

Mar 3 2010

## Understanding the End of the Cold War

LSE Ideas

By Dr Nicholas Kitchen

The end of the Cold War is arguably the most important event to hit the discipline of international relations since the first chair in the subject was created at Aberystwyth in 1919. Academics in the field almost universally failed to predict it and our theories didn't appear to explain it, and this spawned both heated debate and new thinking within the field. What follows is a brief sketch with pointers to resources on the topic – some well known, others less so.

[John Gaddis' "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War"](#) is a good place to start. Gaddis places the blame for IR failing to predict the Cold War ending as it did squarely with the deterministic social-science approach to the discipline that failed to accept indeterminacy, even as the sciences themselves were embracing unpredictability. [Ted Hopf's response](#) and their correspondence the next volume is worth reading too, particularly for his more fundamental critique that it was not so much the theories themselves as the sociology of the discipline that prevented scholars asking the right questions.

Michael Cox, in contrast, focuses his contribution for Volume 3 of Sage's [Twentieth Century International Relations](#) on the empirical reasons for the failure. The implication of Cox's argument is that it was poor information rather than poor theory that lay at the heart of IR's inability to foresee peaceful Soviet collapse.

Of course, some scholars did get close to predicting the way in which the Cold War would end, notably the macro-sociologist Randall Collins. In his "What Theories Predicted the State Breakdowns and Revolutions of the Soviet Bloc?" [Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change](#), Vol. 14 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1992) he critically evaluates the quality of both his own and others' predictions.

Of course, in assessing the causes of failure to predict the end of the Cold War, a great proletarian spanner is thrown in the works by the degree of disagreement as to the direct causes of that event itself. Was it [Reagan's policies](#), as Patman contends? [The effects of the Afghanistan War](#), and not anything intrinsic to the Cold War itself, that precipitated a collapse of empire, a thesis advanced by Reuveny and Prakash? A shift in ideas within Soviet elites, as per [Matthew Evangelista](#) among others, or [shifts in the external environment](#) as proposed by Deudney and Ikenberry? Indeed, such is the complexity of the event that Ned Lebow and Stein resort to 'non-linear confluence' as their preferred model of causation to explain the events of 1989-91 in Richard Hermann's volume ["Ending the Cold War"](#). Such is the confusion that James Lee Ray and Bruce Russett feel the need to reassure us that despite appearances, the end of the Cold War [doesn't render scientific prediction in international politics obsolete](#).

The main target of this plethora of explanations and acknowledgement of complexity is neorealist theory. The classic hatchet-job is done by Richard Ned Lebow in his ["The Long Peace, the end of the Cold War and the failure of Realism"](#). Constructivist explanations, such as those from [Koslowski and Kratochwil](#) and [Tuomas Forsberg](#), reflect the boom in this post-positivist approach. *Innepolitik* is back in vogue in Matthew Evangelista's ["Paradox of State Strength"](#).

However, it is not for nothing that realism has been the dominant paradigm of international relations since the Peloponnesian War. Despite having taken quite a beating, realism fights back off the ropes. Stephen Walt provides [a strong defense of realism](#) in light of the end of the Cold War and Brooks and Wohlforth first reevaluate the supposed ["landmark case for ideas"](#) and later emphasise the role of economic constraints in Wohlforth's edited volume [Cold War Endgame](#). However, perhaps the most perceptive of all the realist defences is [Wohlforth's first attempt](#) in 1995-6, which despite constructing a realist account chides realists for thinking that because such an explanation is possible that somehow realism stands unbowed.

The end of the Cold War ensures that IR theory is a more plural and epistemologically varied place. Risse-Kappen and Grunberry therefore accurately call the end of the Cold War "A Time of Reckoning" in [Allan and Goldman's edited volume](#), and for Wohlforth it was certainly a ["Reality Check"](#). [Hopmann's review essay](#) provides excellent coverage of recent theoretical developments.

International Relations is surely a better place for these developments and the debate that produced them. The 'neo-neo' debate that obsessed the discipline for so long now seems as irrelevant and obscure as it surely was. Whether IR theory is any better placed to predict major events in international politics is debatable, probably doubtful, but that International Relations is better equipped to explain those events when they happen is indisputable.

---

This entry was posted in [Cold War](#), [end of cold war](#), [international relations theory](#), [realism](#), [The Wall](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).