlana Savranskaya’s chapter in this volume and Vladislav M. Zubok’s chapter in volume III.

28 For assessments of détente, see Jussi Hanhimaki’s chapter in this volume and Olav Njelstad’s chapter in volume III.

that Kissinger's second view implies that the USSR remained a revolutionary power, driven by its ideology and identity. Whether or not the latter view was correct, to the extent that American policymakers believed it, détente in fact could not have been permanent.

From the start, détente was opposed by neoconservatives who argued not only that the United States was getting the worse part of the bargain, but that the very notion of détente was flawed because it abandoned America's deepest ideals of supporting the forces of freedom throughout the world. Although some of the critics were opportunistic in seeking their own domestic political advantage, their stance was effective because it represented a strong reaffirmation of American identity and the parallel claim that the Soviets were driven by theirs. A détente that accepted a Communist Soviet Union was a betrayal of American values and would at most buy a temporary respite since it could not tame the expansionist Soviet policy that stemmed from its identity. Furthermore, such a policy would sacrifice domestic support because even if Kissinger, Nixon, and Gerald Ford were realists, the bulk of the American population remained truer to traditional American values.

Jimmy Carter's presidency embodied and magnified the contradictions in Kissinger's views. On the one hand, Carter and some of his advisers thought the United States had exaggerated the Soviet threat and believed that there was a great deal of common interest that could be realized through diplomacy - the United States and Soviet Union were, after all, normal states. On the other hand, he and others in his administration believed that the Soviet Union would press the United States wherever possible throughout the world, yet was vulnerable because its domestic system, which drove its foreign policy, was increasingly recognized as a failure. While this view was skeptical about détente, it recognized that a crucial lever could be American insistence that the Soviet Union grant human rights to its citizens. It appears that Carter's stance here was simultaneously instrumental and principled.

But even had Carter ignored human rights, détente probably would have failed. The Soviets saw a number of opportunities to support movements and states in Africa that they believed to be progressive, if not revolutionary. The United States was being forced to grudgingly acknowledge Soviet equality, and even if the Soviet moves harmed relations with the United States, this was a price worth paying. Some of the gains came in traditional power-political terms, but at least as important was the Soviet feeling that they could not be true Soviets if they abandoned the progressive cause. This played a role in the dispatch of troops to Afghanistan that gave the coup de grâce to détente. The potential loss was not only of a client on their borders, but that a potentially socialist state would revert to the forces of reaction.

Identity and the end of the Cold War

The Cold War ended when Soviet identity shifted, and Reagan refused to reciprocate Soviet concessions until he believed that this was occurring. This provides a fundamental contrast with the earlier détente. The change in Soviet policy and identity, furthermore, grew out of comparisons and interactions with the West.

Mikhail Gorbachev and his colleagues realized that the Soviet system was failing. But this failure was relative not absolute. The economy was not collapsing, indeed it was growing a bit. There was no starvation or privation, and despite the concern of Soviet military leaders, the large and secure nuclear arsenal was adequate to deter an American attack. The inadequacies of the Soviet performance appeared only when compared to the capitalist world. This had always been true, but in the past Soviet leaders could tell themselves that they were catching up. The contrast between East and West Germany was particularly striking since many of the other excuses of the weak socialist performance were implausible here. Furthermore, increased travel and contacts with the West meant that more members of the Soviet elite understood the situation, which undermined the leaders' confidence in their system and the beliefs that had produced it. Competition in the Third World by military activities, foreign aid, or serving as a model of development was obviously being crippled. Since the Third World represented the future, impending failure there cast doubt on Soviet prospects. Even more centrally, the knowledge that socialism had failed to out-compete capitalism struck at the core of Soviet beliefs about themselves and the world.

To reform the Soviet economy, Gorbachev needed better relations with the West in order to reduce military spending and gain access to Western investment and technology. Thus, he began a series of initiatives and concessions, mostly dealing with arms control. These were accompanied by a basic shift in outlook toward world politics, summarized in the phrase "new thinking." Whether these ideas were largely rationalizations for policies forced on him by pressing circumstances or whether they were autonomous and more freely adopted is heatedly debated but is of less importance here than the fact that the...
new thinking implicitly if not explicitly contradicted key elements of Soviet identity. Not only was lowering international tensions given priority over supporting progressive movements, but the sources of tension were located in the traditional dynamics of international conflict, especially misperceptions and spirals of unnecessary hostility and fears. In arguing that Soviet isolation and Western belligerence were largely brought on by ill-advised Soviet actions, Gorbachev adopted what IR scholars call a security dilemma analysis. Although not new to Western observers, this line of thought was not only innovative in the Soviet context but constituted a denial of the crucial idea that politics pivots around class conflict. Thus, at the XXVIIth Party Congress in 1986, for the first time there was no mention of the “world revolutionary process,” and by December 1988 Gorbachev abandoned talk of defending the “Socialist Commonwealth,” of supporting progressive revolutions, and of the dangers from “American imperialism.”

Once Gorbachev and his colleagues concluded that they needed a solid rapprochement with the West, it was hard for them to maintain that the difference between the Soviet and American social systems had to be central to their relationship. So it is no accident that Yegor Ligachev, who opposed Gorbachev’s policies, claimed that “We proceed from the class nature of international relations. [Any other approach] only confuses the Soviet people and our friends abroad.” Once class conflict was dropped, little remained of the unique Soviet identity and mission in the world. Even if the Soviets thought that their system was more humane and progressive than capitalism, there was no reason to believe that Soviet security required keeping the West on the defensive, and little need to resist concessions on arms control or maintain Soviet clients in the Third World. As Marx and Engels had said, the revolutionizing power of capitalism was so great that under its influence “All that is solid melts into air.”

Gorbachev famously said that he was going to do something terrible to the United States – he was going to deprive it of an enemy. In fact, what is striking is how little the United States actually changed after the Cold War. While Soviet identity was formed in opposition to a capitalist world, American identity did not need Communism, and the United States came out of the Cold War with little more knowledge of itself or others than it had at the start. Whether the American identity would have withstood prolonged reversals abroad or falling behind the USSR in economic and technological competition is an interesting question. Certainly, American self-confidence was shaken at a number of points, especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But having deeper roots in its own society and history, the American identity had a resilience that the Soviet one did not. Although American society changed markedly during the Cold War, it is far from clear that it would have been much different had those years been peaceful or characterized by conflict with a different adversary. Furthermore, to the extent that American identity did change during the Cold War, there was a broadening of sense of self, a greater tolerance for diversity, and, at least until the late 1970s, the acceptance of a greater role for government in many spheres of life, just the opposite of what we would expect if the Cold War had led to an exaggeration of those features that separated the United States from the USSR.

It is not hindsight that leads to the conclusion that the asymmetries outlined earlier were crucial. Maintaining Soviet identity depended on the future unfolding according to plan: a cooperative worker’s society was to be put in place, the Soviet Union was to modernize, class conflict would dominate until the workers prevailed, and the superiority of Communism would be demonstrated by overtaking the West and by the triumph of revolutions abroad. Until these hopes were dashed only limited détentes were possible, and these would be undermined by the refusal of either side to give up the competition. Conversely, when the hopes faded and politics was not seen as dominated by class conflict, there was no reason for the Soviet Union to either menace or fear the US, and once American leaders concluded that the Soviet domestic system was changing, issues that had bedeviled the relationship for so long were easily resolved. The Cold War ended only when one side’s identity did; it could not have ended peacefully otherwise.

33 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 7. Of course, Marx and Engels were referring to the displacement of pre-capitalist systems by the rise of the bourgeoisie, but the point seems to have more general validity.