

The Soviet Economic Decline and Great Power Politics

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How is the end of the Cold War to be understood? More generally, is the way that conflict ran its course, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, to be understood in realist terms—that is, as a process in which power considerations were of primary importance and in which ideological factors played a relatively minor role? Many scholars who have written about the final phase of the Cold War, as William Wohlforth pointed out, “either dismiss or denounce explanations informed by realist theory.” But Wohlforth’s own view, which he developed in more than “24 publications between 1991 and 2005,” was very different.¹ In a series of remarkable articles, he and his co-authors (most notably Randall Schweller and Stephen Brooks) argued that the end of the Cold War *was* to be understood in primarily realist terms—that it was a case, to use E.H. Carr’s phrase, of “rational and peaceful ‘adjustment to the changed relations of power.’”²

From a realist perspective, relative power is in large part a function of relative economic strength, and the USSR’s economic decline, according to Wohlforth and his co-authors, was the main factor that led the Soviets during the period in the late 1980s when Mikhail Gorbachev was General Secretary to pursue the policy they did.³ Their argument turned on certain claims about timing. The USSR’s economic performance had in their view been quite satisfactory until the mid-1970s.⁴ At that point, however, “Soviet economic performance took a sudden turn for the worse.”⁵ It took a while, however, for the Soviet leaders to realize how profound the problem was: “observers can only know that they are living through a ‘trend’ if the

¹ William C. Wohlforth, “No One Loves a Realist Explanation: The Cold War’s End Revisited” *International Politics* Vol. 48: Nos. 4/5 (July/September 2011) ([link](#)), p. 441. For a list of his works on the subject, many of which were co-authored, see Wohlforth’s c.v. ([link](#)).

² Randall Schweller and William Wohlforth, “Power Test: Updating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War,” *Security Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 2000) ([link](#)), p. 106.

³ See especially William Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994-95) ([link](#)); Schweller and Wohlforth, “Power Test” ([link](#)); Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000-2001) ([link](#)); and Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, “Economic Constraints and the End of the Cold War,” in William Wohlforth, ed., *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Debates* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003) ([link](#)).

⁴ Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War” ([link](#)), pp. 109-110; Wohlforth, “Ideology and the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 2 (April 2000) ([link](#)), p. 327.

⁵ Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War” ([link](#)), pp. 16, 18; Brooks and Wohlforth, “Economic Constraints” ([link](#)), pp. 277-78, 280.

phenomenon has been under way for several years.”⁶ So it was only “in the early 1980s, just as the systemic decline of the Soviet Union became undeniable” that “Soviet policymakers at the highest levels began to agonize over relative decline” and the situation began to have a major impact on policy.⁷ Wohlforth in fact suggested that it was “in the 1982-83 period” that the new ideas about policy began to get through to the top leadership—that is, just before Gorbachev got the top job.⁸

That very important argument did not, of course, go unchallenged, and the most cogent criticism focused on those claims about timing. As Mark Kramer pointed out in a 1999 article, Wohlforth had overlooked “the extent to which Soviet leaders perceived a sharp relative decline at the start of the 1980s,” well before Gorbachev came to power. Declassified Politburo transcripts as early as 1980, Kramer noted, were “full of apprehensive comments about the Soviet Union’s relative power.” Yet none of the Soviet leaders at that time, he says—neither Leonid Brezhnev nor Yuri Andropov nor Konstantin Chernenko, who served as General Secretary for about a year after Andropov’s death in 1984—would ever have considered “any of the liberalizing steps that Gorbachev took.”⁹ The implication was that if economic factors were as important as Wohlforth had made out, then one should have seen a relatively dovish policy take shape in the pre-Gorbachev period; since it was out of the question in Kramer’s view that Soviet policy at that time could have developed along those lines, the economic problem could not have played nearly as great a role as Wohlforth had claimed; it followed that other factors, especially ideology, were more important than Wohlforth had suggested.

Wohlforth responded by loosening his argument a bit. The break we associate with Gorbachev, he argued, was perhaps not quite as sharp as was commonly assumed. “There was actually more pressure,” he and Stephen Brooks wrote in an article they published a year after the Kramer article came out, “to shift

⁶ Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War,” pp. 27-28 ([link](#)); Brooks and Wohlforth, “Economic Constraints” ([link](#)), pp. 281-82.

⁷ Brooks and Wohlforth, “Economic Constraints” ([link](#)), pp. 282-83. See also Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War” ([link](#)), p. 28.

⁸ Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War” ([link](#)), p. 110

⁹ Mark Kramer, “Ideology and the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 4 (October 1999) ([link](#)), p. 566. See also Richard Ned Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism,” *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (Spring, 1994), pp. 263-64 ([link](#)).

policy toward retrenchment before 1985 than standard accounts allow.” The growth in Soviet military spending had actually been capped in the pre-Gorbachev period, and “it was Brezhnev, Andropov, and Ideology Czar Suslov who privately revoked the Brezhnev Doctrine in 1980-81 when they ruled out direct intervention in Poland as beyond Soviet capabilities.”¹⁰

This point about Poland was of fundamental importance because if true—that is, if the Soviets in the final analysis were prepared to accept the collapse of the Communist order in Poland at that time—this would mean that the decisive change in Soviet policy toward eastern Europe had taken place while Brezhnev was still in charge. Kramer, however, seemed to think that the Soviets before Gorbachev would never have accepted the loss of Poland. Indeed, he stated explicitly that Andropov would never have done what Gorbachev did with Soviet foreign policy. For Andropov, “the only important thing,” in Kramer’s view, “was to hold the socialist bloc together (and expand it if possible) under tight Soviet control.”¹¹ What all this suggests is that the whole question of how powerful economic constraints were in shaping Soviet foreign policy turns to a considerable extent on this one fairly narrow historical issue: would the Soviets in the final analysis have intervened militarily in Poland in 1981 or 1982 if that was the only way to keep the Communists in power there?

And the important point to note here is that the evidence released in the 1990s—most of which Kramer had himself presented to the English-speaking world in a series of important articles—shows quite clearly that the Soviets in general, and Andropov in particular, were *unwilling* to intervene even if the Polish Communists were unable to control the situation on their own. Andropov was astonishingly blunt in this regard. “We do not intend to introduce troops into Poland,” he said at the climactic Politburo session held on December 10, 1981. “That is the proper position, and we must adhere to it until the end. I don’t know how things will turn out in Poland, but even if Poland falls under the control of Solidarity [the main opposition group in Poland], that’s the way it will be.” The rest of the leadership, although reluctant to make the point as explicitly as Andropov had, evidently shared that view. “There cannot be any introduction of

¹⁰ Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War” ([link](#)), pp. 28-30. For the evidence on Poland, see n. 67 on p. 30.

¹¹ Kramer, “Ideology and the Cold War” ([link](#)), pp. 566-67.

troops into Poland,” the foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, noted. And Mikhail Suslov, another key leader, agreed: “there can be no consideration at all of introducing troops.” No one added: “except, of course, if that’s the only way Communist rule can be maintained.” No one even responded to Andropov’s remark about Solidarity by saying, in effect, that if the Communists were about to lose control in Poland, the basic decision about non-intervention would have to be reconsidered. The discussion at the December 10 meeting, moreover, was no flash in the pan; as Andropov noted, the policy had been formulated at the previous Politburo session, and Brezhnev had also taken this basic line on earlier occasions. The key point was that whether the Poles instituted martial law or not was entirely up to them: as Andropov summed it up, “whatever they decide is what will be.”¹² And the Soviet leadership held to that position even when it became clear to them that the General Jaruzelski, the head of the Polish government, might not act if the Soviets did not promise to intervene if things did not go well following a crackdown; their willingness to run the risk of Jaruzelski not taking action shows how determined they were to bite the bullet and allow events in Poland to take their course.¹³

This extraordinary evidence on the Polish affair should lead us to re-think some very important and much broader issues. Could it be that the Soviets had essentially crossed the Rubicon well before

¹² Politburo session, December 10, 1981, in Mark Kramer, ed., “Soviet Deliberations during the Polish Crisis, 1980-1981,” *Cold War International History Project Special Working Paper No. 1* (April 1999) ([link](#)), doc. 21, pp. 164, 165, 166, 168. Note also the note of the October 29, 1981, Politburo session, *ibid.*, doc. 20, esp. p. 152, where Andropov says that “we need to adhere firmly to our line—that our troops will not be sent to Poland.” See also Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 335-36. The notes of the December 10 meeting were first published in English in conjunction with Mark Kramer’s article, “Soviet Policy during the Polish Crisis,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 5 (Spring 1995), pp. 1, 116-26; the document in question is on pp. 134-37 ([link](#)). That document had been published in a Russian journal the previous year; see Wojtech Mastny, “The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980/81 and the End of the Cold War,” *Cold War International History Project Working Paper no. 23* (September 1998), pp. 8 (n. 4), 29 ([link](#)). In his 1995 article, Kramer found it hard to believe what the evidence he presented seemed to show, namely that the Soviets were really prepared to accept the loss of Poland; Andropov’s comment about not sending in troops, even if Poland were to “fall under the control of Solidarity,” he viewed as an “anomaly” (Kramer, “Soviet Policy during the Polish Crisis,” p. 123). My own view is that while Andropov was more explicit than his colleagues, his basic point about Solidarity was implicit in the decision the leadership had reached: to rule out a military intervention was tantamount to allowing events to run their course in Poland. One should also note, given the issue that we are concerned with here, that Andropov justified the decision about non-intervention by alluding to the possibility that the West would react to a military move by imposing “very burdensome” economic and political sanctions on the USSR; the Soviets had to be “concerned above all with our own country,” and that evidently meant maintaining economic relations with the West, something that was essential for “the strengthening of the Soviet Union” (Kramer, “Soviet Deliberations,” p. 165).

¹³ See Mark Kramer, “Jaruzelski, the Soviet Union, and the Imposition of Martial Law in Poland: New Light on the Mystery of December 1981,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 11 (Winter 1998) ([link](#)), pp. 5-14.

Gorbachev came to power? Could it be, in other words, that the basic problem with the Wohlforth argument is that he had not taken it far enough? The Soviet economic problem, as I show in a companion article, had been clear both to American specialists and to the Soviet leadership since the late 1960s.¹⁴ Even the evidence that Wohlforth and his co-authors presented, if you read it carefully enough, indicates that Soviet economic performance had begun to deteriorate well before the mid-1970s.¹⁵ And if the seriousness of the problem had been clear for some time, wouldn't that suggest that the Soviets should have been more inclined to draw in their horns and pursue a relatively moderate, status quo-oriented, policy, not just in the 1980s, but well before that? That is what the basic thrust of the Wohlforth argument should lead us to expect. And suppose it turns out that Soviet policy during the Brezhnev period *was* a good deal more moderate than was widely assumed at the time, and suppose also that we conclude that the deepening economic problem had played a basic role in bringing about that sort of policy. Those conclusions would be of fundamental importance. We would have discovered a key, perhaps even *the* key, to understanding why things ran their course the way they did not just in the late 1980s but in the whole period from the mid-1960s on.

¹⁴ See Marc Trachtenberg, "Assessing Soviet Economic Performance: A Failure of Intelligence?" (unpublished). The whole discussion here builds on the argument developed in that companion piece.

¹⁵ Thus the graph Brooks and Wohlforth give in their 2000/2001 *International Security* article ([link](#)) to support the claim that it was only in the mid-1970s that the Soviet economy "took a sudden turn for the worse" seems to show that the decline began in the late 1960s (pp. 15-16). And the graph they present to support the claim that the "early 1980s marked the beginning of the longest period in the post-World War II era in which average Soviet growth rates fell behind those of the United States" actually suggests that that period began a full decade earlier—that is, around 1974 when the two growth rate curves crossed (pp. 19-20). Indeed, they themselves write that "according to the most recent CIA estimate"—which they seem to view as if anything presenting too rosy a view of Soviet performance—"the Soviet economy reached an all-time peak of 57 percent of U.S. gross national product in 1970," implying that the Soviet growth rate was essentially less than America's essentially from that point on (p. 21). Finally, their claim that "for the first time in the Cold War era," it had become clear in the early 1980s "that barring some dramatic turnaround the Soviet Union would never close the gap in brute economic output with the United States, to say nothing of closing the gap in technology" (p. 19) is somewhat at variance with their point that America's "relative position stabilized after 1960" (p. 22).

Rethinking Soviet Policy

Those basic conclusions would be of particular importance, given the way the Soviet policy was commonly interpreted even in the 1980s—and the way it is still often interpreted. According to that view, the Soviet leadership, at least in the pre-Gorbachev period, was not interested in reaching a real accommodation with the West. Indeed, the claim was that a degree of aggressiveness was essentially built into the Soviet system. The idea that the USSR was not interested in true coexistence was shared even by writers who sensed that ideological fervor had declined dramatically. Imperialism, according to the Harvard political scientist Adam Ulam in 1978, perhaps the most distinguished scholar working in this area, was “a vital element of the rationale of the Soviet system.” With Communist doctrine discredited or irrelevant in the eyes of most of the Soviet people, “the regime strives to demonstrate its viability and vitality through foreign expansion.”¹⁶ “If the missionary ardor has vanished,” according to Walter Laqueur in 1983, “the ecumenical ambitions persist, and the Soviet Union has not become a status quo power. The state-of-siege system is still needed to provide legitimacy for the ruling stratum.”¹⁷ The Harvard historian Richard Pipes, in a 1984 article, also recognized the decline of ideology. “Corrupted by privilege and peculation,” he wrote, the Soviet ruling class had “lost, since Stalin’s death, any sense of service or obligation, whether to the ideal of communism or to the nation.” But he went on to argue that imperialism was “endemic to the Soviet system in part because its ruling elite has no other justification for maintaining its power and privilege than to create the phantom of an ever-present external threat to the country’s survival, and in part because it seeks to compensate its citizens for deprivations at home by manifestations of its might abroad.”¹⁸ There was, in fact, nothing new to that line of argument. George Kennan, for example, had interpreted Soviet policy in internalist terms in his famous “X” article of 1947.¹⁹ Alexander Gerschenkron also thought the Soviets needed a certain level of

¹⁶ Adam Ulam, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: Unhappy Coexistence,” *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 3 (1978) ([link](#)), p. 568. See also Adam Ulam, “The World Outside,” in Robert Byrnes, ed., *After Brezhnev: Sources of Soviet Conduct in the 1980s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 347-48, 350.

¹⁷ Walter Laqueur, “U.S.-Soviet Relations,” *Foreign Affairs* 62, no. 3 (1983) ([link](#)), p. 581.

¹⁸ Richard Pipes, “Can the Soviet Union Reform?” *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 1 (Fall 1984) ([link](#)), pp. 50, 59.

¹⁹ “X” [George Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July 1947) ([link](#)), esp. pp. 570-71. See also George Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), esp. pp. 166, 251-52.

international tension for domestic political reasons.²⁰ And the theory, although never universally accepted, remained very much alive in policy circles throughout the Cold War period. In 1971, for example, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, then Henry Kissinger's top assistant at the White House, wrote his chief that "for all the stultification of ideology, the Soviet state remains a revolutionary one" and could not be "brought into a rational system of world order."²¹

That theory provided an explanation for what was often portrayed as a simple empirical fact: Soviet aggressiveness in world affairs. Pipes, for example, referred in 1984 to the USSR's "hitherto unbridled appetite for conquests."²² Robert Conquest in 1975 spoke of the Soviets' "total hostility to the West and all the West stands for."²³ That same year a number of former diplomats, journalists and academics who had "devoted their professional lives largely to work in and study of the Soviet Union," met in Miami to discuss Soviet policy and in particular to talk about where things were headed. One is struck by how dark a view many of the participants took at those meetings. "The mass of Americans," the veteran diplomat Elbridge Durbrow said, "think that peaceful coexistence means the Soviet want peace and stability. But the last thing they want is peace or real coexistence. No question about it." Loy Henderson, who had also served for many years in the State Department, thought that "the Soviet Union's main purpose at the present time is to become the most powerful country in the world"; it might not want a confrontation right now, but it would like to be able in a few years "to not hesitate any longer about confrontation," hoping that America would "bow rather than risk a war we know we couldn't win."²⁴ And it was not just hard-liners who believed the USSR was not interested in true coexistence. In 1973 Marshall Shulman, then director of the Russian

²⁰ See Alexander Gerschenkron, "The Stability of Dictatorships," originally delivered as a lecture at Yale in 1963, and reprinted in Alexander Gerschenkron, *Continuity in History and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968). The dictatorship's "thirst for enemies," he wrote, "cannot be quenched as long as the system continues in existence." It was for this reason that "Stalin initiated, in the fall of 1945, the policy of the cold war," but that policy outlived Stalin: "In order to pose as the defender of the nation from foreign threats, Soviet Russia has untiringly conjured up one crisis after the other."

²¹ Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, January 7, 1971, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. 13, pp. 264-65. ([link](#)).

²² Pipes, "Can the Soviet Union Reform?" ([link](#)), p. 60.

²³ Robert Conquest, "A New Russia? A New World?" *Foreign Affairs* 53, no. 3 (April 1975) ([link](#)), p. 494.

²⁴ Foy Kohler and Mose Harvey, eds., *The Soviet Union: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: A Colloquy of American Long Timers in Moscow* (Miami: University of Miami Center for Advanced International Studies, 1975), pp. 195, 198.

Institute at Columbia—during the Carter period he would become Secretary of State Vance’s advisor on Soviet affairs— wrote that the Soviet Union was “not a status quo power” (except in eastern Europe); it was insisting on “the intensification of the ideological struggle,” not just at home but abroad as well, “against an enemy identified as ‘American imperialism.’”²⁵ And Shulman was on the dovish end of the spectrum.

Many observers still argue along those lines. The “fundamental problem in dealing with the Soviet leaders before Gorbachev,” Jack Matlock, for example, wrote in 2010, was “the dogmatic view those Soviet leaders held of the world, and of their own policy.” They were “steeped in Marxist-Leninist thinking”; they saw the “bourgeois” world as “inevitably hostile”; Soviet security in their view “depended on imposing socialist governments on neighboring countries.” Matlock, who had served as U.S. ambassador in Moscow from 1987 to 1991, believed that the Soviet leadership before 1985 had not been able to escape from its own increasingly dysfunctional ideology, an ideology that “justified the totalitarian state the Soviet leaders headed.” “Soviet leaders before Gorbachev,” he wrote, “were locked mentally in a vicious ideological circle that prevented their perceiving that Soviet policies were not serving the real interests of the Soviet Union.”²⁶

That general view was linked to a particular interpretation of U.S.-Soviet relations in the 1970s. How were improved relations at the beginning of that decade to be explained? It was often taken for granted that basic Soviet policy had not changed. The core political issues that lay at the heart of the Cold War, the eminent international relations scholar Hans Morgenthau pointed out in 1970, had not been settled. The “improvement” was instead in good measure the result America’s “failure to compete with and oppose a Soviet Union steadily expanding its power throughout the world.” “What looks to the naïve and the wishful thinkers as a new harmonious phase in American-Soviet relations is in truth,” Morgenthau argued, “a by-product of our military involvement in Indochina. We have been too busy with trying to save Indochina

²⁵ Marshall D. Shulman, “Toward a Western Philosophy of Coexistence,” *Foreign Affairs* 52, no. 1 (October 1973) ([link](#)), pp. 37-38.

²⁶ Jack F. Matlock, *Superpower Illusions: How Myths and False Ideologies Led America Astray—and How to Return to Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 33.

from communism to pay much attention to what the U.S.S.R. was doing in the rest of the world and to compete with it or oppose it as our interests require.”²⁷

And why did the Nixon-Kissinger détente policy fail? The main problem, it was said, was that the Soviets did not view détente the same way the Americans did. They felt they could continue to promote revolution abroad and press forward with their own political agenda—and actually get the West to support them economically while they were doing so. The détente policy collapsed when the West finally woke up and realized that détente had become a “one-way street.” William Hyland’s view was typical. Hyland, who had been one of Kissinger’s main assistants in the White House, summed up the problem this way in 1981: “The United States basically wanted to preserve the status quo, or at least regulate change in a measured fashion. It sought Soviet cooperation. The U.S.S.R., however, wanted to challenge if not assault the existing order whenever and wherever it was relatively safe to do so.”²⁸ Robert Gates, writing in 1996, took much the same view. Brezhnev, he wrote, had made it clear that détente meant “no change in Soviet support for ‘national liberation movements’ or any sacrifice of ideological principles. The Soviet leaders plainly believed they could achieve their goals—and deal with their nightmares—without paying a price.”²⁹ And William Odom, another key figure in the American national security community, took much the same line in an article he wrote in 1993. The concessions Nixon and Kissinger had made to the USSR, he wrote, had not had the desired effect: “the Soviet regime responded by more repression at home and more expansion abroad.”³⁰

That particular historical interpretation has far-reaching implications. It has a certain bearing, for example, on what we are to make of the basic idea of a realist foreign policy of the sort Kissinger was supposed to have pursued. But is Soviet policy during the Brezhnev period really to be interpreted in those terms? The answer here turns in large part on how we deal with another issue, this one having to do with

²⁷ Hans Morgenthau, “Changes and Chances in American-Soviet Relations,” *Foreign Affairs* 49, no. 3 (April 1971) ([link](#)), p. 436.

²⁸ William Hyland, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: The Long Road Back,” *Foreign Affairs* 60, no. 3 (1981) ([link](#)), p. 540.

²⁹ Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) ([link](#)), p. 38.

³⁰ William Odom, “The Pluralist Mirage,” in Nikolas Gvosdev, ed., *The Strange Death of Soviet Communism: A Postscript* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2008) ([link](#)), pp. 147-48. The Odom article was originally published in *The National Interest*, no. 31 (Spring 1993).

American policy: did the U.S. government during the Nixon-Kissinger period really “seek Soviet cooperation”?

Some quite extraordinary evidence on this issue has been made available in recent years, and it now seems clear that the answer to that latter question is no, and that all the talk about a new “global structure of peace” is not to be taken too seriously—indeed, that the realist rhetoric should be viewed essentially as window-dressing, one of whose functions was to prevent people from seeing that U.S. policy was based on a very different set of ideas. The American leadership during that period, in fact, was more interested in balancing against than in working with the USSR. It sought, in particular, to enter into what amounted to a “tacit alliance” with China directed against the Soviet Union.³¹ But it calculated that that policy could not be pursued too overtly. It was worried that the USSR might attack China while the Sino-American relationship was still being firmed up; the goal of the détente policy was to hold the Soviets back during that critical period.

Perhaps the most revealing document here is the record of a meeting Kissinger had with the French president, Georges Pompidou, in May 1973. The United States, Kissinger assured Pompidou, was by no means choosing “the Soviet Union over China.” America, he said, was in fact more interested in “playing China against the Soviet Union.” It was in America’s interest that the USSR not be permitted to “render China impotent,” since if that happened “Europe would become a Finland and the United States would be completely isolated.” But how could China be supported? It would take “several years to establish with China the links which make plausible the notion that an attack directed against China could be an attack on the fundamental interests of the United States.” His government was moving in that direction. It intended to “turn rapidly toward China in the space of two or three years.” But it was “important that this movement not serve as a pretext for a Soviet attack against China.” It was thus essential, he said, “that our policy be such that it does not seem to be directed against the Soviet Union” and that détente be “carried on in parallel with the Soviet Union.” That strategy “may be complex, but it is not stupid.” The aim was to “gain time, to

³¹ See Evelyn Goh, “Nixon, Kissinger, and the ‘Soviet Card’ in the U.S. Opening to China, 1971–1974,” *Diplomatic History* 29:3 (June 2005), p. 485.

paralyze the Soviet Union”—not to capitulate to them, but rather to “enmesh them.”³² This, Kissinger recognized, was not an heroic strategy, but the U.S. government, he thought, needed to use such “complicated methods.” It needed to “maneuver” in that way, in large part because of the domestic political situation in both Europe and the United States.³³

Shouldn't Soviet policy in this period be interpreted in the light of what we now know about what the U.S. government was trying to do? Since the end of the Cold War, we have learned a good deal about the Soviet side of the story, and Soviet policy during the Brezhnev period now comes across as more restrained, less expansionist, less ideological, and certainly less systematic, than it seemed at the time. Part of the picture is not new. It was clear even in the late 1960s to the best-informed observers, like Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, perhaps the U.S. government's top Soviet expert at the time, that “the essence of Soviet foreign policy is now to keep the status quo—in order to concentrate on internal affairs.”³⁴ Thompson was probably thinking mainly of Europe, and certainly the basic goal of the USSR's European policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s was to get the western powers to accept the status quo in that continent; the fact that the West German government was willing to do so during the Brandt period was viewed as a major accomplishment. But it was also clear that in dealing with the Third World, the USSR did not take a particularly militant line. The Soviets, for example, supported bourgeois India rather than

³² Kissinger-Pompidou meeting, May 18, 1973, Digital National Security Archive, item number KT00728 ([link](#)), pp. 4-6. See also the account based on the French record of this meeting, in Georges-Henri Soutou, “Le Président Pompidou et les relations entre les Etats-Unis et l'Europe,” *Journal of European Integration History* 6, no. 2 (2000) ([link](#)), p. 134. For an English translation, see Georges-Henri Soutou, “Georges Pompidou and U.S.-European Relations,” in Marc Trachtenberg, ed., *Between Empire and Alliance: America and Europe during the Cold War* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 181. See also Kissinger's comments to Chinese UN ambassador Huang, August 4, 1972, and July 6, 1973, in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York: Free Press, 1998), pp. 73, 145.

³³ See various documents in Burr, *Kissinger Transcripts*, pp. 94, 177-178, 303, 386.

³⁴ C. L. Sulzberger, *An Age of Mediocrity: Memoirs and Diaries, 1963-1972* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 480 (diary entry for November 23, 1968, recording a conversation with Thompson). Thompson, it is important to note given the questions we are interested in here, referred specifically in this context to how “the growth rate is slowing down” and to how “the role of the Communist party these days is anachronistic.” But later in the conversation he took a rather different line. Moscow, he said, was not interested in a spheres of influence deal; the pragmatists had declined in influence; the ideologists were “on top” and looked “at everything with an orthodox view that [was] out of step with world reality” (pp. 481-82). Those inconsistencies in analysis probably reflected the fact that this was a period of transition, and that Soviet policy itself at this time was not totally consistent—a point I will return to at the end of this section..

Communist China, and scarcely batted an eyelash when the Indonesian Communists were exterminated in 1965 or when the leftist Allende government was overthrown in Chile in 1972.³⁵

Evidence that has become available after 1991 supports this general picture in major ways. With regard to western Europe, for example, CIA analysts, writing in 1976, were struck by the fact that the Soviets, whatever their long-term goals, did not for the time being seem particularly interested in helping Communist parties come to power there. Intelligence reports indicated, for example, that the decision of the Portuguese Communist Party “to push an all-out bid for power in 1975 was taken against the advice of the Soviets.” The Soviet government also sought to hold the Italian Communists back. “Brezhnev,” according to the CIA at that time, “went so far as to suggest to [Italian Communist leader] Berlinguer in 1973 that in Moscow’s eyes, the ‘historic compromise’ could go too far. Brezhnev hinted that the Soviets would not like to see the [Italian Communist Party] move beyond the stage of influencing the Italian government to the stage of actual participation in a government because this would cause uneasiness in the West and might damage the prospects for detente.” The Soviets, more generally, had “been sensitive to the possibility that a role in government for any of the western Parties would cause deep anxiety in the West and might trigger a reaction against the Soviet Union, threatening Moscow’s access to Western technology and undermining its diplomatic initiatives.”³⁶

The same basic point applied to what the USSR was doing in the Third World. With regard to Vietnam, for example, Soviet policy was surprisingly moderate. The Soviets, of course, opposed the U.S. policy in that area and gave a certain amount of assistance to the Communist side in the war, but, as Ilya Gaiduk, the leading student of Soviet policy in this area, has written, the USSR’s “principal goal was the political settlement of the conflict, and the sooner the better”; the assistance North Vietnam was given was in large part designed, according to Gaiduk, to give the Soviets a certain degree of influence over the

³⁵ See Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War*, pp. 192-93, 229, 278-79. This account is of particular interest because Haslam was by no means trying to make the case for a realist interpretation of Soviet policy in this period. See my contribution to an H-Diplo roundtable on that book ([link](#)), pp. 19-22.

³⁶ CIA Research Study, “Soviet Policy and European Communism,” October 1976, CREST system ([link](#)), p. 15, and CIA, “Synopsis: Soviet Policy and European Communism,” September 1976, CREST system ([link](#)), p. 3.

Communist government there, which would enable them to press for a negotiated settlement of the war.³⁷ In 1972, the Soviets were unwilling to allow what the United States was doing in Vietnam to affect their relations with America: after the bombing of Hanoi that year, some Soviet leaders, like Prime Minister Kosygin, thought the USSR should register its disapproval by canceling the visit President Richard Nixon was about to make to Moscow, but Brezhnev and Gromyko were appalled by the idea and rejected it out of hand.³⁸

In the Middle East, the story was much the same. The Soviets were unwilling to back the Arabs to the hilt. When U.S. nuclear forces were put on alert during the 1973 war, the Soviet reaction was quite mild. “We won’t fight” for the Arabs, Brezhnev declared; “the people would not understand. And above all we don’t have any intention of being dragged into world war because of them.”³⁹ After the war, Soviet leaders seemed seriously interested in working with America to bring peace to the region. The USSR, Brezhnev said, would “participate in guaranteeing the borders,” including Israel’s—this he thought was the heart of the problem—and if the Arabs got upset by that, then they could “go to hell!”⁴⁰

The problem was that the Americans were unwilling to work with the USSR in this area and instead sought to eliminate Soviet influence from the region. The Soviets, as Nixon’s national security advisor Henry Kissinger admitted privately in 1974, were thus “getting nothing out of détente.” The United States was “pushing them everywhere.” The Soviets, he recognized, had “tried to be fairly reasonable all across the board.” You could not find a single place, he said, “where they have really tried to make serious trouble for us. Even in the Middle East where our political strategy put them in an awful bind, they haven’t really tried to screw us.”⁴¹ “If I were in the Politburo,” he said on March 11, “I could make a case against

³⁷ Ilya Gaiduk, “Soviet Policy towards U.S. Participation in the Vietnam War,” *History* 81, no. 261 (January 1996) ([link](#)), p. 46. See also Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1996).

³⁸ Anatoly Chernyaev, diary for 1972 ([link](#)), pp. 2-4.

³⁹ Quoted in Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War*, p. 276.

⁴⁰ Chernyaev diary for 1973 ([link](#)), entry for November 4, 1973, p. 69. My conclusions here are based in large part on the unpublished work of Galen Jackson.

⁴¹ Kissinger meeting with State Department and White House officials, March 18, 1974, Digital National Security Archive, Kissinger Transcripts collection, item no. KT01071, pp. 7-8 ([link](#)).

Brezhnev for détente—more so than against us.” Brezhnev, he thought, was “a political idiot and has given us all sorts of gains.”⁴²

The Soviet “adventurism” of the late 1970s needs to be seen in this context. “Soviet involvement in Angola in 1975,” Vladislav Zubok writes in *A Failed Empire*, his important study of Soviet policy in the Cold War, “lacked any clear strategic plan or goal.”⁴³ It was natural, given the course that U.S.-Soviet relations had taken in the previous period, that the Soviets would support the anti-western side in places like Angola in various minor ways. Even the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, so shocking at the time, was not the act of a determined, expansionist power; the decision to invade (and indeed to overthrow a Communist government), it now seems clear, has to be understood in less aggressive terms. That decision, one astute observer concluded, “was certainly a grave error of policy. But it was not irrational, and by the time the final decisions were taken in December 1979 it had become all but inevitable.” The Soviets intervened reluctantly, and against the advice of top military officers, in order to prevent the “loss” of Afghanistan; indeed, at the very end, they were worried that if Afghanistan were lost, “the vacuum would be filled by the Americans.”⁴⁴ The collapse of détente, it seems, implied that they had little to lose in terms of their relationship with the Americans by dealing with the Afghan situation the way they did.⁴⁵

⁴² Kissinger meetings with Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, March 11 ([link](#)), March 19 ([link](#)), and April 23, 1974, ([link](#)), National Security Adviser: Memoranda of Conversations, 1973-1977, in Digital Ford Presidential Library ([link](#)). Soviet policy in the region, in Kissinger’s view, was less objectionable than the policy some of America’s allies were pursuing. “The British and French are being complete shits,” Kissinger remarked in November 1973; they were “worse than the Russians.” French policy was particularly objectionable in his view: the French, he pointed out in March 1974, were “talk[ing] against” America’s Middle East policy; “if Gromyko had said such things we would say it was the end of détente.” Kissinger meeting with Schlesinger and other top U.S. officials, November 29, 1973, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. 25, doc. 363 ([link](#)); Kissinger-Meir meeting, November 1, 1972, *ibid.*, doc. 305 ([link](#)); Kissinger-Scheel meeting, March 3, 1974, p. 8, Digital National Security Archive ([link](#)), Kissinger Transcripts collection, item no. KT01052 ([link](#)).

⁴³ Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 251. See also Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War*, pp. 291-92.

⁴⁴ Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 17-24, esp. pp. 19, 24. See also Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy [Alexander Liakhovsky], “Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979,” Cold War International History Project Working Paper no. 51 (January 2007) ([link](#)); Odd Arne Westad, “The Road to Kabul,” in Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997); and Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 7-8 and chap. 3, esp. pp. 73-74, 81 (for the first quotation). For the second quotation, see Anatoly Dobrynin in “The Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Détente,” proceedings of a conference organized by the Norwegian Nobel Institute, September 1995 ([link](#)), p. 92. A briefing book prepared for that conference, containing documents relating to the issue, is also available on the National Security Archive website ([link](#)). Note also Haslam’s argument that the Americans had “trick[ed] Moscow into invading

None of this is to be taken as implying that whatever problems developed were all America's fault, that Soviet policy in the 1970s was purely defensive and status quo-oriented, or that ideological considerations played no role in shaping what the USSR was doing beyond her borders. What it does suggest is that Soviet policy was in transition. On the one hand, there were strong arguments for pursuing a relatively moderate policy. The economic problem was of fundamental importance in this regard. It was not just the Soviet leadership wanted to be able to draw on western technology and benefit from western credits, and that that would be impossible if the USSR pursued too aggressive a policy—although that was a major factor. But, perhaps more importantly, there was in addition a growing sense that the military competition with a much richer and more technologically advanced coalition of powers was simply unwinnable. It was also pointless—and this was particularly true in a society in which the ideology, in large part because it was failing in the economic realm, no longer had anything like the hold it once had. Instead of pursuing a provocative policy that would not yield any real long-term strategic advantage, it might make sense to pull in their horns, limit their actions abroad to what was in the USSR's own interests, and focus more on getting their own house in order. On the other hand, there were many people at home, and especially in the ruling party, who were still caught up in traditional attitudes—who found it hard to bring themselves to accept the desirability or feasibility of a real accommodation with the West, and who had an interest in framing issues in traditional ideological terms. That latter view might be fading, and the former view might be gaining the upper hand, but change of that sort can be slow, and the transition can be messy. A neat and rapid transformation of policy was not to be expected, in part because key leaders were themselves pulled in both directions in varying degrees, and in part because to maintain a certain degree of consensus, those who thought in

Afghanistan,” in support of which he tells a story he had heard from General Odom: when news of the invasion reached Brzezinski in Washington, “he shot a clenched fist into the air triumphally: “They have taken the bait.” Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, pp. 319-326, and p. 472 n. 217; the quotations are on pp. 319 and 326. It does not seem, however, that the Americans played so decisive a role in this affair. For an analysis, see Justin Vaïsse, “De Harvard à la Maison-Blanche: Zbigniew Brzezinski et l'ascension des universitaires dans l'establishment de politique étrangère américaine pendant la guerre froide,” HDR thesis, Institut d'études politiques, Paris, December 2011, pp. 416-419.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, pp. 80-81. The general point here was understood by some of the more perceptive observers at the time. Note, for example, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, “Russia, America, and Détente,” *Foreign Affairs* 56, no. 2 (January 1978) ([link](#)), p. 292. It was “almost certain,” Sonnenfeldt wrote, that “disappointments about expected benefits from détente” had led the Soviets to question whether the costs of continuing with the détente policy were still “worth paying.” The comment is particularly worth noting because Sonnenfeldt had been one of Kissinger's closest advisors.

relatively non-ideological terms might feel they had to throw a bone or two to those who took the more traditional view by paying lip service to the ideology and indeed by pursuing certain foreign policy goals that appealed to those who still thought in traditional, ideological, terms.

That general view is in line with the impression you get from reading the diaries of Anatoly Chernyaev for 1972 and 1973, another extraordinary source that has become available in recent years. According to Chernyaev, then working in the International Department of the Central Committee, the “real politicians,” as he called them—a pragmatic group headed by Brezhnev personally and including people like Gromyko—sincerely wanted an accommodation with the West. They understood that the “truly radical change in the world order” they had in mind was “bound to have profound social-psychological, and consequently ideological consequences.” Drawing the USSR into the world economy, and thus exposing Soviet cadres to direct contact with the West, would inevitably undermine the old, increasingly “outdated,” ideology, and that group was willing to accept change of that sort. But the leaders who thought in those terms were not free agents. There was a vast “multi-million-man army” of people who fed off the official ideology. “These people,” Chernyaev noted, “comprise a very influential part of our social and Party mechanism and have to be taken into consideration,” especially at the level of packaging. Change in the form of a “liberation of public life from ideological dogmas”—he used the word “perestroika” in this context—could only come from the top down.⁴⁶

In such circumstances, the picture, as the outside world saw it, was bound to be mixed. In the 1970s, the old world had by no means totally passed away, and policies were still being pursued which, to use Matlock’s phrase, “were not serving the real interests of the Soviet Union.” The various “gains” one could point to were often more a source of weakness than of strength. The ties with Cuba were bound to alienate America, especially given Cuba’s activist policies beyond her borders. And Soviet ties with Vietnam were bound to alienate China, and make her feel more encircled by Soviet power, thus increasing that country’s incentive to align itself with the United States. The ties with Cuba and Vietnam and the other overseas

⁴⁶ Chernyaev diary for 1972 ([link](#)), entries for June 3 (p. 24) and December 16 (p. 35), and the postscript (p. 40); Chernyaev diary for 1973 ([link](#)), entries for February 3 (p. 4), April 16 (pp. 28-29), May 19 and 22 (pp. 38-39), June 6 (pp. 41-42), June 24 (pp. 46-47), July 14 (pp. 50-52), October 14 (p. 64), December 17 (p. 75).

relationships that the Soviets were developing in Africa in the late 1970s, moreover, had to be sustained by naval power—an area in which the Soviets would find it hard to compete with America and her allies. A naval build-up, moreover, would take up resources that might better be spent elsewhere, whether in the civilian economy or in other military areas—areas more directly related to the USSR’s core strategic interests. But rational calculations of that sort do not automatically shape policy. People may come to think in realist terms, but change in this area tends to be slow and uneven, especially in conflict situations where an adversary’s setbacks and humiliations tend to be, somewhat irrationally, a source of gratification. So it is not surprising that Brezhnev’s “peace policy” could be discounted in the West, and that evidence could be found—in Soviet rhetoric, and in what the Soviets were doing outside their borders and with their military forces—to support the view that nothing had basically changed.⁴⁷

One nonetheless has the sense that fundamental change was taking place. The pressures generated by the international system are very strong. The Soviets had nothing to gain from unnecessarily provoking their adversaries, or in pursuing policies ambitious policies, given their limited resource base. Those general considerations were particularly important at the time, given the growing problems they were having with their economy. In such circumstances, it made sense for them to trim their sails and limit themselves to the defense of their most basic interests. The Soviets, as Andropov put it in the December 1981 Politburo discussion of the Polish problem, had to be “concerned above all with our own country.” And that meant avoiding sanctions and maintaining economic relations with the West, something he clearly viewed as essential for “the strengthening of the Soviet Union.”⁴⁸ On the surface the picture might be unclear, and indeed might suggest (especially to those who viewed the issue through a strong ideological lens of their own) that nothing fundamental had changed, but the basic forces at work were quite powerful, and one has the sense that there was more continuity between the Brezhnev and Gorbachev periods than people realized at the time.

⁴⁷ See the appendix.

⁴⁸ Politburo session, December 10, 1981, in Kramer, “Soviet Deliberations” ([link](#)), doc. 21, p. 165.

The Soviet Military Build-up

But isn't there one very basic problem with this whole line of argument? If Soviet policy was essentially status quo-oriented, how then is what James Reston referred to in a 1978 *New York Times* column as the "reckless build-up of Soviet naval and military forces" to be explained?⁴⁹ If, as I have been arguing here, the economic problem was understood at the time, shouldn't the Soviets have opted for a more modest military policy? They had claimed that they were interested in détente with the West, but if that was "truly the Soviet purpose in Europe," as one analyst put it in 1973, "then why the steady and unprecedented military build-up at the same time?"⁵⁰ If they really wanted détente, then "why the hell," one well-known former diplomat wondered two years later, "are they building up all their fleets, missiles, and the rest of it?"⁵¹ Why provoke an arms race with a coalition of much wealthier, more technologically advanced, powers, especially at a time when they also had a hostile China to worry about? Wouldn't it have been better, given their internal problems, to pursue a more moderate military policy, if only to make it easier for them to get access to western technology?

Those questions do not in themselves discredit the idea that Soviet policy was essentially moderate, but they do help bring the problem into focus. And in tackling that issue, the first step is to learn what we can about what the Soviets were actually doing in the military sphere—about whether they were in fact making a strong effort to build up their military power, in order perhaps to "shift the correlation of forces" so as to be able to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy while they were still able to do so. Such notions were quite common at the time. According to the distinguished French journalist Michel Tatu writing in 1982, the Soviets had "staked everything on winning the arms race"; if that effort failed, he wondered, "what power and legitimacy would the Soviet leadership retain?"⁵² The Cornell political scientist Myron Rush published an article in *International Security* that same year claiming that since 1976 the Soviets had been able to maintain a high and steadily growing level of military spending only by cutting back on

⁴⁹ James Reston, "The Present Danger," *New York Times*, November 17, 1978 ([link](#)), p. A29.

⁵⁰ Elliot Goodman, "Disparities in East-West Relations," *Survey* 19:3 (Summer 1973), p. 89.

⁵¹ Elbridge Durbrow, in Kohler and Harvey, *The Soviet Union*, p. 198.

⁵² Michel Tatu, "U.S.-Soviet Relations: A Turning Point?" *Foreign Affairs* 61, no. 3 (1982) ([link](#)), p. 593.

investment and thus hurting their longer-run economic prospects; “having mortgaged its economy for a temporary military advantage,” they could be expected to take advantage of that situation by pursuing a more aggressive policy while they still had the chance to do so.⁵³ But what are we to make of arguments of that sort?

It turns out that this general argument was quite weak. At about the same time that Rush’s article came out, the CIA revealed, first, that it now believed that Soviet military spending, especially for procurement, had leveled off in the late 1970s, and, second, that the share of GNP allocated to investment had “more or less stabilized in the last few years.”⁵⁴ Indeed, Rush himself had noted in his article that investment had grown more rapidly than GNP in the late 1970s, meaning that the share of GNP devoted to investment had actually risen in that period.⁵⁵ The idea of a massive build-up, in the sense of a substantial increase in the rate at which military spending was growing, is also not supported by later CIA calculations. Soviet defense spending grew in the 1970s at a rate of only 2.5% per year, slightly less than the growth rate for the economy as a whole (2.7%). This, as one leading specialist in this area notes, is not at all in line with the common view, both at the time and to a certain extent even today, that the Soviets were engaging in a massive military build-up.⁵⁶ To be sure, the Soviets in the 1970s seemed to be spending a good deal more on defense than the United States was. But, as Figure 1 shows, the gap had opened not because the Soviets had chosen to accelerate defense spending; it makes more sense to view it as resulting instead from U.S. cutbacks in this area as the Vietnam War wound down and then finally ended:

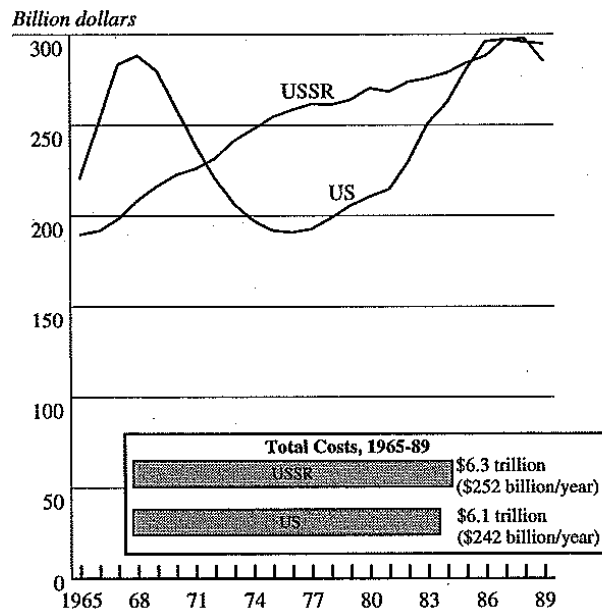
⁵³ Myron Rush, “Guns over Growth in Soviet Policy,” *International Security* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1982-83) ([link](#)), pp. 177-79.

⁵⁴ See Henry Rowen’s testimony, in U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *Allocation of Resources in the Soviet Union and China—1982*, part 8 (1982) (Washington: GPO, 1983) ([link](#)), p. 168. (Rowen was presenting the CIA’s current view.) On the revised CIA estimates of Soviet military spending, see Noel Firth and James Noren, *Soviet Defense Spending: A History of CIA Estimates* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1998), pp. 75-80. For the CIA’s estimates at the time of Soviet investment levels, see Central Intelligence Agency (John Pitzer), “Gross National Product of the USSR 1950-80,” in U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *USSR: Measures of Economic Growth and Development, 1950-80* (Washington: GPO, 1982), pp. 18-21, and tables A-7, A-8 and A-11 on pp. 68-78 ([link](#)). For a later estimate, see “Measures of Soviet Gross National Product in 1982 Prices,” Table A-10 on pp. 82-83 (1990) ([link](#)).

⁵⁵ Rush, “Guns over Growth,” p. 172.

⁵⁶ See James Noren, “CIA’s Analysis of the Soviet Economy,” in Gerald Haines and Robert Leggett, eds., *Watching the Bear: Essays on CIA’s Analysis of the Soviet Union* (Langley: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2003) ([link](#)), p. 33.

Figure 1: CIA Estimates of Dollar Cost of U.S. and Soviet Military Program, 1965-89 (1988 Dollars)



Source: Firth and Noren, *Soviet Defense Spending*, p. 116.

The figures on military spending are, of course, just one part of the story. The Soviets, after all, were certainly making a major effort in the military sphere. The real question has to do with how that effort is to be interpreted. High levels of military spending do not in themselves mean that the Soviet leadership was preparing to pursue an aggressive foreign policy. The USSR, after all, was competing not just with the United States, but with a coalition of much wealthier powers; it had “allies” of its own, of course, but the satellites in eastern Europe scarcely contributed to the power of the Soviet side.⁵⁷ To remain competitive, even if it was pursuing an essentially defensive policy, the USSR would have to spend a lot more proportionately on defense than the western powers—and this without even taking China into account. Moreover, given its relatively small resource base the Soviets would be at a disadvantage if their enemies, in the event of war, had the time to mobilize their much stronger economies. They thus had a strong incentive to make sure that the war ended quickly; and to achieve that result, the USSR needed a strong offensive

⁵⁷ See Valerie Bunce, “The Empire Strikes Back: The Evolution of the Eastern Bloc from a Soviet Asset to a Soviet Liability,” *International Organization* 39, no. 1 (Winter 1985). Note also Schweller and Wohlforth, “Power Test,” pp. 87-89 ([link](#)) and Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War” ([link](#)), p. 23, and the sources cited there.

military capability. This was the same logic that applied to Germany in 1914, or to Israel for most of its existence: an offensive doctrine, and the plans and capabilities that gave it meaning, are to be understood in structural terms, and do not in themselves mean that basic policy was inherently aggressive in nature. Even a defensive-minded USSR would, moreover, have a special reason for maintaining forces strong enough to pose a serious threat to West Germany: to prevent the Federal Republic from going nuclear, the USSR had to convince people that force might really be used if the Germans moved in that direction—and that meant that a certain degree of military superiority in the theater would be needed to support a policy that aimed essentially at maintaining the status quo. The point is not that a Soviet policy of reaching for military advantage was not something the West needed to worry about; it is simply that a military policy of that sort does not in itself prove that the USSR intended to use the power it was generating to change the status quo, either in Europe or in the world as a whole.

The same basic point applies to what the Soviets were doing in other areas. To be sure, as Sonnenfeldt put it in 1978, they were building strategic forces needed not just to “deter attack, but capable of threatening the effectiveness and survival of substantial portions of U.S. strategic strength.” What they were doing was “inconsistent with what Americans regard as compatible with stability.”⁵⁸ But the Americans, who certainly viewed themselves as having an essentially defensive policy, had never given up on counterforce; in deciding what sort of strategic force to build, they were never concerned simply with deterring a nuclear attack on themselves, but always had more far-reaching goals.⁵⁹ All of this was natural, especially given the way military establishments think—natural for America, but natural for the USSR as well. In neither case did the building of a strong counterforce capability in itself mean that the country was opting for an aggressive foreign policy.

None of this, of course, proves that Soviet policy was mainly defensive in nature, and that the military forces the USSR was building were designed essentially to support that sort of policy. My real point

⁵⁸ Sonnenfeldt, “Russia, America, and Détente” ([link](#)), pp. 278-79.

⁵⁹ See especially Francis Gavin, “Nuclear Nixon,” in Francis Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). One should also note that the people who complained most loudly about Soviet counterforce capabilities were the strongest supporters of a strong U.S. counterforce capability.

is that this is very much an open issue. My sense, in fact, is that we have barely scratched the surface in terms of our understanding of what the Soviets were doing in the defense area during the Brezhnev period. We need to get a much better sense in particular for how their efforts affected the military balance—at the strategic nuclear level, in Europe, and in the rest of the world as well. And we need to understand better than we presently do what they were trying to accomplish in this area—that is, to see whether their efforts were essentially defensive or reactive in nature or were designed to achieve more far-reaching strategic and political objectives.

More generally, I think we need an archivally-based political history not just of Soviet military policy at this time, but of the whole U.S.-Soviet strategic balance—a history that looks at what each side was trying to do in the military area, at the conceptual and political framework within which policy was worked out, at how the policies of both sides (and other powers as well) shaped the military balance, at how the strategic balance—both what it was and how it was changing—was understood by both sides, and how that affected each side’s policy.⁶⁰ This is not an easy subject to study. The whole question of how a military conflict between great powers was likely to run its course cannot, as a general rule, be answered in any definitive way for a whole series of reasons, some of them technical in nature. In 1999, then-former Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates said that during the Cold War, the CIA “secretly acquired by thievery, scams and trickery an amazing array of Soviet military equipment for the US military to dissect and study that enabled the preparation of countermeasures.” The Agency, he said, “stole Soviet weapons manuals, recruited Soviet scientists and engineers as agents who told us about weapons in research and development, and developed many often heroic agents who revealed much about Warsaw Pact plans and capabilities.”⁶¹ The other side, presumably, was doing the same sort of thing, and all this was bound to have an effect on what would happen if an armed conflict actually broke out. An assessment of the military balance would in

⁶⁰ The most important study done in this area, the *History of the Strategic Arms Competition, 1945-1981*, by Ernest May, John Steinbruner, and Thomas Wolfe (U.S. Defense Department, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office, 1981) (part 1 [link](#)) (part 2 [link](#)) does not to my mind really get at these issues. There is, of course, a large literature dealing with Cold War military issues, some of it very good but much of it highly politicized (in both directions); that literature was, by and large, generated at the time, and was thus not based on extensive study of the archival sources.

⁶¹ Robert Gates, “U.S. Intelligence and the End of the Cold War,” November 19, 1999, CIA online speeches and testimony archive ([link](#)). For information about one important source, A. G. Tolkachev, see Bob Woodward, *The Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 86.

principle have to take all this into account; indeed, it would have to consider the possibility that some of the “heroic agents” Gates referred to had been identified and were being used by the adversary to get the Americans to believe what the Soviets wanted them to believe—and that the Americans might have been doing the same thing with the USSR.

An outsider is scarcely in a position to make an assessment of that sort—indeed, it is hard to know whether anyone can—and probably the best we can do is to focus on the basic thinking that evolved at the top political level. What was the political leadership being told about military matters, and what conclusions did it draw from the information it was getting? How, more generally, did it approach this whole set of issues? In studying the American side of that problem, the CIA estimates—many of which are available online—are an obvious source.⁶² But it is important to remember that the CIA was not supposed to do “net assessment”—that is, it was not supposed to study how Soviet and western military forces stacked against each other or consider what might happen if an armed conflict actually broke out.⁶³ To get at these issues, one should therefore also study the records of the Office of Net Assessment in the Defense Department, paying particular attention to how its work affected the thinking of top government officials.⁶⁴

⁶² Some relevant CIA documents are included in the CIA’s “List of “Declassified National Intelligence Estimates on the Soviet Union and International Communism” ([link](#)) ([index](#)); full text versions can often be found by searching for the title or document number of documents listed there in the CIA’s Electronic Reading Room website ([link](#)). Note, for example, “Soviet Strategic Arms Programs And Détente: What Are They Up To?” SNIE 11-4-73, September 10, 1973 ([link](#)).

⁶³ See the discussion of the net assessment issue in Raymond Garthoff, “Estimating Soviet Military Intentions and Capabilities,” in *Watching the Bear*, chap. 5 ([link](#)) (pp. 169-70 in the printed version).

⁶⁴ Diego A. Ruiz Palmer cites a number of sources relating to this issue. “For an authoritative analysis of the origins of the net assessment function in the United States Department of Defense,” he writes, “see Phillip A. Karber, *Net Assessment for SecDef* (Vienna, VA: The Potomac Foundation, 2013). For a comprehensive review of its application, see George E. Pickett, James G. Roche and Barry D. Watts, ‘Net Assessment: A Historical Review’, in Andrew W. Marshall, J.J. Martin and Henry S. Rowen, eds., *On Not Confusing Ourselves: Essays on National Security Strategy in Honor of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).” The Office of Net Assessment, Ruiz Palmer notes, “under the auspices of National Security Study Memorandum 186” of September 1973, produced a series of assessments of the NATO-Warsaw Pact military balance, but to date only one of them has been declassified: Lieutenant Colonel Peter R. Bankson, *The Military Balance in Europe: A Net Assessment*, Office of the Director of Net Assessment, 1 March 1978. NSSM 186, “National Net Assessment of Comparative Costs and Capabilities of US – USSR Military Establishments,” approved in September 1973 served for “over a decade and a half” as “the analytical framework for the conduct, under the authority of Andrew W. Marshall, director of Net Assessment in the US Department of Defense, of successive, increasingly ambitious and complex assessments and simulations of the NATO-Warsaw Pact balance of forces and competing operational strategies. A task force of analysts was assembled to conduct the NSSM-186 assessments under the direction of Phillip Karber, who exercised that responsibility with a steady hand for nearly fifteen years. By the end of the Cold War, NSSM-186 had been the most ambitious and longest-running analytical effort ever undertaken by the

The U.S. Side of the Story

Did the Americans understand that the USSR's economic problems were deepening? If so, how did they think the economic situation would affect Soviet policy? And how, if at all, did they think the Soviet economic decline should influence U.S. policy?

American economists, including leading CIA analysts, had been aware of the Soviet economic problem since the mid-1960s. In intellectual terms, their analyses were quite impressive; the economists had been able to see below the surface, and explain why, in easily-understandable, non-technical, language, a very serious problem was developing. They were not able, of course, to predict what would happen. But they were able to give some sense for the structure of the problem. The basic message was that it was unlikely that things would just go on as they had, and that some very fundamental and difficult choices were going to have to be made. The traditional Soviet growth model, it seemed, had run its course and, as Abram Bergson, the most prominent economist working in this area, put it in an important 1973 article, might “not survive its dictatorial originator much longer.”⁶⁵

The conclusions they reached had major foreign policy implications, but one does not get the sense that they received anything like the attention they deserved. Consider, for example, Adam Ulam's contribution in 1983 to the important volume *After Brezhnev: Sources of Soviet Conduct in the 1980s*.⁶⁶ Ulam was a leading expert on Soviet foreign policy; indeed, no scholar working in this area was more highly respected. And yet in this 78-page essay, in a book on the “sources of Soviet conduct,” Ulam simply ignored the

Department of Defense.” He then refers the reader to an article by Stephen Peter Rosen: “The Impact of the Office of Net Assessment on the American Military in the Matter of the Revolution in Military Affairs,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 4 (2010): 477–480. Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, “The NATO-Warsaw Pact competition in the 1970s and 1980s: a revolution in military affairs in the making or the end of a strategic age?”, *Cold War History* 14, no. 4 (November 2014). Ruiz Palmer had himself served on the “staff of the National Security Study Memorandum 186 task force assembled under the authority of the Director of Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense, US Department of Defense, to analyse NATO and Warsaw Pact force trends and operational strategies in Europe.”

⁶⁵ Abram Bergson, “Toward a New Growth Model,” *Problems of Communism* 22, no. 2 (March-April 1973) ([link](#)), p. 9. On these matters in general, see Trachtenberg, “Assessing Soviet Economic Performance.”

⁶⁶ Adam Ulam, “The World Outside,” in Robert Byrnes, ed., *After Brezhnev: Sources of Soviet Conduct in the 1980s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

economic problem—and thus found it easy to argue that nothing was likely to change: “very little in their experience or in the international picture as it has evolved during the past twenty years or so could have persuaded the Kremlin that its basic guidelines for dealing with the outside world need drastic revision.”⁶⁷ Ulam took much the same line in other works he published at the time, but it is important to note that at one point at least he seemed to sense that very fundamental change was by no means out of the question. “Now let us imagine,” he told an interviewer in 1975, “that ten years from now, some individual or group in the Politburo emerges with the avowed intent of laying to rest all remnants of Stalinism and starting the Soviet Union on its way to the 20th century. Modernization, rationalization, economic reform, political relaxation and the proper observance of the Soviet Constitution would follow. In the political and cultural climate created by such a change, I cannot see how Romanian, Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian claims for independence could be resisted”—an extraordinary comment, given what happened after Gorbachev came to power in the USSR in 1985.⁶⁸

But on the whole economic factors did not loom large in Ulam’s analysis of Soviet foreign policy, and scholars interested in these issues more generally did not give the Soviet economic problem the attention it deserved. It was not that it went entirely unnoticed; it just was not placed at the heart of the analysis. Alexander Dallin’s long 1981 article on “The Domestic Sources of Soviet Foreign Policy” is a good case in point. Dallin, another very distinguished scholar, stressed Soviet restraint in foreign affairs, a point which he felt had not been adequately appreciated by American observers.⁶⁹ And he recognized that because of their economic problems, the Soviets might want increased interaction with the West. But this was just one factor among many, and he went on to provide a long laundry list of Soviet foreign policy goals.⁷⁰ Indeed, Dallin’s basic approach was not to reach for clarity and simplicity, but to focus instead on what he called the “ambiguities and inconsistencies” of Soviet politics; the article as a whole, he admitted in his

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 347; see also p. 420.

⁶⁸ Blaine Harden, “Adam Ulam, a Top Historian of Soviet Union, Dies at 77,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2000 ([link](#)).

⁶⁹ Alexander Dallin, “The Domestic Sources of Soviet Foreign Policy,” in Alexander Dallin, *The Uses of History: Understanding the Soviet Union and Russia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 100. This essay was originally published in Seweryn Bialer, ed., *The Domestic Context of Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview, 1981).

⁷⁰ Dallin, “Domestic Sources,” pp. 102-103.

conclusion, had discussed a “bewildering spectrum of variables.”⁷¹ He was certainly aware of the USSR’s economic difficulties, but he did not view the issue as of central importance for the purposes of his analysis. He was reluctant to even consider the issue of the effect the economic problem would have on Soviet foreign policy—other than to say that it would have one.⁷²

Other analysts, however, thought the Soviet economic problem was of central political importance. Sonnenfeldt, for example, published a major article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1978; the problem loomed large in his analysis there. “Burdened as it is,” he wrote, “with enormous and constantly rising military expenditures as well as by ponderous and over-centralized bureaucratic controls and a rigid social structure, the Soviet economy has been unable with its own resources to provide for the broad modernization of Soviet life” and lagged “well behind other industrial countries in technical sophistication and productivity—and that situation was in his view a fundamental element in the whole foreign policy equation.”⁷³ Hyland, in a *Foreign Affairs* article published the next year, also emphasized the importance of the problem. “The economic situation will be basic,” he wrote. “No analysis foresees a bright outlook. A slowdown in general economic growth in the 1980s seems virtually certain.”⁷⁴ Given the nature of the Soviet system, the situation seemed likely to worsen: “one can foresee a leadership more or less tied to conservative elements, doomed to maneuver within narrow limits, caught up in an economic crisis but unable to adopt policies that would constitute a decisive solution.”⁷⁵ And Richard Pipes, the Harvard historian who had just served as one of Reagan’s advisors on Soviet affairs, wrote in 1984 that “the current crisis of communism is

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 129, 142.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 102, 124, 126, 143-44.

⁷³ Sonnenfeldt, “Russia, America and Détente” ([link](#)), p. 286.

⁷⁴ William Hyland, “Brezhnev and Beyond,” *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 1 (Fall 1979) ([link](#)), p. 63. Hyland went on to point out that “basic solutions are therefore called for,” that economic liberalization and decentralization was “one way out,” and that this in fact had been “obvious for well over a decade.” The problem was that reform of that sort had been resisted, and would probably continue to be resisted, on political grounds, meaning that the “economic crisis could worsen.”

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 64.

due to its vegetating in a kind of limbo between compulsion and freedom, unable to profit from either”; and the economic problem was a fundamental part of that crisis.⁷⁶

What is striking is not that people were unaware of the problem, but rather that very few observers seemed to think that the USSR’s economic difficulties would lead to a more moderate foreign policy, let alone that the change would be dramatic. George Kennan was one of the few who saw things that way; the prevailing view was that the economic problem might well lead to a more aggressive Soviet policy.⁷⁷ Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, writing in 1979, certainly thought so, and he was by no means the only prominent figure to argue along those lines.⁷⁸ The well-known Soviet dissident Andrei Amalrik thought in 1980 that internal Soviet difficulties would “demand an aggressive foreign policy”; that view was evidently shared by President Jimmy Carter’s national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and his aide, General William Odom.⁷⁹ The veteran *New York Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury, writing in 1981, saw a Soviet Union in decline becoming increasingly militaristic. “Weakness, particularly internal weakness,” Salisbury wrote, “in a world power can sometimes be more dangerous than strength,” and “so long as Soviet policy finds no escape from the morass in which it is mired, the chauvinistic military tendency seems certain to grow.”⁸⁰ Nick Eberstadt, in a major *New York Review of Books* article, which also appeared in 1981, took much the same line. “Short-term strength,” he wrote, “in tandem with a prospect of long-term weakness, is not a prescription for international stability.”⁸¹ The Columbia political scientist Seweryn Bialer, another prominent commentator, also expected trouble. “The economic realities of the 1980s,” he predicted that same year, would “sharply strengthen the tendency toward a political climate markedly less benign than that of the

⁷⁶ Pipes, “Can the Soviet Union Reform?” ([link](#)), p. 57.

⁷⁷ See Kennan’s comments in Kohler and Harvey, *The Soviet Union*, pp. 198-202.

⁷⁸ See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Will Russia Blow Up?” *Newsweek*, November 19, 1979, p. 144 ([link](#)).

⁷⁹ Odom to Brzezinski, September 29, 1980, Declassified Documents Reference System, doc. CK3100586747 ([link](#)).

⁸⁰ Harrison Salisbury, “The Russia Reagan Faces,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 1, 1981 ([link](#)), p. 31.

⁸¹ Nick Eberstadt, “The Health Crisis in the Soviet Union,” originally published in the *New York Review of Books*, February 19, 1981, and republished in Nick Eberstadt, *The Poverty of Communism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988) ([link](#)). The quotation is on p. 26 of the book version.

1970s, and will contribute immensely to an environment of sharp competition, confrontation and discord.”⁸² Richard Pipes, writing in 1984, thought the Soviets might be tempted to deal with their domestic difficulties by “raising the level of international tension”: the Soviet leadership, in his view, would “always find the pursuit of an aggressive foreign policy preferable to coping with internal problems.”⁸³ Even as late as 1990, Malia was worried about what might happen. “Decaying superpowers,” he said, “do not go quietly into the night.”⁸⁴

But what can be said about key policy-makers at the time? Were they able to see the problem, and, if so, how did that affect the way they approached the most fundamental political and military issues? At this point I can offer only sketchy and very tentative answers to those questions, but my general sense is that U.S. political leaders were slow to recognize the importance of the issue. Henry Kissinger, in an article he wrote the year before Nixon chose him as his national security advisor, did not seem to think that economic constraints would have a substantial impact on Soviet defense policy. While the demand for consumer goods had to be taken into account, “an expanding modern economy” like the USSR’s could “supply both guns and butter.”⁸⁵ Perhaps he came to see things differently after he had been in office for a while: by 1973 or so, he wrote in his memoirs, “the increasingly intractable problems of the Soviet economy were already becoming apparent.”⁸⁶ Later still he wrote that he and Nixon had taken the view that “the Soviet Union, seemingly so monolithic and so eager to demonstrate its military power” was “in fact being rent by vast systemic upheavals”; he and the president had supposedly “treated America’s travail over Vietnam as a temporary weakness which, once overcome, would enable us to prevail over the Soviet system when

⁸² Seweryn Bialer, “The Harsh Decade: Soviet Policies in the 1980s,” *Foreign Affairs* 59, no. 5 (Summer, 1981) ([link](#)), p. 1011; see also pp. 1016-20. See also Seweryn Bialer and Joan Afferica, “Reagan and Russia,” *Foreign Affairs* 61, no. 2 (Winter 1982) ([link](#)), p. 267: “we face a long-term situation where Soviet external expansion will accompany internal decline.”

⁸³ Pipes, “Can the Soviet Union Reform?” ([link](#)), pp. 53, 59.

⁸⁴ Malia, “To the Stalin Mausoleum” ([link](#)), p. 297. One has the sense, in fact, that the point that for internal reasons the USSR was bound to pursue an aggressive foreign policy was simply taken for granted in the early 1980s, at least by many analysts. See, for example, William Griffith’s review of Harry Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Détente* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), in *Problems of Communism* 34, no. 2 (March 1985) ([link](#)), esp. p. 106.

⁸⁵ Henry Kissinger, “Central Issues of American Foreign Policy,” originally published in *Agenda for a Nation* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1968), and republished in Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969) and in FRUS 1969-74, vol. 1, doc. no. 4 ([link](#)).

⁸⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), pp. 243-44.

geopolitical isolation and a stagnant economy had exhausted its ideological zeal.”⁸⁷ But the evidence supporting these claims is thin, and on the whole one has the impression that neither Kissinger nor Nixon was particularly interested in the USSR’s economic problems, or understood the political and military importance of this question.⁸⁸

Nor does it seem that key policy-makers fully understood the importance of this issue during the Carter period. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s national security advisor, was a Soviet affairs specialist; as an academic at Harvard and Columbia, he had written a good deal on Soviet politics. It does not seem that he paid much attention to the USSR’s growing economic difficulties. Although the economists had diagnosed the problem by the mid-1960s, and Brezhnev had given a major speech in 1969 outlining the USSR’s economic difficulties, Brzezinski wrote in 1972 that the Soviets in the last few years had become more optimistic “concerning longer-range economic prospects.”⁸⁹ His famous 1966 article, “The Soviet Political System: Transformation or Degeneration?” was published in *Problems of Communism* in 1966. His analysis there, as Mark Kramer notes, treated “the ‘degeneration’ of the Soviet system as an exclusively political phenomenon”; the economic side of the story was essentially ignored.⁹⁰ Brzezinski’s limited understanding of the way the Soviets were thinking about these problems is reflected in his characterization of the well-known Soviet economist V.S. Nemchinov as an “economic computator.” Nemchinov—the same Nemchinov who, in a famous 1964 article, had warned that the over-centralized planning system would “act as a brake on social and technical progress” and would “sooner or later collapse under the pressure of the

⁸⁷ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999) ([link](#)), pp. 99-100; the second quotation can also be found in Henry Kissinger, “Between the Old Left and the New Right,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 3 (May-June 1999) ([link](#)), p. 105.

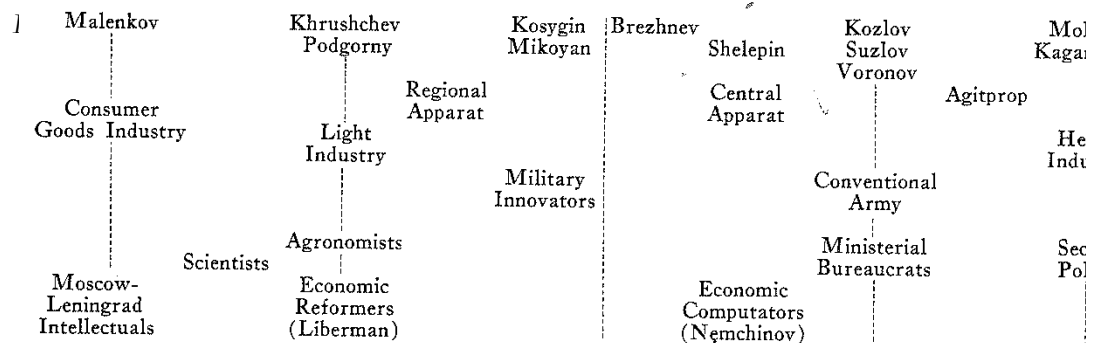
⁸⁸ To support that claim of clairvoyance, Kissinger quoted from a memorandum he sent to Nixon in 1973. That document is quoted at greater length in Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 242-43, and Kissinger also deals with it in Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979) pp. 527-28. The document has since been published in its entirety: Kissinger to Nixon, February 2, 1970, FRUS 1969-74, 12:369-71 ([link](#)). The USSR’s economic problems were discussed briefly there, but it was Sonnenfeldt and not Kissinger who wrote the memorandum; Kissinger signed it, but it is unclear how well he understood what was going on in the Soviet Union. Economics, as he often admitted, was not his strong suit.

⁸⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “How the Cold War Was Played,” *Foreign Affairs* 51, no. 1 (October, 1972) ([link](#)), p. 200.

⁹⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Soviet Political System: Transformation or Degeneration?” *Problems of Communism* 15, no. 1 (January-February 1966) ([link](#)); Mark Kramer, “Anticipating the Grand Failure,” in Charles Gati, ed., *Zbig: The Strategy and Statecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 43-44. See also Brzezinski, “Reflections on the Soviet System,” *Problems of Communism* 17, no. 3 (May-June 1968) ([link](#)).

realities of economic life⁹¹—was actually placed to the right of Brezhnev on the Soviet political spectrum.

(See Figure 2.)



Source: Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Soviet Political System: Transformation or Degeneration?” *Problems of Communism* 15, no. 1 (January-February 1966) ([link](#)), p. 10.

But Brzezinski’s general view was that the Soviet system was in trouble. The centralized, bureaucratic system in the USSR was becoming increasingly dysfunctional—society was increasingly hemmed in by artificial “bureaucratic and dogmatic restraints imposed on it by the ruling party,” and a gap was opening up between state and society. The political elite was “unable to respond effectively either through terror or reform.”⁹² The implication was that a major crisis was in the making.⁹³ That view—shared,

⁹¹ See Trachtenberg, “Assessing Soviet Economic Performance,” n. 121.

⁹² Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Reflections on the Soviet System,” *Problems of Communism* 17, no. 3 (May-June 1968) ([link](#)), p. 44; see also p. 48. See also Brzezinski, “Soviet Political System” ([link](#)), p. 12.

⁹³ Brzezinski did not make this point explicitly, and indeed did not supply a clear answer to the question posed in the title of his 1966 article. As Merle Fainsod noted, Brzezinski’s analysis had suggested that a “crisis of major proportions” was in the making, but he had also seemed to think that gradual reform was possible. Merle Fainsod, “Roads to the Future,” *Problems of Communism* 16, no. 4 (July-August 1967) ([link](#)), pp. 21-22. Brzezinski, incidentally, was often

incidentally, by other leading analysts—focused on the Soviet system’s inability to meet the needs of a modern industrial society and was thus very much in line with the way economists like Grossman and Bergson saw the problem.⁹⁴ And that in turn suggests that Brzezinski, in the White House, might have been receptive to the economists’ arguments, and that those arguments might well have had a certain effect on his thinking and on the thinking of other policy-makers, possibly including President Carter himself. But all this is quite speculative. It is still not clear how well top U.S. officials understood what was going on with the Soviet economy, and how their understanding of the issue affected American policy at the time.

With Reagan the story is much clearer, and there is no doubt that by 1981 a sense that the Soviet economy was in real trouble had come to play a fundamental role in shaping U.S. policy—even if, for tactical reasons related to the government’s need to build up the Soviet threat in order to get the military build-up funded, the official CIA picture was not as bleak as the CIA economists thought was warranted.⁹⁵ But the official line was one thing, and Reagan’s real view was another. “Better than many contemporaries,” Hal Brands writes, Reagan “intuitively understood,” even in the 1970s, that “Moscow’s growing military capabilities rested atop a rotting political-economic foundation,” and as president he sought to “increase the strains on a deteriorating Soviet economy”—not to bring about a total collapse of the Soviet system, but

criticized at the time for inconsistencies of this sort—and indeed, by his academic colleagues, for analytical superficiality. See, for example, Hans Morgenthau, “An Ideologic Shield,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1971) ([link](#)), pp. 150-51. On the superficiality issue, see Vaisse, “De Harvard à la Maison-Blanche,” esp. pp. 306-307. The issue of whether he thought gradual change was possible is important because it suggests that by the time Brzezinski became Carter’s national security advisor, he had not reached firm conclusions about what impact all this should have on American foreign policy—that is, whether the situation inside the USSR called for a conciliatory or a tough U.S. policy.

⁹⁴ Robert Conquest, in his essay commenting on Brzezinski’s 1966 article, made the point this way: “we are faced by an economy and a society whose inextinguishable tendencies run counter to the political integument at present hemming them in, thus creating the conditions of a classical Marxist pre-revolutionary situation.” This, he thought, was “even more a crisis of ideas than of economics.” He then put his finger on the core issue: “the question that remains to be answered is whether the political integument will be destroyed explosively or will erode away gently.” Robert Conquest, “Immobilism and Decay,” *Problems of Communism* 15, no. 5 (September-October 1966) ([link](#)), p. 37. For similar arguments, see Wolfgang Leonhard, “Notes on an Agonizing Diagnosis,” *Problems of Communism* 15, no. 4 (July-August 1966), p. 39; and Fainsod, “Roads to the Future” ([link](#)), p. 23.

⁹⁵ See Firth and Noren, *Soviet Defense Spending*, p. 94, and interview with Noren, cited in Aaron Lobel, “Anticipating the Collapse? Political Judgment and the Debate over CIA Assessments of the Soviet Union, 1975-91,” Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2001 ([link](#)). Official assessments of Soviet military spending also did not fully reflect the analysts’ views; the official documents played down the importance of economic constraints in determining how much the Soviets spent in this area. See Firth and Noren, *Soviet Defense Spending*, pp. 75-80, 85-96.

rather as a way of getting the Soviets to accept a reasonable accommodation with the West.⁹⁶ A very substantial U.S. military build-up would place the Soviets under a good deal of pressure—this was called the “cost-imposing strategy”—and various other measures could be taken to hurt the Soviet economy.⁹⁷ It was in fact clear at the time that the Reagan administration was thinking in those terms. The president’s national security advisor, William P. Clark, for example, gave some sense for the new approach in a May 1982 speech: “We must,” he said, “force our principal adversary, the Soviet Union, to bear the brunt of its economic shortcomings.”⁹⁸ Indeed, that policy was often criticized at the time; the Soviets, it was said, were not

⁹⁶ See Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), chapter 3, and especially pp. 108, 110, 111. Maybe it was not just intuition that had led Reagan to these conclusions. He had learned from CIA experts during the presidential transition at the end of 1980 that the Soviets were in “a lot of trouble.” Kennedy, *Sunshine and Shadow*, p. 18. Richard Pipes, who was deeply involved with the formulation of U.S. policy on the Soviet Union in the early Reagan period, writes that Reagan’s predictions about the demise of the USSR “did not rest did not rest entirely on intuition,” and that the U.S. government, in fact, in the early 1980s “occasionally received intelligence reports that depicted in stark terms the internal crisis afflicting the Soviet Union.” Richard Pipes, “Misinterpreting the Cold War: The Hard-Liners Had It Right,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 1 (January-February 1995) ([link](#)), p. 157. The case of Margaret Thatcher, the right-wing politician who became British prime minister in 1979, is also suggestive. Before taking office, she tended to take a dark view of the Soviet threat, but she was open to argument, and when the economic and other internal difficulties the USSR was facing were explained to her in February 1980 “seminar,” “she remarked that it seemed the system was bound to collapse before long.” See Rodric Braithwaite, “Gorbachev and Thatcher,” *Journal of European Economic History* 16, no. 1 (2010) ([link](#)), p. 32, and idem, *Across the Moscow River* (London: Yale University Press, 2002) ([link](#)), pp. 51-52.

⁹⁷ Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?*, p. 112. See also Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration’s Secret Strategy that Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994); Peter Schweizer, ed., *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: Reassessing the Causes and Consequences of the End of the Cold War* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2000); Alan Dobson, “Reagan Administration, Economic Warfare, and Starting to Close Down the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 3 ([link](#)); and Francis Marlo, *Planning Reagan’s War: Conservative Strategies and America’s Cold War Victory* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2012) (with extensive bibliography). For insight into the thinking that lay behind this strategy, see Richard Pipes, “Can the Soviet Union Reform?” ([link](#)), esp. pp. 54-60. Pipes, who worked at the NSC during the early Reagan period, later wrote that that article “summarized” the Reagan strategy; see Pipes, “Misinterpreting the Cold War: The Hard-Liners Had It Right” ([link](#)), p. 157. It seems that the “competitive strategies perspective” that Andrew Marshall developed, first at RAND and then at the Pentagon, was one of the intellectual taproots of the strategy. See, for example, Marshall’s preface to Henry Sokolski, ed., *Prevailing in a Well-Armed World: Devising Competitive Strategies against Weapons Proliferation* (Carlisle: Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2000) ([link](#)); and Andrew W. Marshall, “Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis,” RAND R-862-PR (Santa Monica: RAND, 1972). Note also David J. Andre, *New Competitive Strategies: Tools and Methodologies*, Vol. 1, *Review of the Department of Defense Competitive Strategies Initiative, 1986-1990*, Final Technical Report, McLean, VA: Science Applications International Corporation, November 30, 1990 ([link](#)); and J. J. Martin et al., *The U.S.-Soviet Long-term Military Competition*, Final Technical Report prepared for the Director, Defense Nuclear Agency, and Director, Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Vols., 1-3, San Diego, CA: Science Applications International Corporation, June 5, 1990 (released to me under the FOIA).

⁹⁸ Richard Halloran, “Reagan Aide Tells of New Strategy on Soviet Threat,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1982 ([link](#)), pp. 1, 15. The phrase about forcing the Soviets to “bear the brunt of its economic shortcomings” was taken from National Security Decision Directive 32, “U.S. National Security Strategy” ([link](#)), of May 20, 1982. See also Richard Halloran, “Pentagon Draws Up First Strategy for Fighting a Long Nuclear War,” *New York Times*, May 30, 1982 ([link](#)) (discussed in Schweizer, *Victory*, p. 81); Leslie Gelb, “Russia,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 28, 1984, p. 22ff. ([link](#)); and, for one

particularly vulnerable to that sort of pressure.⁹⁹ But Soviet leaders, by the mid-1980s at the latest, had reached a different conclusion. “Another round of the arms race,” Gorbachev told the Politburo, was “beyond our capabilities”; “we will lose it, because we are already at the limit of our capabilities.” “If the new round begins,” he added, “the pressure on our economy will be unbelievable.”¹⁰⁰ The clear implication was that the military confrontation with America was unsustainable and that Soviet foreign policy therefore had to be changed.¹⁰¹ And the problem was particularly acute because the technological gap between the USSR and the West was clearly growing—something which was of fundamental importance because of its military implications.¹⁰²

of the most perceptive contemporary accounts, Michel Tatu, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: A Turning Point?” *Foreign Affairs* 61, no. 3 (1982) ([link](#)), esp. pp. 592-95.

⁹⁹ “I think it’s absolutely crazy,” Ivan Selin said, “to believe that the United States could take military steps to cause the Soviets to spend either more or less on defense, and therefore either beggar or redirect their economy.” U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, Subcommittee on International Trade, Finance, and Security Economics, and Library of Congress, Congressional Reference Service, *Soviet Military Economic Relations: Proceedings of a Workshop on July 7 and 8, 1982* (Washington: GPO, 1983) ([link](#)), p. 271. See also Stephen Cohen, “The Soviet System: Crisis or Stability?” *Sovieticus*, p. 22 (originally appeared in *The Nation* in August 1983), and Seweryn Bialer and Joan Afferica, “Reagan and Russia,” *Foreign Affairs* 61, no. 2 (Winter 1982), pp. 263-64 ([link](#)).

¹⁰⁰ Politburo session of October 4, 1986, quoted in Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War” ([link](#)), p. 29. A number of other documents that also support the point are cited here; those documents appeared in an unpublished National Security Archive briefing book. Those same documents, however, are now available in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton and Vladislav Zubok, eds., “*Masterpieces of History*”: *The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989* (New York: Central European University Press, 2010). It was also often suggested at the time that Soviet military spending was relatively unconstrained by any concern for the consumer’s interests. See, for example, the famous Team B report of 1976: “Soviet Strategic Objectives: An Alternative View,” Report of Team ‘B’, December 1976, CREST system ([link](#)), pp. 15, 21-22 (where the CIA was criticized for having argued that the allocation problem was an important issue for the Soviet leadership); the first passage also appears in the extract from the document in Donald Steury, ed., *Intentions and Capabilities: Estimates on Soviet Strategic Forces, 1950-83* (Washington: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1996) ([link](#)), p. 380. This kind of argument was by no means to be found only on the right. Seweryn Bialer and Joan Afferica argued in the early 1980s that the Reagan policy of putting pressure on the Soviets by building up U.S. military power was misconceived because the USSR would cut back on consumption, “enforce harsh internal discipline,” and “arm and arm and arm, regardless of cost.” Bialer and Afferica, “Reagan and Russia” ([link](#)), p. 264. For the point that arguments of this sort were often made at the time, see Stephen Mayer, “Economic Constraints in Soviet Military Decision-Making,” in Henry Rowen and Charles Wolf, eds., *The Impoverished Superpower: Perestroika and the Soviet Military Burden* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1990), p. 202; Mayer himself, one should note, did not agree that the consumer’s interests were not a major factor.

¹⁰¹ See also Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War” ([link](#)), pp. 46-47. William Odom, referring to the early 1980s, says that his “own investigation, through interviews with Soviet officers, VKP [Soviet Communist Party] officials and a few senior party leaders, revealed unanimity on the judgement that the Soviet economy could not indefinitely sustain the military competition with the United States.” William Odom, “The Sources of ‘New Thinking’ in Soviet Politics,” in Olav Njolstad, ed., *The Last Decade of the Cold War: From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation* (London: Frank Cass, 2004) ([link](#)), p. 121.

¹⁰² See Benjamin Fischer, “CANOPY WING: The U.S. War Plan that Gave the East Germans Goose Bumps,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 27, no. 3 (2014) ([link](#)), esp. pp. 434, 457.

But even if it is true that the Reagan build-up played a key role in bringing about the dramatic changes in Soviet policy that took place during the Gorbachev period, we would still need to understand how exactly it generated the pressure it did—why it was, as the Politburo was warned in 1970, that if the economic problem was not solved, the USSR would be transformed eventually “into a second-class provincial power.”¹⁰³ In the nuclear age, wouldn’t the Soviets have been able to hold their own even with an anemic economy? Even if the United States sought to develop a first-strike capability, would economic constraints really have prevented the Soviets from taking effective countermeasures? And without a meaningful strategic edge, what good would lesser forms of military superiority be for the Americans? We need to learn more about how people on both sides thought about these issues.

But whatever the answers are, the questions themselves are of fundamental importance. The Soviet economic decline played a fundamental role in determining how the Cold War ran its course—a more important role, I think, than has been generally recognized. In reinterpreting the Cold War, there are many major issues that still need to be sorted out. A sense for how important the Soviet economic problem was, and especially for how this question was understood by both sides at the time, can help bring those issues into focus. It should be part of the basic framework we bring to bear when we do historical work on the Cold War.

Concluding Thoughts

The Soviet economic decline had to matter domestically because it was of such enormous importance internationally: a regime that did not have to worry about remaining competitive with other major powers could have dealt with its economic problems in a far more relaxed way. And conversely the USSR’s economic difficulties were of great international importance because the way that country dealt with them was bound to have a profound effect on the way it related to the rest of the world—and on the way other countries related to it. That is why the insights the economists had reached very early on about the

¹⁰³ A.D. Sakharov, V.F. Turchin, and R.A. Medvedev, “Appeal of Soviet Scientists to the Party-Government Leaders of the USSR,” March 19, 1970, *Survey*, no. 76 (Summer 1970).

USSR's deepening economic problems should have been of fundamental interest to students of international politics. And yet leading specialists in this area, including people like Kissinger and Brzezinski, were slow to grasp what the economists were saying, and it is hard to avoid thinking that foreign policy analysis would have been better if the analysts had had a firmer sense for the nature of the problem the Soviets were going to have to deal with.

How should an understanding of the Soviet economic problem have affected the way Soviet foreign policy was interpreted? The natural assumption, I think, is that the USSR's economic difficulties could be expected to lead to a more moderate, more defensive, more status-quo-oriented, foreign policy. A country losing ground in the competition with the West would tend, increasingly, to feel the best it could hope for was to maintain its present position. It would, one would expect, try to reach an accommodation with its adversaries, perhaps even try to pursue a policy that looked toward establishing some kind of great power "condominium." It would try to ease the pressure it would have to endure by avoiding provocative actions and would perhaps attempt to reach meaningful arms control agreements with its rivals. It would try to establish the sort of great power relationship that would facilitate technology transfer and provide access to western capital.

That set of assumptions, it seems to me, would have been the natural point of departure for the analysis of Soviet foreign policy—if, in fact, the insights of the economists had been absorbed. And yet very few analysts at the time—George Kennan, as noted above, is the one major exception here—interpreted Soviet foreign policy in those terms. To be sure, on occasion some aspect of Soviet behavior struck one analyst or another as surprisingly moderate. Thomas Schelling, for example, was impressed in 1981 by the "absolute impassivity" of Soviet policy throughout the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁴ And Soviet behavior on the Polish question, William Hyland noted the following year, "had been astonishingly restrained, so much so that some observers concluded there had been a loss of nerve in the Kremlin."¹⁰⁵ Yet such bits and pieces of evidence were not seen as part of a larger picture—and not interpreted in the light of what the economists were saying

¹⁰⁴ See Stanley Hoffmann et al., "Vietnam Reappraised," *International Security* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1981) ([link](#)), p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ Hyland, "U.S.-Soviet Relations" ([link](#)), p. 545.

about the Soviet economic problem. Even the simple point that the Soviets now had a strong economic incentive to limit the rise in military spending was often ignored. Compare, for example, Seweryn Bialer's claim in 1981 that a variety of factors made it "highly unlikely" that the Soviets, even under new leadership, would slow down the growth in military spending with Bergson's remark the same year that the Soviet government's ability "to sustain its military buildup" was becoming "increasingly problematic in the face of mounting economic stringencies."¹⁰⁶ (The CIA, one should remember, revealed in late 1982—that is, the year after the Bialer article was published—that Soviet military spending had actually leveled off in the late 1970s.¹⁰⁷) And of course one did not have to be an economist to see the point; it was enough to have some general sense for the importance of economic factors and for the political effect they were likely to have. Kennan, for example, had pointed out a few years earlier that it would be very hard, for economic reasons, for the Soviets to "go beyond equivalence" in the military area.¹⁰⁸

To the extent that foreign policy analysts did take the Soviet economic problem into account, they tended, as a general rule, to argue that it would lead to a more aggressive Soviet policy. But this was essentially an argument by assertion; it was hard to find anyone who actually tried to demonstrate (perhaps by using historical evidence) that the USSR's economic decline would, in all probability, have that effect.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Bialer, "Harsh Decade" ([link](#)), p. 1006; Abram Bergson, "Can the Soviet Slowdown Be Reversed?" *Challenge* 24, no. 5 (November/December 1981) ([link](#)), p. 42. This in essence had been Bergson's view for some time. See his testimony in U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *The Military Budget and National Economic Priorities*, part 3: "The Economic Basis of the Russian Military Challenge to the United States," June 24, 1969 (Washington: GPO, 1969), pp. 924-25 ([link](#)). "Overall," he said, "it would be a most difficult thing for [the Soviets] to try to surpass us much in military strength in the future with the kind of economy they have. They have to consider that the pressures of other needs are rising rather than declining." Wouldn't it in fact be hard for the Soviets, JEC Chairman Proxmire wondered, to reduce the amounts going to either consumption or investment? Bergson agreed: those were the "principal competing claimants for the Soviet GNP, the Soviet pie," and the "pressure of competition was becoming more rather than less intense." "This is rather paradoxical," he noted, and went on to make what he had come to view as the key point: "The pie is growing. But the claims of the competing uses are becoming more pressing. In the case of investment it just so happens that Stalin put the Russians on a growth track where the investment cost of growth is continually rising. So that the share of the GNP that must go to investment must rise if the rate of growth is to be maintained."

¹⁰⁷ See n. 54 above.

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, *The Soviet Union: Internal Dynamics of Foreign Policy, Present and Future*, hearings held in September and October 1977 (Washington: GPO, 1978) ([link](#)), p. 62.

¹⁰⁹ There is a large political science literature dealing with power transitions. A variety of arguments have been made, but a consensus seems to be emerging: a number of important recent works cast doubt on the claim that decline tends to produce an aggressive foreign policy. See especially Randall Schweller, "Managing the Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory," in Alistair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999) ([link](#)), esp. pp. 8-9. Schweller also dealt with the issue in his book *Unanswered Threats: Political*

The same point applies to the “internalist” interpretation of Soviet foreign policy—that is, to the idea at least a degree of aggressiveness was essential for internal political reasons. Again, there was little attempt to actually prove this was the case. To be sure, various Soviet pronouncements seemed to support the theory that Soviet policy was innately aggressive, but in any political system (including our own) there can be a huge gap between rhetoric and reality, and mere “verbal formulations” are not necessarily to be taken at face value. It was a mistake to simply assume, as Alexander Dallin pointed out, that “aggressive Soviet rhetoric” was “a clue to behavior—not a substitute for it or an alibi for inaction.”¹¹⁰

The point is important because of the major role theories of that sort played in shaping American policy, especially during the Reagan period. Richard Pipes, who played a key role in the early 1980s, refers to the “revolutionary central thesis” of a key policy document adopted at the end of 1982. According to that document, NSDD 75, U.S. policy should be based on the idea that “Soviet aggressiveness

Constraints on the Balance of Power (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). As Richard Rosecrance notes in his review of that book, “in Schweller's analysis, domestic uncertainty is generally a force for caution or hesitancy in international terms” (*Political Science Quarterly* 122, no. 3 [Fall, 2007] [link](#), p. 513). See also Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, “Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011) [link](#); and William Wohlforth, “Hegemonic Decline and Hegemonic War Revisited” in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *Power, Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). There is a related literature on the “diversionary theory of war”; the findings here seem to point in the same general direction. For an overview, see Jack S. Levy, “The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique,” in Manus I. Midlarsky, ed., *The Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989). Note also M. Taylor Fravel, “The Limits of Diversion: Rethinking Internal and External Conflict,” *Security Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010). Even with regard to pre-1914 Germany, the prevailing view among historians today is that the connections between foreign policy and domestic politics were more fragile than people like Hans-Ulrich Wehler and the so-called “Bielefeld school” had led us to think. This was certainly Cornelius Torp’s view in his important article, “The ‘Coalition of ‘Rye and Iron’” under the Pressure of Globalization: A Reinterpretation of Germany's Political Economy before 1914,” *Central European History* 43, no. 3 (September 2010) [link](#), esp. p. 418ff., where he explicitly distanced himself from the earlier “Kehrite” view associated above all with Wehler. As Torp pointed out, the basic argument about the limitations of the Kehrite view had been made before—most notably, perhaps, by Geoff Eley in his article on “Sammlungspolitik, Social Imperialism, and the Navy Law of 1898,” published in *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* in 1974; note also the introduction to the 1991 edition of Eley’s *Reshaping the German Right*. See also Wolfgang Mommsen’s “Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914,” which came out in *Central European History* in March 1973 [link](#), esp. p. 15ff., where he criticizes the Kehrite view. Niall Ferguson’s “Public Finance and National Security: The Domestic Origins of the First World War Revisited,” *Past & Present*, No. 142 (February 1994) [link](#) is another important analysis. Ferguson begins his essay by noting that the argument “that the German ‘ruling elites’ precipitated war to avert a domestic political crisis – ‘to strengthen the patriarchal order and mentality’ and ‘halt the advance of Social Democracy’ - no longer appears tenable.”

¹¹⁰ Alexander Dallin, “Bias and Blunders in American Studies on the USSR,” in Dallin, *Uses of History*, p. 21; originally published in the *Slavic Review* 32, no. 3 (September 1973). See also Kennan’s comments in *The Soviet Union: Internal Dynamics of Foreign Policy, Present and Future* [link](#), p. 78. It seems clear from interviews conducted after the end of the Cold War that Soviet rhetoric (about, for example, the possibility of victory in nuclear war) was not to be taken at face value, but was instead to be understood in ideological terms. See John Hines, Ellis Mishulovich and John Shull, *Soviet Intentions, 1965-1985* (McLean, VA: BDM, 1995) [link](#), vol. 1, pp. 26-27. There was some evidence that became available at the time that was taken in some quarters as showing that the Soviet leadership was thinking in aggressive terms, but that material is of dubious value and was not taken too seriously at the time. See the appendix.

has deep roots in the internal system”; it followed that the United States should put pressure on the USSR’s internal system “to weaken the sources of Soviet imperialism.” In practice, Pipes noted, “subversion considerably exceeded the language of NSDD 75”; Reagan himself had “insisted on the deletion from the document of certain points dealing with economic warfare lest they leak to the press and embarrass him.” In Pipes’s view, “Reagan was right.” Containment, it had become clear, was no longer an appropriate policy. “With Soviet outposts scattered all over the globe—Cuba, Nicaragua, Angola, Vietnam, and so on,” it seemed to Pipes at the time that the old containment policy “had become impracticable.” A more assertive American policy was in order: “The altered geopolitical situation required an assault on the Soviet system itself.”¹¹¹

That general view, Pipes says, was shared by the Reagan administration as a whole. His 1984 *Foreign Affairs* article, published shortly after he had left the government, “summarized this strategy.” In that article he had argued that experience had shown “that attempts to restrain Soviet aggressiveness by a mixture of punishments and rewards fail in their purpose because they address the symptoms of the problem, namely aggression, rather than the cause, which is a political and economic system that induces aggressive behavior.” Positive changes in Soviet policy would come about “only from failures, instabilities, and fears of collapse”—the implication being that if the U.S. government wanted to change Soviet policy, it would have to force the Soviets to deal with that sort of situation. So the Reagan administration took a hard line and the policy worked. “The Hard-Liners Had it Right,” Pipes said—the events leading to the fall of the Soviet Union were a vindication of the Reagan policy.¹¹²

The Reagan policy certainly played a key role in shaping the course of international politics at the end of the Cold War. The idea that U.S. pressure could help bring about major changes in Soviet policy and indeed in the Soviet system itself turned out to be correct. It is easy today to quote experts saying at the time that such a policy could not be effective—that the Soviets could and would resist the pressure—and the fact that such predictions turned out to be incorrect is one reason why the “Sovietologists” came to be held in

¹¹¹ Richard Pipes, “Reagan was Right,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May-June 1995) ([link](#)), p. 200; “U.S. Relations with the USSR,” NSDD 75, January 17, 1983 ([link](#))

¹¹² Pipes, “Misinterpreting the Cold War: The Hard-Liners Had It Right” ([link](#)), p. 154; Pipes, “Can the Soviet Union Reform?” ([link](#)), pp. 56, 61.

such low regard.¹¹³ The Pipes analysis does not look bad when seen in that context. The pressure the Reagan administration brought to bear clearly did have a major impact on Soviet policy, not just externally but internally as well. But that point does not answer the question of whether it made sense to pursue a policy of that sort. Could it be that the great campaign was mounted after the war, for all intents and purposes, had already been won?

The problem, in other words, did not lie in the assumption that the Soviets were vulnerable to pressure—in large part because of their growing economic problem—or that a policy of exerting strong pressure could have far-reaching political effects. The real question had to do not with whether the treatment could be effective, but rather with whether the disorder had been diagnosed correctly. And part of the problem here had to do with some of the basic assumptions that underlay the Reagan strategy, and above all the assumption about how détente had been a “one-way street,” and indeed had failed for that reason. Many people, in fact, had taken the rhetoric of the Nixon-Kissinger period at face value. By the end of the 1970s, it was clear that the détente policy had failed: U.S.-Soviet relations had obviously deteriorated quite significantly in the course of that decade. The implication was that U.S. policy could not be based on realist principles—the principles Nixon and Kissinger had claimed to stand for. And that in turn meant that stronger medicine was now called for—that the United States had to adopt a much tougher policy.

But it is now clear from evidence that has become available after the end of the Cold War that many of those assumptions were incorrect. The Reagan administration, in particular, like most of its predecessors, did not really understand what had happened before it took office; it did not understand what U.S. policy in the early 1970s had actually been. Kissinger, in fact, had tried to mollify his right-wing critics by explaining (in private, at least at first) what U.S. policy actually was. In 1974 he wrote Eugene Rostow, the chairman of a task force that had just drafted a powerful attack on the détente policy, that the government

¹¹³ See, for example, Bialer and Afferica, “Reagan and Russia” ([link](#)), pp. 262-63. The Reagan administration’s assumption that the West could have a major impact on Soviet international behavior by “exerting influence on internal Soviet developments” was, Bialer and his co-author wrote, “simply fallacious”; and one of the reasons it was “profoundly erroneous” was that the Soviet Union was “not now nor will it be during the next decade in the throes of a true systemic crisis, for it boasts enormous unused reserves of political and social stability that suffice to endure the deepest difficulties.” Peter Schweizer in his book *Victory* (p. xiv) quotes that latter passage and various other comments by well-known liberal intellectuals to support his basic point that Reagan was more perceptive than his critics on the left.

had never had any illusions about the nature of Soviet policy; the goal had been to ensnare the Soviets in a network of intersecting interests.¹¹⁴ (This was remarkably similar to the line he had taken in his meeting with Pompidou the previous year.) But the critics were not persuaded. One thinks of Keynes's famous remark about Woodrow Wilson: it was harder to de-bamboozle people than it had been to bamboozle them in the first place.¹¹⁵

Perhaps things would have been different if political analysts had, from the start, paid more attention to the conclusions the economists had reached by the mid-1960s. Soviet policy would certainly have been seen in a different light; American policy itself would thus have been interpreted differently. But the basic point that emerges for me from the whole analysis here is more purely historical in nature: given how important the Soviet economic problem was at the time, it was bound to affect the way great power politics in the whole later Cold War period ran their course. We historians need to bear that in mind—more than we have so far—as we try to make sense of that period.

¹¹⁴ Paraphrased in Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 103.

¹¹⁵ See John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1920), p. 50. Note also Kissinger's remarkable exchange with Henry Rowen in 1984: Henry S. Rowen, "The Old SALT Gang Returns," *Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 1984, p. 28 ([link](#)); Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, "Old Wine in New Bottles," *ibid.*, November 12, 1984, p. 24 ([link](#)); and Henry S. Rowen letter to the editor, *ibid.*, November 16, 1984 ([link](#)).

Appendix: Some Reported Brezhnev Statements on the USSR's Long-Term Goals during the Détente Period

In 1996 the CIA's in-house journal *Studies in Intelligence* published an article by Gus Weiss called "Duping the Soviets: The Farewell Dossier," which began by quoting a statement Brezhnev was supposed to have made at a Politburo meeting in 1971. "We communists," Brezhnev was reported as saying, "have to string along with the capitalists for a while. We need their credits, their agriculture, and their technology. But we are going to continue massive military programs and by the middle 1980s we will be in a position to return to a much more aggressive foreign policy designed to gain the upper hand in our relationship with the West."¹¹⁶ No source was given for the quotation.¹¹⁷

Brezhnev was reported as making similar comments in two newspaper articles published in the 1970s. The first was an article called "Brezhnev Said to Assure East Europe That Accords With West Are a Tactic" which the *New York Times* published in September 1973. "According to intelligence reports recently received" in Washington, that article began, "Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet Communist party leader, has emphasized to Eastern European leaders that the movement toward improving relations with the West is a tactical policy change to permit the Soviet bloc to establish its superiority in the next 12 to 15 years." The reports were mostly "third-or fourth-hand accounts of Brezhnev statements" that had been "filtered through Eastern European sources" to British and other Western intelligence agencies "and finally to the United States intelligence community."¹¹⁸

The second article, "Brezhnev termed détente a ruse, 1973 report said," was published in the *Boston Globe* in February 1977. According to that article, a British intelligence report from early 1973 (and passed on to the Americans that year) had quoted Brezhnev "as privately declaring that détente was a ruse designed to lead to a decisive shift in the balance of power." "Trust us, comrades," Brezhnev was reported as saying at a "secret meeting of East European Communist party leaders in Prague," "for by 1985, as a consequence of what we are now achieving with détente, we will have achieved most of our objectives in Western Europe. We will have consolidated our position. We will have improved our economy. And a decisive shift in the correlation of forces will be such that, come 1985, we will be able to exert our will wherever we need to."¹¹⁹

The *Globe* article did not receive much attention at the time. The syndicated columnist Tom Braden used it in a piece he wrote in 1979.¹²⁰ It also had a certain resonance on the Right. The *National Review*, in its March 4, 1977 issue, published a piece ("Secret Speech: Did Brezhnev Come Clean?") based on the *Globe* report, and Ronald Reagan used the *Globe* story in a radio talk he gave on March 23, 1977.¹²¹ It was also cited in Joseph Douglass, *Why the Soviets Violate Arms Control Treaties* and in Reagan advisor Thomas Reed's book *At the Abyss*.¹²² But neither mainstream scholars nor CIA analysts, judging from their failure to cite either the *Globe*

¹¹⁶ Gus Weiss, "Duping the Soviets: The Farewell Dossier," *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 39, no. 5, 1996 ([link](#)).

¹¹⁷ The author, Gus Weiss, does not even suggest that the document it came from was one of the nearly 4000 documents Col. Vetrov (codenamed "Farewell") provided to French intelligence, who then passed them on to the U.S. government; the Farewell material, though, was the subject of his article.

¹¹⁸ John Finney, "Brezhnev Said to Assure East Europe That Accords With West Are a Tactic," *New York Times*, September 17, 1973, p. 2 ([link](#)).

¹¹⁹ William Beecher, "Brezhnev termed détente a ruse, 1973 report said," *Boston Globe*, February 11, 1977.

¹²⁰ Tom Braden, "Détente: Soviets Testing New Strength," October 21, 1979 ([link](#)).

¹²¹ Kiron Skinner et al., *Reagan in His Own Hand* (New York: Free Press, 2001), p. 118 ([link](#)).

¹²² Joseph Douglass, *Why the Soviets Violate Arms Control Treaties* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey, 1988), pp. 9-10; Thomas Reed, *At the Abyss: An Insider's History of the Cold War* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 294 ([link](#)).

article or the earlier piece in the *Times*, seemed to think that those reports carried much evidentiary weight.¹²³ Even the famous Team B report of 1976, which took a dark view of Soviet long-term goals, did not consider this evidence to be worth citing.¹²⁴

It is not hard to understand why people were reluctant to take these reports at face value. For one thing, as Mark Kramer pointed out to me, “no Soviet leader would ever have referred to Soviet foreign policy as ‘aggressive.’” Given the risk of leaks, Brezhnev would scarcely have proclaimed at a meeting with East European leaders that he was engaged in a ruse, no matter what his real goals were. He might well have said that his policy was designed to promote Soviet interests, or the interests of the Communist bloc as a whole, and that those interests went beyond the mere safeguarding of the status quo. But as was pointed out in both articles, such statements could easily be interpreted in tactical terms—as efforts on Brezhnev’s part to secure his political position at home and to weaken opposition to his policies from his own more conservative colleagues.

Still, it would be interesting to know what Soviet leaders were saying in private at the time—and what western intelligence agencies heard them saying to each other. The most important reports mentioned in both articles apparently came from the British, and we know from the declassified history of the National Security Agency which the National Security Archive posted on its website in 2013 that the British were listening in on Kosygin’s “telephone calls while he was in London in 1967.”¹²⁵

The Americans also obtained information on their own. The columnist Jack Anderson reported in the fall of 1971 that a U.S. intercept operation operating out of the American embassy in Moscow “was collecting and exploiting the private car phone communications of Politburo leaders.”¹²⁶ According to Bob Woodward, “elite CIA and National Security Agency teams,” called “Special Collection Elements,” could “perform espionage miracles, delivering verbatim transcripts from high-level foreign-government meetings in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, and phone conversations between key politicians”; the Soviets, for their part, had, during the Ford period, “intercepted phone calls from nearly half a dozen places in the Washington area”—a fact known to the U.S. government, which, however, was supposedly prevented from by the Justice Department from continuing to read the “Soviet ‘take’ from these phone calls” in order to “protect the privacy of U.S. citizens.”¹²⁷ It would be very interesting to see what was being said and how that information was processed.

¹²³ The alleged evidence is not mentioned, for example, in some of the main CIA documents from the period dealing with Soviet aims. See especially CIA report, “Détente: The View from the Kremlin,” April 25, 1975, CREST system ([link](#)), and CIA memorandum, “Soviet Détente Policy,” May 23, 1974, CREST system ([link](#)); and National Intelligence Estimate, “Soviet Strategic Objectives,” January 12, 1977 CREST system ([link](#)).

¹²⁴ “Soviet Strategic Objectives: An Alternative View: Report of Team ‘B,’” December 1976 ([link](#)).

¹²⁵ Thomas Johnson, *American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945-1989*, Book III: Retrenchment and Reform, 1972-1980 (National Security Agency: Center for Cryptological History, 1998) ([link](#)), p. 81. The redacted version included in National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 260, November 2008 ([link](#)) did not include this material; the passage cited in the following footnote was also deleted from that version. The more complete version, released following an appeal, is posted on the National Security Archive’s Electronic Briefing Book 441, September 2013 ([link](#)). For a guide to the British sources, a good place to start would be Len Scott, “Sources and methods in the study of intelligence: A British view,” in Loch Johnson, ed., *Strategic Intelligence*, vol. 1 (Westport: Praeger, 2007). There is also a research guide covering this material on the British National Archives website ([link](#)).

¹²⁶ Johnson, *American Cryptology*, Book 3 ([link](#)), p. 82. Anderson, it was reported there, “had acquired a box of top secret CIA National Intelligence Digests (NIDs), the unwitting courtesy of an NSC staffer who had been in the habit of taking them home for a little bedtime reading. After a marital falling out, his wife took the accumulated NIDs to Anderson, who kept them in his office and used them in his columns over a period of years.”

¹²⁷ Woodward, *The Veil*, pp. 30-31, 55, 86-87. DCI William Casey was supposed to have personally planted a listening device in the office of a senior official in an unidentified Middle Eastern country. *Ibid.*, p. 147. On these matters in