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Power, Ideas, and New Evidence on the Cold War's End

A Reply to Brooks and Wohlforth

Robert D. English

The past decade has seen an outpouring of scholarship on the causes and consequences of the Cold War's end. Scholars of various theoretical perspectives—chiefly neorealist (materialist or power-based), neoliberal (institutionalist), and constructivist (ideas-based)—have digested an enormous body of evidence on the sudden dissolution of a superpower. Yet it appears that we are still far from agreement on one central issue: the sources of the Soviet Union's retreat from confrontation and embrace of a "new thinking" in foreign policy. And the reasons for this disagreement have much to do with the powerful, distorting influence of a second signal event: the Soviet Union's subsequent collapse.

This problem is seen in the materialist explanation for Moscow's "strategic retreat" of the late 1980s advanced by Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth.¹ Advancing one of the strongest such arguments to date, the authors cite new evidence on Soviet economic woes and their supposedly compelling effect on even hard-line opponents of foreign policy reform, toward a conclusion that ideas were mainly endogenous to structure and "largely a reflection of a changing material environment" (p. 8). Yet Brooks and Wohlforth's case is weakened by an evident bias in their selection of sources—and, in turn, in those sources' recollections of the 1980s—that flows from hindsight of the Soviet Union's subsequent collapse and a consequently exaggerated sense of the inevitability of rapid retreat. Downplaying the hard-liners' opposition to reform, the authors also overlook evidence of the liberals' principled belief in new thinking with the result that the alternatives to strategic retreat disappear, the critical contributions of leadership and ideas fade, and economic decline

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1. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/01), pp. 5–53. Subsequent references to this article are in parentheses.

alone renders fairly straightforward and all but inevitable a radical foreign policy turn that was in fact highly complex and contingent.

This bias of hindsight is compounded by assumptions Brooks and Wohlforth make about the “rationality” of pre-reform Soviet politics whereby the pervasive cynicism, careerism, and corruption of military-industrial officials is replaced by a kind of bureaucratically tempered realism. Had the Politburo of the mid-1980s been subject to anything like the pressures that would weigh on the leaders of a pluralistic state in similar economic straits, then correlation of those straits with subsequent policy change might constitute primary evidence of causation. But the Kremlin faced few such pressures, at least until the late 1980s, by which time Mikhail Gorbachev had already launched his boldest new-thinking initiatives. Until then, the Soviet system had been stable, the alternatives to strategic retreat had seemed viable (at least they had to a conservative leadership majority), and the most critical unexplored change had been the growth of ties between a reformist minority and a group of academics and policy analysts who had been advocating major “Westernizing” changes for more than a decade.

Below I examine some interpretive problems concerning evidence that Brooks and Wohlforth cite on the beliefs and actions of Soviet old thinkers. I then outline some important but overlooked sources on the origins and influence of the new thinking. Next I suggest an alternative to Brooks and Wohlforth’s materialist explanation of Soviet behavior, seeking to give leadership and ideas their due alongside power. I conclude with some observations on the difficulty of assimilating new evidence on such a rare, complex event as the Cold War’s end, including the need for balance, close attention to context, and the standards required for claims of correlation versus causation.

Economic Decline and Soviet Old Thinking

Brooks and Wohlforth begin with a synthesis of recent research on Soviet economic trends prior to Gorbachev’s accession as general secretary in 1985, and follow them through the subsequent years of perestroika. They argue that Soviet relative decline came earlier and proceeded more rapidly than most analysts understood at the time. Further, this was a qualitative and not just quantitative change; looking back from the perspective of capitalism’s incipient globalization, Brooks and Wohlforth contend that by the mid-1980s the dilemma facing Moscow was arguably “modern history’s worst case of imperial overstretch” (p. 22).

Of course, this assessment by itself adds little to the materialist case; indeed, some nonrealists had no difficulty proceeding from similarly pessimistic views of the Soviet condition long before their acceptance by realists.² Such findings, though now more conclusively documented, hardly show that retrenchment had become unavoidable by the mid-1980s. Absent strong evidence that this situation was broadly understood in such dire terms by the Soviet leadership—and, moreover, that there was agreement on strategic retreat as a remedy—such data make only a circumstantial case for the priority of material forces. In fact Brooks and Wohlforth do offer evidence to this end, but with so many flaws and omissions that they are not convincing.

For example, having shown that the Soviet economy was weaker than previously understood, Brooks and Wohlforth claim that this problem was particularly acute because “what mattered most to Soviet policymakers . . . was the direct comparison between their country’s economic performance and that of their main rival, the United States” (p. 19). Further, “the Soviet elite’s basic reference point was one in which Moscow was gaining rapidly vis-à-vis the United States. Anything short of that was devastating” (p. 22). This is clearly wrong. Such attitudes had faded by the late 1960s, and by the early 1980s most of the leadership was mired in corruption, often oblivious to foreign and even domestic economic trends, and largely content to muddle through indefinitely. Politburo members certainly valued the international respect that their military might had earned, but that did not seem at risk.³ And neither their identity, nor their legitimacy, depended on overtaking the United States. On the contrary, the Soviet leadership’s “basic reference point” lay not in the future but in the past, mainly in the experience of World War II and postwar priva-

2. One of the most vivid portrayals of the domestic costs of Soviet superpower ambitions remains Robert C. Tucker’s 1981–82 article “Swollen State, Spent Society: Stalin’s Legacy to Brezhnev’s Russia,” reprinted in Tucker, *Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), pp. 108–139. Others cited the analyses of such “dissident” Soviet economists as Igor Birman and Grigory Khanin (ignored by many realists until well after the Soviet Union’s collapse) to argue that Moscow’s military burden far exceeded even the worst-case Western estimates.

3. In the recollection of a former deputy general staff chief, “Our senior military officers and the political leadership . . . didn’t care about SDI [i.e., the United States’ Strategic Defense Initiative]. Everything was driven by departmental and careerist concerns. Any serious issue was shunned. . . . Nobody took national security seriously, nobody. . . . You are looking for elements of intelligence, logic, or concern for the nation’s welfare, but all these were lacking.” Quoted in Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insiders’ History* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 57–58.

tions, which the leadership frequently invoked to rationalize current economic difficulties.⁴ Nor did a younger generation of elites suffer from any “catch up and surpass America” illusions. Though they were clearly concerned about the economy, the near desperation that Brooks and Wohlforth depict is much exaggerated.⁵

The authors’ focus next turns to members of the Soviet military-industrial complex; if even they agreed that economic woes made missile cuts, troop reductions, and other elements of a general strategic retreat unavoidable, then perhaps material pressures really were paramount. Here Brooks and Wohlforth draw on new evidence—primarily memoirs and interviews—to support two claims: (1) there was consensus on the depth of crisis and the necessity of urgent measures; and (2) there was agreement on, or at least an absence of serious resistance to, major arms cuts. What is actually remarkable about such retrospective accounts is their *lack of agreement*. For each former official arguing, “We couldn’t have stayed afloat for another 20 years, we were under a lot of pressure,” another claims “I did not foresee an impending crisis.” Or, “The country could still have endured for years to come. . . . Imagine that Brezhnev is still alive. . . . things would be a little worse, but the country would be under control.”⁶

Equally problematic is the testimony of several former top officials—Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, General Staff Chief Sergei Akhromeyev, and others. Here some have claimed that they agreed on the need for major military reductions, and that far from opposing such cuts they actively cooperated

4. This is the picture that emerges from a broad range of sources on Brezhnev-era politics. An especially lively description—though still representative of numerous such testimonies—is that found in the memoirs of Boris Yeltsin, *Against the Grain: An Autobiography* (New York: Summit Books, 1990). Russian-language sources include R.A. Medvedev, *Lichnost’ i epokha. Politicheskii portret L.I. Brezhneva* [A personality and its epoch. A political portrait of L.I. Brezhnev] (Moscow: Novosti, 1991); and Andrei Grachev, *Kremlevskaia khronika* [Kremlin chronicle] (Moscow: EKSMO, 1994).

5. The views of former Politburo Second Secretary Yegor Ligachev, the patron of these officials, are instructive. As William E. Odom notes, “Ligachev wanted reform but not at the expense of the Soviet Union’s international military status.” This meant weaning wasteful clients, quitting Afghanistan, and other cost-cutting steps. It did *not* mean a broad strategic retreat; any major arms cuts would have to be matched by equivalent U.S. steps. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 92. See below for discussion of the viability of conservative alternatives to new thinking.

6. Ellman and Kontorovich, *Destruction of the Soviet Economic System*, pp. 52, 55, 65. It is also evident that much of “the arms race bankrupted us” opinion is shaped by hindsight. That is, the surprising speed of the system’s subsequent collapse has colored today’s reflections on yesterday’s perceptions. See below for more discussion of this critical point.

in making them. Though this would seem to offer convincing support for Brooks and Wohlforth, there are several reasons for skepticism. One is a large body of conflicting evidence that reveals how strongly the old thinkers disagreed with Gorbachev's incipient new thinking. A typical example concerns Marshal Yazov, who has since recalled how excitedly he received Gorbachev's initial call for reforms. But according to a close colleague, Yazov's early enthusiasm had instead to do with Gorbachev's promise to *strengthen* the country's defenses; Yazov worried about the cost of modern weapons only insofar as neglect of training, housing, and other needs hurt combat readiness—but not about the military's larger drain on the civilian economy.⁷

An even stronger reason to doubt the old thinkers' retrospective claims of support for military cuts is that at the time they consistently (and often openly) opposed them. This line began with questioning of Gorbachev's mid-1985 unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests and his pursuit of a late-1985 summit meeting to discuss arms control with U.S. President Ronald Reagan in Geneva.⁸ It also includes opposition to the mid-1986 Stockholm agreement on confidence-building measures in Europe as well as to Gorbachev's radical disarmament proposals offered later that year at Reykjavik, to efforts toward a defensive restructuring of Soviet military doctrine, to the 1987 treaty banning

7. Leonid Ivashov, *Marshal Iazov. Rokovoi avgust 91-go: Pravda o "putche"* [Marshal Yazov. That fateful August of 1991: The truth about the putsch] (Vel'sk: Vel'ti, 1993), pp. 9–10. It is also difficult to believe that Marshal Akhromeyev, who was warning about NATO's threat and lobbying for costly high-technology arms in 1984, and who admitted suspicion of Gorbachev's foreign policy steps in 1985, became convinced of the need for deep, one-sided cuts by 1986. See Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), pp. 8–9; S.F. Akhromeev and G.M. Kornienko, *Glazami marshala i diplomata. Kriticheskii vzgliad na vneshiuiu politiku SSSR do i posle 1985 goda* [Through the eyes of a marshal and a diplomat. A critical view of USSR foreign policy before and after 1985] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia, 1992), pp. 34, 65–66, 91, 362; and Ellman and Kontorovich, *Destruction of the Soviet Economic System*, p. 96.

8. Arms negotiator Oleg Grinevsky argues that, contrary to their later claims, Marshal Akhromeyev, Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kornienko, and other conservatives fought Gorbachev's policies. See Vladislav M. Zubok, "Why Did the Cold War End in 1989? Explanations of 'The Turn,'" in Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretation, Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), p. 263. In fact, Akhromeyev tried to block the 1986 Stockholm agreement, opposed the 1987 INF treaty, and resigned over Gorbachev's 1988 conventional force cuts. For its part, the defense ministry only grudgingly backed Gorbachev's proposals, and then only as propaganda with no expectation that they would become policy. See Aleksandr G. Savel'yev and Nikolai N. Detinov, *The Big Five: Arms Control Decision-Making in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1995), p. 93; Georgy Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody. Reformatsiia Gorbacheva glazami ego pomoshchnika* [The price of freedom. Gorbachev's reformation through the eyes of his assistant] (Moscow: Rossika-Zevs, 1993) pp. 89–91; and E. Shevardnadze, O. Grinevskii, Iu. Kvitsinskii, V. Komplektov, and B. Piadyshev, "Peregovorshchik-razoruzhenets" [A negotiator-disarmer], *Nezavisimaiia Gazeta*, February 19, 1997, p. 4.

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF), and to Gorbachev's sweeping 1988 unilateral troop reductions.⁹

By this time, Politburo Second Secretary Yegor Ligachev had clearly joined the opposition to Gorbachev, as seen in his sponsorship of the infamous "Nina Andreyeva letter" that sought to halt the ideological liberation (or, in Ligachev's view, decay) that supported perestroika and new thinking, and shortly thereafter in his speech attacking the erosion of traditional Leninist foreign policy precepts.¹⁰ It is no secret that the hard-liners applauded Ligachev; as William Odom argues, they understood well that the old-thinking ideology was the linchpin of the militarized party-state system that they sought to preserve.¹¹ And so, while paying lip service to the new thinking, Soviet hard-liners campaigned vigorously to discredit it—efforts that began in 1987, grew stronger in 1989, and continued right up to the attempted putsch of August 1991.¹² Nor did their obstruction of new-thinking policies—of initiatives to restrict arms transfers abroad, reduce military secrecy, halt biological weapons research, and begin defense conversion—slacken in the least.¹³ Neither was the August putsch the hard-liners' first such effort, having been preceded by a

9. Savel'yev and Detinov, *The Big Five*, pp. 131–138. On hard-liners' portrayal as orderly and consensual of a process that was actually disorderly and contentious, see Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 89; also pp. 107, 130–136.

10. Ligachev defended the orthodox, class-based foundation of Soviet foreign policy, precisely that which Gorbachev was discarding with his argument that "universal human values" superseded class interests. As Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 92, notes, Ligachev opposed steps that threatened the country's "international military status [while] Gorbachev was willing to set the Soviet Union's military status aside." On Ligachev's 1988 speech, see Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1994), p. 363.

11. Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, pp. 94–98, 113–115.

12. This was seen in their support of such rabid old thinkers as Gen. Viktor Filatov, editor of the defense ministry's hard-line *Voенно-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* [Military-historical journal], of the "black colonels" Viktor Alksnis and Nikolai Petrushenko, and of conservative officers' and veterans' groups, on the one hand, and their harassment of such military reformers as Col. Alexander Savinkin, Maj. Vladimir Lopatin, and the organization Shield on the other. The brass also sponsored "vicious" abuse of their civilian critics. Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, pp. 150–153, 163–171. See also Georgy Arbatov, *Zatianuvshesia vyzdorovlenie (1953–1985 gg.) Svidetel'stvo sovremennika* [A prolonged recovery (1953–1985) The testimony of a contemporary] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia, 1991), pp. 366, 369–370; and Andrei A. Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917–1991* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 145–146.

13. Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, pp. 206, 229, 257–258. Noteworthy as well was the effort of KGB Director Vladimir Kryuchkov to discredit Gorbachev's new thinking and the country's nascent opening to the West by accusing the latter's security services—primarily the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency—of plotting to destroy the Soviet Union. Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 442–445.

move to replace Gorbachev with Ligachev in the summer of 1990 and another to sideline him via emergency legislation in the early summer of 1991. And even as this “parliamentary putsch” failed, hard-liners were preparing a more forceful variant as seen in their backing of the militant anti-Gorbachev manifesto *A Word to the People*.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Brooks and Wohlforth argue that “what is most striking . . . is the haphazard, ineffectual, belated, and intellectually weak nature of the opposition to Gorbachev’s overall course in world affairs” (p. 45). Intellectually weak it may have been, but that reflects only the intellect of the new thinking’s opponents, not the depth of their convictions. And as for being haphazard or ineffectual, it was concerted enough to delay arms control progress repeatedly while complicating other attempts to put Soviet-Western relations on a new footing.¹⁵ Given the Soviet military’s tradition of strict subservience to the party, its oppositional efforts during the mid-to-late 1980s were actually *extraordinary* and seem ineffectual or belated only in hindsight. If this was a case of the dog that failed to bark, it certainly snarled so much that its eventual bite surprised few.¹⁶

Mention of the putsch raises another problem in evaluating the hard-liners’ claims—one of credibility. It is not only that the testimony of those who violated their solemn oaths should be treated with caution.¹⁷ It is that the events of 1991 and after created circumstances of which Brooks and Wohlforth seem unaware. They argue that “because they wish to blame Gorbachev for the Soviet collapse, conservative policy veterans face strong incentives to argue in hindsight that Moscow had ample capabilities to continue the rivalry. It is therefore striking that even in hindsight, most hold that Moscow could not sustain the Cold War status quo” (p. 46). In fact the domestic context has been

14. On the attempted “parliamentary putsch,” see Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, pp. 539–540. The July hard-liners’ manifesto, subsequently reprinted in other conservative publications, first appeared as “Slovo k narodu” in *Sovetskaya Rossiia*, July 23, 1991. Its signatories included ground forces commander Gen. Valentin Varennikov and Deputy Interior Minister Gen. Boris Gromov.

15. Others cite the initial cover-up of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster, and the arrest on phony espionage charges of American journalist Nicholas Daniloff on the eve of the Reykjavik summit, as further efforts to sabotage U.S.-Soviet relations.

16. On the manifold factors restraining political assertiveness by the military, see Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, pp. 339, 394–397.

17. Some have also engaged in flagrant falsehoods on other issues, ranging from a cover-up of the military-KGB role in various antinationalist crackdowns to efforts at implicating Gorbachev in the August coup. At least in the case of the latter, the known facts support Gorbachev’s admonition concerning the hard-liners: “Don’t believe them. They are liars, dyed-in-the-wool liars.” Federal News Service, “Press Conference with Former USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev,” August 16, 2001.

rather more complicated than this suggests, beginning with the highly charged atmosphere in the aftermath of the putsch (when many hard-liners “went public” for the first time). Jailed and facing trial for treason, and with popular opinion inflamed against them, they had good reason to downplay their opposition to Gorbachev and counter their image as “dinosaurs” who had long been scheming against efforts to demilitarize and liberalize the Soviet system.

And notwithstanding the sea change in Russian attitudes toward the West over the difficult years since the Soviet Union’s collapse, the hard-liners still have good reason to shade the truth. This is so because for all their opposition and delay, most ultimately acquiesced in Gorbachev’s policies. Thus they now face such questions as: Given the humiliation and suffering those policies have caused, why did you not act sooner? Why, rather than resigning and denouncing him publicly, did you remain at Gorbachev’s side and so lend your authority to his disastrous concessions? Were you more concerned about the perquisites of your position than the defense of the Motherland?¹⁸ Were you so dazzled by Gorbachev’s charms that you could not see straight?¹⁹ In a climate where President Vladimir Putin directs a rare public outburst at those “who destroyed the army, the navy, and the state,”²⁰ the former officials who were complicit in that destruction face a strong incentive to argue exactly as they have: The economy seemed so weak that we truly believed there was no alternative to some cuts; it was only later that Gorbachev went too far and things got out of control.²¹

18. In addition to careerist concerns and their traditional deference to the party, some old thinkers also made a rational calculation. Notwithstanding their differences with Gorbachev’s policies, they thought that they would still have greater influence opposing him from within the Politburo, restraining even deeper and more ill conceived military cuts, than if they broke openly and irrevocably with him. Gorbachev, for his part, feared letting “this lousy, rabid dog off the leash” and thought it was better to have the “mastodons” inside the tent spitting out than outside spitting in. See Chernyaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, pp. 279–280, 325, 338.

19. Yazov, in particular, appears to have been under the spell of Gorbachev’s personality. He was also most indebted to Gorbachev, having been named minister of defense in 1987 over many more qualified officers and then promoted to marshal in 1989. These were things of which, just a few years earlier, he had probably not even dared to dream. See Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 183; V. Stepankov and E. Lisov, *Kreml’eskii zagovor. Versiia sledstviia* [Kremlin conspiracy. What the investigation revealed] (Moscow: Ogonek, 1992), pp. 25–29. On Gorbachev’s tactic of compromising critics by giving them responsibility for selling and implementing his initiatives, see Matthew Evangelista, “Norms, Heresthetics, and the End of the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 2001), pp. 20–21.

20. See “Putin Blames Disaster on Those Who ‘Destroyed the State,’” *RFE/RL Security Watch*, August 28, 2000, p. 1.

21. It should be noted that Gorbachev has faced corresponding incentives to downplay the conservatives’ opposition to new thinking; before 1991 this served to project an image of party unity for the sake of *perestroika*, and since then to share blame for the results of policies that he authored.

The preceding is not meant to accuse all hard-liners of falsehood. But it should suffice to demonstrate why most such testimony cannot simply be taken at face value.²² Still, one might wonder what difference it makes if the hard-liners fought Gorbachev's policies from the outset or only after the INF treaty and troop cuts of 1987–88, or if they dug in their heels only over the loss of Eastern Europe and German reunification in 1989–90. The answer is that it makes all the difference in the world. For whatever one believes about the old thinkers' acquiescence in Gorbachev's initiatives, it remains inconceivable that they would have launched similar initiatives without him, much less persevered when they failed to elicit equivalent Western concessions. Thus it would seem self-evident that the role of Gorbachev, supported by Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Ideology Secretary Alexander Yakovlev, was essential.

Mikhail Gorbachev: New-Thinking Leader or Overseer of Retreat?

Or was it? In Brooks and Wohlforth's portrayal, Gorbachev is essentially the CEO of "Soviet Retrenchment, Inc." His searching discussions of foreign policy philosophy with Shevardnadze, Yakovlev, and a few intimates over 1985–87 are absent.²³ So too are the vital analytical contributions and political support of many liberal Soviet, and some Western, advisers.²⁴ Brooks and Wohlforth's lack of attention to the influence on Gorbachev of reformist intellectuals—and

Still, on the whole, the reformers' public recollections of the events of 1985–91 have been far more consistent, and accord better with known facts, than those of most hard-liners.

22. Further fueling these doubts are other inconsistencies. Yazov, for example, while presenting a face of moderation to Western interlocutors, shows a different one to other audiences—for example, his praise of North Korean socialism and of its president Kim Jong Il as "a great commander who has won important battles." This comment suggests his real attitude toward the collapse of East German socialism and reunification with West Germany, as well as his unconcern for the military burden on a crippled economy. See "Visits of Russian Communists to North Korea," *DPRK Report*, No. 10 (November–December 1997), p. 1. Also eye-opening is Yazov's surly and disingenuous interview with the Czech *Lidové noviny* [The people's news], translated in *RFE/RL Newsline*, Vol. 4, Nos. 6/7 (January 2000), pp. 1–5.

23. An example of how Gorbachev quietly tapped the ideas of liberal intellectuals—and how quickly they led him to radical conclusions—is the testimony of Alexander Tsipko cited in Ellman and Kontorovich, *Destruction of the Soviet Economic System*, pp. 169–186. For more detail, see Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), chaps. 5, 6.

24. Brooks and Wohlforth claim that only in late 1988 or 1989 "did [Gorbachev] begin privately to rely on the more radical intellectual proponents of new thinking" (p. 31). And by then, material pressures were so great that ideas played only a rationalizing or facilitating role. But this is contradicted by numerous sources that reveal such a process well under way by late 1985–86. Of course, the implications of this two- or three-year difference for the "power drove ideas" thesis are clear.

in turn to the complex sources of their new thinking—is a striking omission. The authors simply ignore a mass of evidence on the nonmaterial origins of intellectual change, or they misinterpret it: In one glancing reference to such sources, they state that “no new thinker’s memoir is complete without [revelations] about either living standards or the military-technological superiority of the West” (p. 44).

This is a serious misstatement, and a telling one. Those in whose memoirs revelations about Western military-economic power figure little (if at all) in recollections of their evolving worldviews range from Georgy Arbatov, Fedor Burlatsky, and Anatoly Chernyaev²⁵ to Yevgeny Vilikhov, Alexander Yakovlev, and Yuri Zamoshkin.²⁶ And there are many others in between. Of course, the West, including its economic vigor, is present in the reminiscences of many; after all, these are foreign affairs experts. But rarely does it figure in the simplistic fashion that Brooks and Wohlforth suggest.²⁷ For some, new thinking was born in the revival of cultural links to the West; for others it was the personal relations they established through exchanges and professional ties. Some new thinkers emphasize Western progress on environmental, race, or labor issues; others stress their realization that NATO was a democratic, nonthreatening alliance. Many were taken with Western freedoms and openness, and nearly all recall how lingering fears were supplanted by a desire for contact, collaboration, even integration.²⁸ Often these experiences date back to the late 1950s and

25. Arbatov, *Zatianuvsheesia vyzdorovlenie*; Fedor Burlatskii, *Vozhdi i sovetniki. O Khrushcheve, Andropove, i ne tol'ko o nich* [Leaders and advisers. On Khrushchev, Andropov, and not only them] (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990); and Anatoly Chernyaev, *Moia zhizn' i moe vremia* [My life and times] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniiia, 1995).

26. Aleksandr Iakovlev, *Gorkaia chasha. Bol'shevizm i reformatsiia Rossii* [A bitter cup. Bolshevism and the reformation of Russia] (Iaroslavl': Verkhne-Volzhskoe, 1994); Iu. A. Zamoshkin, “Za novyi podkhod k probleme individualizma” [For a new approach to the problem of individualism], *Voprosy Filosofii* [Philosophical issues], No. 6 (1989), pp. 3–16. On Vilikhov, see the testimony detailed in English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, chaps. 3–5.

27. Here again is seen the tension between Brooks and Wohlforth’s claims for correlation versus those for causation. For the former it may suffice simply to demonstrate that economic concerns were widespread, even if not uppermost, among those who championed the new thinking. But the latter requires closer attention to a wider range of intellectual, social, and political changes in order to make a considered judgment about the relative influence of these various factors.

28. Brooks and Wohlforth fault constructivists for counterposing ideas against a “spare and impoverished” understanding of material incentives (p. 11). But at least in my own analysis of the new thinking’s origins, economic problems figure prominently in a detailed examination of the evolution of a “Westernizing” policy-academic elite, as well as in that elite’s subsequent influence on Gorbachev. Admittedly an early effort to understand the complex sources of new thinking, this analysis nevertheless proceeds from recognition of the need for a comprehensive, balanced assessment of multiple factors before venturing claims about causation. See English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, chaps. 2–6.

1960s, and moved them to begin reformist advocacy by the late 1960s or early 1970s.²⁹ Crucially, many were pioneering new thinkers who, it bears repeating, exerted considerable influence on Gorbachev—most of it well before 1988, and some even before 1985.

Ignoring this evidence, Brooks and Wohlforth instead depict the early Gorbachev as largely orthodox. They cite an initial rise in defense spending but fail to ask how much leeway he had over “his” first budget given the cumbersome planning system and advanced state of preparations for the Twelfth (1986–90) Five-Year Plan. They have him approving an escalation of the war in Afghanistan but overlook his concerted efforts toward withdrawal.³⁰ They include the 1987 INF treaty among the concessions driven by economic need but forget that eliminating a new class of nuclear missiles actually costs more than maintaining them in service.³¹ And they omit altogether Gorbachev’s principled rejection of long-standing imperial practices toward the Soviet bloc, considering Eastern Europe only insofar as it represented an economic liability.³²

Beyond these problems, Brooks and Wohlforth also ignore the significance of various early initiatives—Gorbachev’s 1985 nuclear test moratorium, his 1986 disarmament plan and later Reykjavik proposal, and his pathbreaking ideological revisions.³³ In addition, they overlook a basic political reality—how *any*

29. For a superb study of the early roots of new thinking on arms control, see Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Arms Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

30. On Gorbachev’s early commitment to leave Afghanistan and on his efforts toward that end as well as vacillation in the face of opposition to a rapid withdrawal, see Chernyaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, pp. 25–26, 41–43, 89–90, 106, 161–162. One of those who so strongly opposed a “hasty” (only by February 1989) exit that he resigned in protest was Georgy Kornienko; see his *Kholodnaia voina. Svidetel’stvo ee uchastnika* [The cold war. Testimony of a participant] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia, 1994), p. 207.

31. At least this was so in the near term, because of the complex destruction and verification procedures that the treaty mandated. Even more problematic is that in emphasizing economically driven concessions, Brooks and Wohlforth overlook the critical military rationale for the INF treaty; the Soviets gave up theater-range (able to strike Western Europe) missiles in return for destruction of U.S. weapons of strategic reach (able to strike targets in or near Moscow). On this point, see Evgenii Primakov, *Gody v bol’shoi politiki* [Years in high politics] (Moscow: Sovrshennno Sekretno, 1999), pp. 49–50.

32. I have confined my critique mainly to Brooks and Wohlforth’s arguments on defense policy, as did they in their article. However, Gorbachev’s East European policy was also central to “strategic retreat,” and Wohlforth has discussed it extensively elsewhere. See William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 115–119. Rather than engage these issues here, I refer readers to the analysis of Mark Kramer, “Realism, Ideology, and the End of the Cold War: A Reply to William Wohlforth,” *Review of International Studies*, No. 27 (2001), pp. 119–130.

33. Just as Gorbachev’s January 1986 disarmament plan (dismissed at the time as propaganda) outlined the concessions later offered at Reykjavik, and subsequently enshrined in the INF and START treaties, so did his report at the Twenty-seventh Party Congress in February 1986 clearly

major changes were necessarily delayed by the roughly two years that it took to clear the leadership of such hard-liners as Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov, Defense Industry Secretary Grigory Romanov, and Defense Minister Sergei Sokolov,³⁴ as well as other conservatives such as Vladimir Shcherbitsky, Gaidar Aliev, and Andrei Gromyko.³⁵

As further evidence for the primacy of material forces, Brooks and Wohlforth cite a pre-Reykjavik summit (October 1986) Politburo meeting where Gorbachev fought for backing of his radical proposals by warning that otherwise “we will be pulled into another round of the arms race that is beyond our capabilities” (p. 29). Again, they fail to consider the context.³⁶ Suppose, as other sources show, that Gorbachev had already come to a sharply different view of the West, of “the threat,” and so of defense priorities. And that he now saw the main opposition to progress not in Washington or London but seated around the Politburo table.³⁷ How best to sell his proposals to these skeptics? How to win over such committed old thinkers as Ligachev—by explaining the nuances of “mutual security” and arguing for the primacy of “universal human values”? Or simply by stressing economic necessity? The answer is obviously the latter, and by no means can Gorbachev’s use of a particular rationale, before a *very* particular audience, be taken as conclusive evidence of his own priorities.³⁸

foreshadow the ideological revisions (e.g., elevating all-human concerns over class ones) that he openly embraced later that year.

34. Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 4.

35. Akhromeyev suggested that Gorbachev concealed the scope of his early ambitions for changing Soviet foreign policy because, had he made them clear, they would have been seen as a sharp departure from “the entire understanding by the military leadership of the essence of the country’s defense capability” and so presumably rejected. Quoted in Evangelista, “Norms, Heresthetics, and the End of the Cold War,” p. 25.

36. Nor do they note that at the first post-Reykjavik Politburo meeting, Gorbachev argued exactly the opposite. See *Zasedanie Politburo TsK KPSS, “Ob itogakh vstrechi General’nogo sekretariia TsK KPSS M.S. Gorbacheva s Prezidentom SShA R. Reaganom v Reikiavike, 14 oktobra 1986 goda”* [Meeting of the Politburo of the CC of the CPSU, On the results of the meeting of CC CPSU General Secretary M.S. Gorbachev with USA President R. Reagan in Reykjavik, 14 October 1986], pp. 2–4. Credit for attention to this source is owed Mark Kramer.

37. Five months earlier, in a “secret” speech, Gorbachev had castigated *Soviet* obstruction of progress on a broad range of foreign policy issues—Afghanistan, nuclear arms, China, Eastern Europe, even human rights. For detail on this, and on Gorbachev’s frustration with the bureaucracy that prompted his Reykjavik initiative, see Chernyaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, pp. 77–84; and English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, p. 220. Gorbachev’s May 1986 closed speech at the foreign ministry (an abridged version was only published a year later, and the full text of this address did not appear in public until after the Soviet Union’s collapse) is found in “U perelomnoi cherty” [At the critical point], M.S. Gorbachev, *Gody trudnykh reshenii. Izbrannoe 1985–1992* [The years of difficult decisions. Selections from 1985–1992] (Moscow: Gorbachev-Fond, 1993), pp. 46–55.

38. Just as the scripted, ritualistic conduct of the Brezhnev-era Politburo (and the fact that real decisions were made elsewhere, in smaller leadership groupings) limits the value of their proceed-

Mention of Reykjavik raises another aspect of Gorbachev's policymaking that Brooks and Wohlforth overlook: His summit proposals—as everything else of significance that he undertook—were hatched in a small group of liberal advisers. This was no accident; dominated by conservative interests and ideology, the Politburo, defense council and defense ministry, military-industrial commission, the “big five” arms control group, and even much of the foreign ministry consistently worked to stymie innovation. The notion that, absent Gorbachev, they would have come up with similar initiatives is simply not credible. Confirmation of a sort comes from the old thinkers themselves, in their constant complaint that Gorbachev ignored their advice, shut them out of his planning, and consulted instead with “amateurs”—or worse, with Western “agents.”³⁹ It is difficult indeed to reconcile these sentiments with a supposed consensus for strategic retreat.

Although not addressing this directly, Brooks and Wohlforth have an indirect answer: “However much Gorbachev’s fiercest critics opposed” his initiatives, “they could not deny . . . the critical material trends” that made them necessary (p. 48).⁴⁰ Here we see that there are actually two arguments embedded in their case for the primacy of material forces. The strong version holds that Gorbachev and the hard-liners were essentially of one mind on the necessity of strategic retreat, a necessity they accepted fairly early as the economic crisis worsened. This, as I have shown, is contradicted by a large body of evidence. The weak version argues that even if the old thinkers sharply disagreed with Gorbachev’s changes, economic woes left them unable to offer “a plausible general alternative to retrenchment” (p. 49). Leaving aside for now the plausibility of alternatives to new thinking, it is immediately evident how heavily this second argument depends on the role of Gorbachev as the initiator of change, on the centrality of leadership. And this, in turn, necessarily points

ings to historians, so does the absence of much off-the-record deliberation (and the tactics of Gorbachev’s maneuvering around the conservatives) render perestroika-era Politburo records difficult to interpret. A further problem is that in the few cases where Gorbachev’s Politburo meetings were recorded, the transcripts were subsequently edited—distorted, in the complaints of several staff secretaries—by future putschist Valery Boldin.

39. This sentiment resounds through the testimonies of Ligachev, Yazov, Akhromeyev, and many other conservatives.

40. The only case cited by Brooks and Wohlforth of a senior official strongly opposing Gorbachev’s cuts is that of Oleg Baklanov, an apparent exception to the strategic-retreat consensus that they explain as “not surprising” because, as head of the Military-Industrial Commission, “few leaders had as much to lose from Gorbachev’s reforms” (p. 48). But it is hard to see how Baklanov’s shrinking budgets were more painful for him to bear than were General Staff Chief Akhromeyev’s vanishing missiles and tanks or Defense Minister Yazov’s demoralized officers and degraded troops. The obvious alternative explanation is that Baklanov has simply been more forthright than the others about his opposition to new thinking.

back to the key contribution of ideas as well as the important extent to which they developed and operated independent of material pressures.⁴¹

Old and New Thinkers: A Different Interpretation

The preceding suggests a third version of how material and ideational forces interacted in the genesis of Gorbachev's reforms. It indeed begins with increasing concern among part of the Soviet ruling elite, as well as relief in 1985, that they finally had a vigorous leader capable of resolute action. But relief soon turned to worry as Gorbachev began consulting with suspect liberals and broaching heretical ideas. Still, his concrete steps were modest, and the old thinkers reassured themselves that his proposals—a nuclear test ban, reduced military spending, defensive restructuring of doctrine, and deep cuts in nuclear arms—were either just clever rhetoric or, at worst, temporary and reversible.⁴² Their favored course, one of modest economic changes and a more cost-effective military program that preserved strategic parity and the country's global might, still seemed fully viable.⁴³

But largely unbeknown to the old thinkers, Gorbachev was drawing different conclusions. Frustrated by the domestic opposition that stymied both his domestic and foreign policy plans, and driven by his private study and re-thinking of core issues in world politics, Gorbachev was pushed across a critical threshold by the Chernobyl nuclear accident in early 1986. A catastrophe in human terms, Chernobyl was also a key catalyst of new thinking on both domestic politics (by exposing the bankruptcy of the Stalinist system's sloppiness and secrecy) and foreign affairs (by highlighting nuclear dangers, the absurdity of an obsession with parity, and the duplicity and venality of the military-industrial complex).⁴⁴ But the harder Gorbachev pushed, the more these military-industrial interests resisted. Angry, he decided to seek a breakthrough by scheduling an immediate U.S.-Soviet summit, tearing up the negotiating

41. As Evangelista, "Norms, Heresthetics, and the End of the Cold War," pp. 30–31, succinctly puts it, "We cannot understand Gorbachev's initiatives without taking seriously the normative and ideational context: Gorbachev's antinuclearism, his affinity for West European social democrats and their ideas about common security and nonoffensive defense, and his commitment to 'freedom of choice' and nonintervention in Eastern Europe."

42. They thought that "waiting out the reformers while pretending to be reformers themselves was a viable strategy. Wrongly, they believed that time was on their side." Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 201.

43. This was particularly so given the slight economic upturn in Gorbachev's first year.

44. On this critical but underexplored episode, and the "cognitive punch" it provided in catalyzing liberals' rethinking of domestic and foreign policy issues, see English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, pp. 215–222.

positions produced by the bureaucracy, and insisting on his own radical proposal. The hard-liners gave their grudging consent—and breathed a huge sigh of relief when Reykjavik narrowly failed.⁴⁵

But Gorbachev took heart from how close he had come. And drawing more heavily on the ideas of liberal advisers, he pondered new initiatives to break the deadlock. Glasnost, initially a means to engage public opinion in his domestic reforms, was spread to foreign and military affairs as new-thinking intellectuals enlisted wholesale in the campaign for change.⁴⁶ But the old thinkers struck back in bitter polemics over the policies, and philosophy, of world affairs. Still feigning solidarity with Gorbachev, they “did all they could to jam sticks in the spokes” of his foreign policy.⁴⁷ Only in May 1987, following a German teenager’s unsanctioned flight across the Soviet Union and scandalous landing on Red Square, did Gorbachev have a pretext to alter the “correlation of forces” at the top. The powerful, hard-line Defense Minister Sergei Sokolov was replaced by the weak, junior Dmitry Yazov.⁴⁸ Gorbachev also ordered far-reaching military reform, including a purge of the officer corps, that shattered the morale and unity of the brass. With his opponents temporarily reeling, and with public opinion both increasingly assertive and increasingly hostile to them, Gorbachev now prevailed in pushing through the concessions necessary for the INF treaty, for an Afghan settlement, and for progress on issues from human rights to third world conflicts.

The last political prisoners were freed, the jamming of foreign radio broadcasts was halted, and Gorbachev embraced the new thinking’s core precept—a rejection of the confrontational, class-based approach to world politics—as an

45. The summit collapsed not over the main issues of radical reductions in offensive nuclear weapons—on which Reagan and Gorbachev agreed—but over the secondary matter of a formula for acceptable research on strategic defenses. Soviet liberals blamed military hard-liners for scuttling a potentially historic agreement by insisting that Gorbachev not yield on relatively minor issues that, in any case, were soon set aside. On Reykjavik, see Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era* (New York: Poseidon Books, 1991), pp. 183–209.

46. Conservatives were dismayed at what one described as a hijacking of perestroika by “highly politicized research organizations of a pro-Western orientation.” This was the characterization of Ligachev assistant Valery Legostayev, “God 1987-iy—peremena logiki” [1987—a change of logic] *Den'* [The day], No. 14 (1991), p. 2.

47. Chernyaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, p. 341.

48. In one insider’s view, Gorbachev hoped to neutralize “the powerful opposition to his ‘new thinking’ that existed in military circles. . . . [So] Sokolov just wouldn’t do. Many members of the defense ministry collegium saw no need for major changes in the military sphere. They were seriously concerned about the policy of concessions to the Americans and a clear violation of military-strategic parity. So turnover in the high command of the armed forces . . . became Gorbachev’s main task.” Ivashov, *Marshal Lazov*, pp. 19–20.

orgy of glasnost undermined all that the old thinkers held sacred.⁴⁹ The excesses of Brezhnev's military buildup were ridiculed; Stalin's blundering in World War II and blame for the Cold War were exposed; and Lenin's responsibility for the Soviet Union's decades of disastrous political, economic, and cultural isolation was denounced. Only then was Gorbachev's hand strong enough to push through major (not piecemeal) military budget cuts, force real (not rhetorical) defensive restructuring of doctrine, and make the deep, unilateral conventional-force reductions announced in his landmark United Nations speech of December 1988. A refreshing contrast to the consensual, public relations-minded version of how these cuts were decided comes from Yazov's biographer Ivashov:

Many generals and marshals persistently argued that we needed to maintain military parity, and around the ministry [*v kuluarakh*] they referred to one-sided reductions as a betrayal of the interests of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact. This position was strongly supported by the country's military-industrial complex. . . . The arguments offered for why we needed to go forward with disarmament were primarily economic ones. Obviously counting on Yazov's backing, and without a Supreme Soviet decision nor even agreement with its committees, Gorbachev announced a unilateral 500,000-man cut in the Soviet armed forces at the UN on December 7, 1988. It was like a slap in the face of the deputies. Some of them tried to express their concerns . . . but were swept aside by the paeans of praise and support for Gorbachev from the West, from our democratic figures, from the mass media. . . . The defense ministry was simply presented with a fait accompli. Nobody consulted with the military or worked out what was to be cut and when. It was, as they liked to say in the 1960s, typical voluntarism. That's why the military reacted to Gorbachev's initiative with—to put it mildly—skepticism.⁵⁰

Staggering from this onslaught, the old thinkers fought on. KGB Director Vladimir Kryuchkov channeled even more tendentious (than usual) information to Gorbachev with the aim of undermining relations with the West.⁵¹

49. Like much else, Brooks and Wohlfarth largely ignore Gorbachev's measures to liberalize, humanize, and open the country to the West (save for new laws permitting joint business ventures). On the central role of human rights in improving U.S.-Soviet ties, see Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, pp. 105–107, 121–123, 148–150; on Gorbachev's 1986–87 embrace of liberal-democratic values as key to establishing international trust, see English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, pp. 215–222.

50. Ivashov, *Marshal Lazov*, p. 27. This account directly contradicts Yazov's subsequent claim, cited by Brooks and Wohlfarth, that "there was no conflict whatsoever between the political leadership and the military" on these cuts (p. 48).

51. Kryuchkov also used his agency's resources to harass and impede the liberals in smaller ways—for example, engineering the firing of Yakovlev's chief assistant on the basis of specious denunciations. See Chernyaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, pp. 221, 281, 339.

Akhromeyev, after repeated threats to do so, finally resigned when Gorbachev's latest cuts faced him with aiding and abetting "the destruction of that which he'd spent his entire life building."⁵² Gromyko quietly complained that "Gorbachev and his Politburo friends" were mindlessly destroying the state's security.⁵³ And Ligachev sounded a warning that Gorbachev's policies were leading to "a new Munich."⁵⁴ Other old thinkers fought a rearguard action—attacking the spread of "pacifism," bewailing the influence of "so-called experts," and spreading alarm about "Western subversion" everywhere from the pages of *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star, the Ministry of Defense organ) and *Sovietskaya Rossiya* (Soviet Russia, an openly antireform newspaper) to the halls of party conferences and Central Committee plenums.

Still, even if the preceding suffices to rebut the claim of a "solid consensus" behind Gorbachev's policies and that his opponents "did nothing substantial" to block them (pp. 33, 48), why did they not do even more when there was still time? Part of the answer is indeed that an economic downturn in 1988 strengthened arguments for at least some kinds of reductions—but only part.⁵⁵ Also crucial were factors such as the force of Gorbachev's personality and his skill as a political tactician; time and again he defused confrontations and put off potentially fateful showdowns with the hard-liners.⁵⁶ The pace of events was also critical; the changes came so quickly during 1987–89 that by the time the old thinkers dug in on one issue, the battle had already shifted to another. A related factor was the unexpected power of public opinion that Gorbachev enlisted in the cause of new thinking, an arena in which party and especially military habits of centralized decisionmaking, unquestioning obedience, and

52. Here I paraphrase from the marshal's post-putsch suicide note. For detail, see the interview with Akhromeyev's widow quoted in Evangelista, "Norms, Heresthetics, and the End of the Cold War," p. 26.

53. Anatolii Gromyko, *Andrei Gromyko. V labirintakh Kremlia. Vospominania i razmyshleniya syna* [Andrei Gromyko. In the labyrinths of the Kremlin. Memories and reflections of a son] (Moscow: Avtor, 1997), p. 182. Credit for this source is owed Vlad Zubok.

54. On Ligachev's public criticism of the changes in Eastern Europe as well as those of other military and party officials, see Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, pp. 421, 428–429.

55. The issue of timing is key, especially because much of the testimony that Brooks and Wohlfarth cite to show conservatives' backing for arms cuts concerns the period *after* 1988. For example, in support of the crisis-drove-concessions thesis, they note testimony on the START negotiations (pp. 46–47) that actually pertains to events in 1989–90, that is, after Gorbachev had launched his boldest new-thinking initiatives. Prior to that, Yazov was assuring colleagues that Gorbachev's innovations were mainly clever rhetoric. Akhromeyev, for his part, wrote that the military agreed on the economic rationale for major reductions only in 1988, yet he himself still strongly opposed the cuts that Gorbachev announced late that year. See Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 117; and Akhromeev and Kornienko, *Glazami marshala i diplomata*, pp. 72–73.

56. An excellent analysis of this factor is Evangelista, "Norms, Heresthetics, and the End of the Cold War."

unimaginative implementation served them poorly.⁵⁷ These weaknesses point up yet another reason for the hard-liners' seeming passivity—their lack of a strong leader. Ligachev, although true to his principles, would not lead an open assault on the party line; he did what he could within the strictures of the old command system and, as best he understood it, the emerging democratic one. Gromyko, no longer in charge of the foreign ministry but still sitting on the Politburo, resisted too, although his influence (and health) were waning fast.⁵⁸ Akhromeyev, after resigning as general staff chief, sought to preserve what he could of the Soviet Union's might by staying on for a time as an adviser to Gorbachev—to his later regret. And Yazov, as even a hard-line admirer writes, was too weak, too indebted to Gorbachev, and too preoccupied with mitigating the damage already done to play the role of a Napoleon.⁵⁹ Others hard-liners seethed, praying that their jobs would not be the next ones cut and thinking ever more seriously about "emergency measures" to turn back the clock.

Assimilating New Evidence: Problems and Possibilities

This interpretation of the old thinkers' behavior, if even remotely accurate, can hardly be squared with another that sees their supposed passivity as an attempt to preserve "political capital," much less as "free riding" on initiatives with which they actually agreed (p. 45). Nor, for their part, can the new thinkers' manifold impressions of the West be reduced to "demonstration effects" of its economic superiority (p. 44). In their effort to capture such complex phenomena in a sparse, materialist framework is revealed a central problem in

57. Compounding these disadvantages, many hard-liners themselves had publicly endorsed such new-thinking principles as "reasonable sufficiency" in defense. As a variety of witnesses have noted, they did so only grudgingly, for propaganda purposes, and with no expectation of actually implementing attendant policies (see n. 8). Highlighting the problem of taking such endorsements at face value is an analogous episode from domestic politics. In 1987–88 Gorbachev won grudging approval for a reform of the political system; a year later the party suffered stunning electoral defeats, was set further reeling by its critics' subsequent dominance of the new legislature, and rapidly lost its grip on power. Looking back, no serious analyst argues that the party bosses willingly endorsed their own demise. They consented only to cosmetic changes (Who could publicly oppose democratization?), mistakenly believing that they could control the election process and badly underestimating how radical Gorbachev's intentions were.

58. Chernyaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, p. 129, recalls Gorbachev's frustration with Gromyko, observing that "this senile old fool still sat next to Gorbachev in the highest leadership body and never took less than an hour speaking on various issues about which he hadn't the slightest idea. But always from the standpoint that everything in his time was good and right, while anything different was suspect."

59. As Yazov himself put it, it was the role of a "Pinochet" that he rejected when subordinates repeatedly appealed for him to stop Gorbachev. See Ivashov, *Marshal Lazov*, p. 66; also pp. 26–27.

Brooks and Wohlforth's argument: They so completely privilege the material over the ideational that they ignore much evidence of the nonmaterial sources of ideas and influence. Such a model simply does not admit the possibility that a critical mass of new-thinking intellectuals held beliefs motivated by ideals; that they took personal and professional risks to promote reform out of principle; and that only the virtual accident of the Kremlin's occupation by an unusually open-minded and innovative leader made it possible to translate these principles into policy.⁶⁰

Indeed, analyzing the situation rationally, and with the benefit of hindsight,⁶¹ Brooks and Wohlforth find it all but inconceivable that modern history's most overextended empire could have chosen any path other than retreat.⁶² But one might better begin by asking how the Soviet Union got into such a fix in the first place, and if the institutional-ideological causes of such blundering could have combined again to produce another "irrational" outcome. A state or regime in the habit of setting negative precedents should not be underestimated in its ability to act in ways that outsiders might not find "plausible" or "compelling." Here the testimony of former economic aide Gennady Zoteev is suggestive:

In 1988, while still working as an advisor to [Prime Minister] Ryzhkov, [Gosplan Director] Baibakov invited me for a discussion. For almost two hours, I tried to explain to Baibakov the past, the present, and the future of the Soviet economy. He listened rather lethargically, probably because he simply failed to comprehend many of the things I was saying. At the end of the con-

60. Sources on Gorbachev's selection as general secretary reveal his colleagues' expectations of modest domestic changes and a largely status quo foreign policy; in the words of one, "Nobody thought that he'd be a reformer. . . . He didn't turn out to be the man we'd voted for." See English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, pp. 195–200 (citation of Politburo member Gaidar Aliev from p. 198).

61. To be fair, it is also the hindsight of Brooks and Wohlforth's sources that is at issue. As previously noted, the suddenness of the system's subsequent collapse has clearly colored many participants' recollections of precollapse events. Knowledge of outcomes leads to a "certainty of hindsight" bias—a false sense of inevitability—that is strongest in brief and summary discussions. Even with subjects striving for honesty and objectivity, it usually requires detailed, probing, event-specific interviews to recall the contingencies and recapture the arguments and expectations of the past. For more on this problem in general, as well as evidence of its distorting effect on the recollections of Soviet officials in particular, see Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Cause and Contingency: Understanding the End of the Cold War," forthcoming in Richard K. Herrman and Richard Ned Lebow, eds., *Learning from the End of the Cold War*, pp. 37–38 (ms.).

62. Brooks and Wohlforth protest that it would be a "caricature" to view their analysis as "leading to one and only one" outcome, and that materialist arguments "do not foreclose important pathways by which ideas may have altered behavior" (p. 50). But in fact they do; at every critical juncture, economic "necessity" or "lack of alternatives" trumped, leading to an outcome in which the only "important pathways" amenable to the influence of ideas concerned relatively unimportant details.

versation he snapped out of his slumber and asked a rhetorical question: "How can all this be happening? We worked so hard and accomplished so much. We have such a powerful industry, the energy sector, and here you are coming up with such gloomy assessment [sic] and forecasts."⁶³

This describes Gorbachev's director of planning, in the increasingly difficult circumstances of 1988, still unable to respond "rationally" to what was ostensibly obvious years before. Or consider Marshal Yazov's plaintive post-putsch lament: "The unfortunate thing is that I didn't realize what had happened in the country, that we had different people already, and a lot of these people didn't share my political views, having their own views on everything. That was my mistake."⁶⁴

Given that these and many similar officials were putatively Gorbachev's men—those who had replaced their old-thinking, Brezhnev-era, predecessors—is it so inconceivable that under different leadership a different course might have been chosen in 1985–89?⁶⁵ Elsewhere I have speculated about alternatives to Gorbachev's conciliatory path for the late Soviet empire, more status quo or even hard-line options under which the Cold War might still be ongoing.⁶⁶ And there is evidence that such options were indeed proposed. Consider the testimony of Gen. Makhmut Gareyev, former deputy chief of the general staff, describing the military reforms advocated by him and then-General Staff Chief Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov (Akhromeyev's predecessor):

The arms race was, in some sense, justifiable. . . . the problem was to participate in the arms race, but to do so in a sensible manner. . . . Many areas offered substantial savings. Just recall the huge amounts of money we wasted on Egypt, Ethiopia, Angola, Salvador. . . . I also proposed to steer clear of such ventures as Afghanistan. That war was very costly. We also advocated a more rational arms procurement policy focusing on specific weapons systems rather than all the weapons produced by the United States. . . . If the arms race had been conducted in a more sensible manner, we could have sustained it and still maintained strategic parity, we could have matched the Western powers and ensured global stability. We also had every opportunity to preserve the Soviet Union. . . . But our leadership was feeble; it was not prepared to make tough, willful decisions, to act decisively like Stalin.⁶⁷

63. Quoted in Ellman and Kontorovich, *Destruction of the Soviet Economic System*, p. 141.

64. Quoted in Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 337.

65. For an excellent counterfactual analysis that reaches similar conclusions, see George W. Breslauer and Richard Ned Lebow, "Leadership and the End of the Cold War: A Counterfactual Thought Experiment," forthcoming in Herrmann and Lebow, *Learning from the End of the Cold War*.

66. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, pp. 229–230.

67. Ellman and Kontorovich, *Destruction of the Soviet Economic System*, pp. 61–63.

That such proposals existed comes as no surprise.⁶⁸ Nor should it be doubted that—in tandem with less disruptive reforms than the budget-busting anti-alcohol campaign or Gorbachev's ill-conceived tampering with the planning mechanism—they were certainly viable.⁶⁹ Moreover, Gareyev's testimony seems to confirm Wohlforth's own 1994–95 argument that “a harder-line alternative to Gorbachev waited in the wings.”⁷⁰ Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a better summary of how material forces influenced the Cold War's end than Wohlforth's 1995 statement that “decline was a necessary condition of change, but clearly insufficient to determine the precise nature of change.”⁷¹ But now that harder-line alternative has apparently vanished, and decline seems to have become a sufficient condition as well. Are these conclusions justified?

I think not, and have highlighted four problems in Brooks and Wohlforth's argument. First, in making a case for the old thinkers' agreement with (or acquiescence in) strategic retreat, the authors ignore much evidence of disagreement (and opposition). Second is their inattention to the domestic political context—including the institutional-cultural legacies of the Soviet military, Gorbachev's maneuvering around his conservative opponents, and the image consciousness of these conservatives' subsequent self-portrayals—that renders problematic the taking at face value of much documentary as well as oral testimony. Third, the authors underemphasize the sharp differences between 1985–86 and 1988–89, such that the importance of Gorbachev's critical early initiatives (when material pressures were relatively modest yet intellectual ferment was great) is downplayed, with emphasis instead placed on post-1988 changes (when the main new-thinking breakthroughs had already been achieved and economic woes were indeed rapidly worsening).

This is linked to a fourth problem in Brooks and Wohlforth's analysis—namely, their disinterest in the nonmaterial sources of new-thinking beliefs

68. Nor is it surprising that documentary evidence of hard-line alternatives is sparse, given that KGB, Central Committee, and defense ministry furnaces worked overtime for a few days in August 1991.

69. Although their broader economic analysis is thorough, Brooks and Wohlforth do not explore the extent to which the post-1988 downturn grew out of earlier trends and to what extent it resulted from Gorbachev's own policies. Serious consideration of the viability of alternative paths requires study of what moderately reduced defense outlays combined with better-designed domestic reforms could have done. Mindful of the interpretive bias caused by the system's subsequent collapse, James Millar recently concluded a review of newly declassified Soviet economic data with the observation that “the Soviet economy was a lot sturdier than it appears in hindsight.” Millar, public remarks at Princeton University Conference on the CIA and the USSR, Princeton, New Jersey, March 10, 2001.

70. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” p. 125.

71. William C. Wohlforth, “Correspondence: Realism and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 186–187.

and behavior. The policy analysts who began advocating major “Westernizing” changes in the mid-1970s, Gorbachev’s exposure to much unorthodox thinking even before 1985, and especially the intense discussion of core philosophical issues of world politics among Gorbachev’s inner circle during his first years in power—all this is absent. And it is in the justification for this inattention that the authors’ central analytical flaw is seen.

That flaw is a framework that too explicitly privileges the material over the ideational—the justification being that “we can only know where the world of ideas begins if we know what international behavior can be explained by changing material incentives” (p. 53). Constructivists naturally object to such an *a priori* relegation of ideas to picking up only where “the world of power” leaves off. Others might agree that material constraints set the general structure within which various forces interacted to produce the Cold War’s end. But it is an unjustified leap from this to an analytical mode that examines those forces’ interaction by designating power the default explanation, with ideas, leadership, or any other factors meriting consideration only when there is a sufficient “lag” or “poor fit” between shifts in power and state behavior (pp. 51, 53).

Given realism’s difficulty in specifying expected behavior, as well as in measuring power, it is unlikely that the fit will ever be judged poor enough that ideational analyses need apply. Yet Brooks and Wohlforth assert that “our study indicates that it is now critical for scholars who focus on the causal role of ideas to pay much more attention to the issue of endogeneity” (p. 8) (i.e., that ideas might not play a causal role). Surely scholars should be mindful of alternative explanations in all cases; but in this one, the study that so indicates is not a close analysis that weighs competing claims and evidence, but rather one that systematically *excludes* evidence of ideas’ causal influence. Pitted against an understanding of ideational incentives as “spare and impoverished” as that which Brooks and Wohlforth charge constructivists of having about material incentives, it would indeed be surprising if it had concluded anything else.

In closing, Brooks and Wohlforth suggest another reason for so heavily privileging the material over the ideational: that the quantifiability of power justifies its priority over more qualitative types of evidence. Material explanations should come first, they write, because “ideas are not directly observable” (p. 53). But for all its impressive economic documentation, their argument ultimately hinges on something equally unobservable—namely, *perceptions*. And no quantity of evidence on what actors should have been thinking can substitute for quality of evidence on what they actually did think. “In the end,”

Brooks and Wohlforth write, “growing economic costs . . . created strong incentives for engaging in retrenchment irrespective of Gorbachev’s underlying motivations” (p. 42). Although no doubt correct, this also seems almost an admission of the problem I noted at the outset: that notwithstanding their claims about causation, absent a fuller and more balanced examination of those “underlying motivations”—of both the old and new thinkers—the authors only have a strong case for correlation.

I highlight these problems not to dismiss the importance of the sources that Brooks and Wohlforth bring to bear or to deny the centrality of material constraints to the way the Cold War ended. Economic decline was clearly a necessary factor in the inception of Soviet reforms, and the authors have given us new insights into how such pressures also played an important facilitating role. But they are still far from establishing material forces as a sufficient condition. Yet there is a note of finality in Brooks and Wohlforth’s claim that “if our research withstands the test of further releases of new evidence,” then constructivists should acknowledge the primacy of material forces in shaping Gorbachev’s foreign policy and “shift instead toward examining different questions for which ideational models may prove to have much greater utility” (p. 50). Such a claim is certainly premature, and before we look ahead to new releases of evidence, the materialist model might better be subjected to a stronger test of the sources we already have. Until then, what Brooks and Wohlforth offer as “reevaluating a landmark case for ideas” looks more like “reinforcing a questionable case for power.”