

# Power, interests and trust: explaining Gorbachev's choices at the end of the Cold War

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**Abstract.** This article argues that the end of the Cold War can be told as a story of the development of trust. Despite its centrality as a political concept, trust has only recently received focused attention in the field of international relations. Development of trust cannot be reduced to changing relationships of power or redefinitions of interests but requires communicative elements. The argument is demonstrated through a comparison of German–Soviet and Japanese–Soviet relations at the end of the Cold War. The key point is that trust and the lack of it, respectively, were a major factor in the profound transformation of the former relationship and led to stalemate in the latter.

## Introduction

My aim is to participate in the debate over the relevancy of various theories of international relations to the end of the Cold War by furthering one particular explanation for the end of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Partly opposing and partly complementary with accounts that explain the end of the Cold War either as a consequence of Western military build-up or the ‘new thinking’ of the Soviet leadership, I will try to tell the story of the end of the Cold War in terms of developing trust between the main players. In other words, whereas the first explanation is based on external changes, and the second internal, the account based on trust development refers to changes in intersubjective understandings.

I will base my argument on a comparison of Gorbachev's action in the question of German unification and in the dispute with Japan over the Kurile Islands. These two negotiation processes constitute a puzzle because Gorbachev conceded in the first but not in the latter. The first was a success and ended in a peaceful resolution of a protracted conflict, while the latter ended in a stalemate. This comparison is important, as most theories about the end of the Cold War have focused mainly on the European scene and neglected the fact that the Cold War ended in a very different manner in Asia–Pacific. In other words, the end of the Cold War was not a unitary phenomenon. Yet a good theory should be able to provide adequate explanations for various events which fall within the same realm. Generally speaking, the explanations which focus on the end of the Cold War in Europe leave unexplained why the progress in Russo–Japanese relations has been far more limited than some observers anticipated.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. William Wohlorth, ‘Reality Check: Revising Theories of World Politics in Response to the End of the Cold War’, *World Politics*, 50:4 (1998), pp. 650–80.

<sup>2</sup> Peggy Falkenheim Mayer, ‘Moscow's Relations with Tokyo’, *Asian Survey*, 33:10 (1993), pp. 953–67.

The case of German unification is central for any discussion of the end of the Cold War and this is why I regard it as the primary case here. The Soviet acceptance of German unification including its membership in NATO was clearly somewhat unexpected. As Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott have remarked, 'in the past, many US experts had presumed that if a red line existed, it ran between East and West Germany; surely they reasoned, Gorbachev could not let the two Germans unite, or allow a united Germany to be a full member of NATO'.<sup>3</sup> What was generally believed, was that perhaps Germany would be united some day in the next century, and that it would be a balanced compromise between the East and West as a result of ideological convergence and a profound transformation of the overall European security constellation. However, Germany was united before Europe was united, and the reunification of Germany occurred primarily, if not exclusively, on Western terms. According to Gerhard Wettig, 'such a choice [that the Kremlin was willing to acquiesce in German NATO participation] was tantamount to an asymmetrical outcome in traditional terms'.<sup>4</sup> A closer investigation of these events thus reflects the articulated need to 'study episodes of revolutionary change in a theoretically informed way',<sup>5</sup> and examine 'what kind of foundations offer the most fruitful set of questions and research strategies for explaining the revolutionary changes that seem to be occurring in the late twentieth century international system'.<sup>6</sup>

### **The end of the Cold War as a test of theories**

Considering the fact that major world political upheavals have always resulted in important changes in the nature of the study of IR, the stakes in the debate are high according to the received wisdom. Realists emerged as winners of the debate preceding the Second World War, but the jury is still out in judging which theories were right on the Cold War. The road from empirical discoveries to theoretical debate has been long. Even the best historical accounts have been accused of not *explaining* the cases.<sup>7</sup> The descriptions of the cases do not yet explain the difference in terms of success, rather, the 'facts' provide material for different kind of explanations, which may or may not be compatible with the basic theories of IR.

The critics of mainstream theories have often claimed that the end of the Cold War showed serious defaults in the study of IR simply because scholars failed to predict it.<sup>8</sup> Surprising outcomes, however, do not yet prove that our theories are

<sup>3</sup> Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Level. The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (London: Warner Books, 1993), p. 419.

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Wettig, 'Moscow's Acceptance of NATO: The Catalytic Role of German Unification', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 45:6 (1993), p. 968.

<sup>5</sup> William Wohlforth, 'Realism and the End of the Cold War', *International Security*, 19:3 (1995), p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It. The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425, and at p. 422.

<sup>7</sup> Gunther Hellmann, 'Der Präsident, der Kanzler, sein Ausseminister und die Vereinigung', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 37:2 (1996), pp. 357–63.

<sup>8</sup> This argument has been presented by John Gaddis, 'International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War', *International Security*, 17:3 (1992/93), pp. 5–58. See also Michael Cox, 'The End of the Cold War and Why We Failed to Predict It' in Allen Hunter (ed.), *Rethinking the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

wrong, especially if we do not subscribe to the view that explanation equals prediction. As Robert Keohane has argued, in explaining the end of the Cold War as well as the extinction of dinosaurs, the true test lies in the ability of scholars to make sense of the process once it had happened. Just as scientists can now tell us that the dinosaurs died because a huge asteroid hit the earth, so scholars of international relations have in Keohane's view now no major difficulties in explaining why the Cold War ended.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, although German unification was a surprising outcome from the then contemporary perspective, the dominant theories of international relations have incorporated this episode, and the end of the Cold War in general, within the body of their self-understanding in a way which gives reasons for the continuing support of the respective theories: (neo)realists can claim that the outcome simply reflected changing power relations and liberals that it was a rational consequence of Gorbachev's 'new thinking'. Indeed, these two explanations also tend to dominate the empirically oriented literature. The first is a power-political account, according to which Gorbachev was forced to do what he did, and the second is an interest-based account that maintains that Gorbachev acted deliberately according to the rational interests of the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> The first explanation stresses external forces, the second internal choices.

Underlying these two theories, there is also a third—intersubjective—way of explaining Gorbachev's behaviour. I will focus in particular on one phenomenon, namely on the development of trust. Conceptually, this account is much less developed than the two former alternatives. Although trust is a central concept for political practitioners, explanations that are based on trust building are often omitted in theoretical literature. As Deborah Welch Larson has argued, in IR literature there is no theory of trust despite its importance.<sup>11</sup> For her, however, the end of the Cold War provides a good laboratory in which to try to investigate the causes of mistrust and how to overcome it.

Explanations based on trust can be connected to constructivist—or reflectivist—theories of international relations as they put emphasis on shared understandings and try to challenge the concept of rationality based on instrumental or strategic understandings of it.<sup>12</sup> Although trust can be based on capabilities and knowledge, the key point from a constructivist perspective is to see trust also in terms of identification and not as an epiphenomenon of material changes or their perception. In other words, there is no certainty that after certain changes in power relations, trust will emerge.

Because there are different sources of trust, the explanations of trust are not mono-causal. Moreover, instrumental rationality offers only a partial explanation

<sup>9</sup> Robert Keohane, 'International Relations, Old and New', in Robert Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (eds.), *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Together they form something that may be called as 'emergent orthodoxy'. See Ralph Summy, 'Challenging the Emergent Orthodoxy', in Ralph Summy and Michael Salla (eds.), *Why the Cold War Ended. A Range of Interpretations* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Welch Larson, 'Trust and Missed Opportunities in International Relations', *Political Psychology*, 18:3 (1997), pp. 701–34.

<sup>12</sup> See Gavan Duffy and Brian Federking, 'The Social Pathology of the Cold War. A Constructivist Diagnosis', paper prepared for the Meeting of the International Studies Association, Minneapolis, March 17–21, 1998; Brian Federking, 'Resolving Security Dilemmas: A Constructivist Explanation of the Cold War', *International Politics*, 35: (1998), pp. 207–32.

for the development of trust if we think that trust is often more a feeling than cognition. Karen Jones, for example, defines it as an affective attitude. What makes trust inexplicable by means of rational choice to her is that it cannot be adapted by will, since once it has developed it becomes resistant to evidence. It is ungrounded optimism about the goodwill of another that grounds trust. It is based on intuition rather than calculation and created out of processes of intersubjective communication.<sup>13</sup> As Niklas Luhmann has argued,

If one were to take as a yardstick the concept of rationality in decision-making theories—be it that of the rational choice in the employment of means or that of optimizing—one would from the outset fall into too narrow a conceptual frame of reference which cannot do justice to the facts of trust. Trust is not a means that can be chosen for particular ends, much less an end/means structure capable of being optimized.<sup>14</sup>

Explanations based on trust are not circular. Trust can be used as an explanation of cooperation because there can be cooperation without trust when cooperation is based on individual calculation, as well as trust without cooperation when no need to cooperate exists. If we are to trace how trust is established, we should focus on communication, pre-agreements and respective tests of behaviour. Whether the beliefs are grounded or not, one needs to know the one that is trusted. In international relations, too, personal relationships are extraordinarily important since trust in persons is often easier to develop than trust in collectives.

Finally, I need to emphasise that my argument does not deny the variety of factors that have contributed to the differing outcomes in the cases at hand, it simply aims at focusing on one that deserves more attention. Most explanations of the cases, which one is able to find in the empirically oriented literature, fall somewhere in between all three—or between the two main poles of realist and liberal accounts.<sup>15</sup> Depending on the background and focus, the competing interpretations

<sup>13</sup> Karen Jones, 'Trust as an Affective Attitude', *Ethics*, 107 (1996), pp. 4–25. For trust, see also Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Trust. Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) and Roderick Kramer and Tom Tyler (eds.), *Trust in Organizations. Frontiers of Theory and Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Trust and Power* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> As for example Rajendra Jain has argued, 'by agreeing to unification, Gorbachev not only made a virtue of necessity by recognizing the inevitable but also tied in with his own foreign policy goals'. Rajendra Jain, *The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe 1949–1991* (London: Sangam Books, 1993), p. 206. Likewise, Gerhard Wettig concluded that 'Gorbachev had successfully pursued "realpolitik"'. He had given in where he had no chance of succeeding and had exacted crucial concessions in return'. Gerhard Wettig, *Changes in Soviet Policy Towards the West* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 172. In the second edition of their famous book Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice name thirteen variables that were part of the diplomatic process leading to Gorbachev's acceptance ranging from the ineffectiveness of Soviet initiatives to the promises to develop ties and deliver assistance to Russia. Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed. A Study in Statecraft*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Rafael Biermann, in turn, lists seven motives for Gorbachev's concession in the German Question, namely: the 'new thinking', the favourable international context, *fait accomplis* in the GDR, the unity and determination of the Western governments, the lack of support of the allies, the necessity to diminish the domestic burden, and finally, the foundation of a new German Russian partnership. Rafael Biermann, *Zwischen Krenl und Kanzleramt. Wie Moskau mit der deutschen Einheit rang* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997). Hannes Adomeit emphasises first the significance of the comprehensive package of incentives that were offered to Gorbachev and argues then that 'the central point to be made about the international dimension of Gorbachev's consent to unified Germany's membership in NATO is that in the spring of 1990 the Soviet Union was running out of options'. Hannes Adomeit, *Imperial Overstretch: Germany in Soviet Policy from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1998), pp. 491 and 528. Interestingly, Adomeit also compares the German economic initiatives to Japanese attempts to return

may take slightly different forms and bear different names.<sup>16</sup> Although many of these empirical studies criticise simple accounts, constructivist explanations have remained a less visible explanation in their own right. For example, David Shumaker has argued that

[e]xternal pressures such as US military spending, increasing costs of support to Third World satellites, growing Eastern European instability, and finally the internal dynamism of Germany's drive for unification also constrained Soviet actions. But these factors cannot account for Gorbachev's specific responses, particularly the decision not to utilize Moscow's remaining resources in the region to disrupt the process of change. In the past, Soviet leaders had responded to similar pressures in fundamentally different ways.

Moscow's international behaviour was not merely a derivative of domestic imperatives. Undoubtedly, economic problems, new leadership values, and crises of legitimacy fundamentally influenced the state's external behavior, yet such phenomena alone cannot illuminate the process by which change was initiated, developed, and implemented. Exclusive emphasis on these unit-level variables would take Soviet foreign policy out of its international context. The view that Soviet acceptance of German unification was simply the result of a political system paralyzed by internal conflict excluded crucial elements of the story.<sup>17</sup>

According to Shumaker then, neither external nor internal factors alone can explain the Soviet acceptance of the German unification and her membership in NATO. This conclusion can hardly be disputed, but Shumaker is not able to say more than that these processes interacted. He ends up by concluding that the difficulty of any rigorous theory incorporating all these threads is apparent. Shumaker is right in a sense, as no theory can provide a full account of historical events. Theories still have at least two explanatory functions: they can offer a framework within which all relevant explanations can find a legitimate place or they can point to some important but neglected aspects of the change that may have 'tipped the balance'. For the former we need a constructivist theory, for the latter, I will argue, in this particular but highly central case, an account of trust building.

the Kurile Islands with the help of economic assistance but contends that the reasons why Gorbachev failed to endorse the Japanese package deal go beyond the scope of his book. Furthermore, Werner Weidenfeld refers to external constraints, domestic politics, language and human friendship when summing up his account. Werner Weidenfeld, *Aussenpolitik für die deutsche Einheit. Die Entscheidungsjahre 1989/90* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt 1998). Finally, Angela Stent argues that 'the Soviet leadership finally agreed to make the best out of a situation that was antithetical to its interests by bargaining for substantial German economic concessions in return for accepting German conditions'. Angela Stent, *Russia and Germany Reborn. Unification, the Soviet Collapse and the New Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. xi.

<sup>16</sup> Adomeit has defined these competing 'schools of thought' in the following way: 'The first interprets the collapse of the external empire as a complex and difficult but essentially *managed* process. The second argues that the Soviet leadership *lost control*'. Hannes Adomeit, 'Gorbachev, German Unification and the Collapse of Empire', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 10:3 (1994), pp. 197–230. The managed process can, of course, be more 'realist' as the story of collapse, but in much of the literature, those who emphasize Gorbachev's freedom of choice tend to support more liberal views of the process. For a recent discussion of realist, liberal and constructivist explanations of the Changes in Soviet Foreign Policy, see Robert Herman, 'Identity, Norms, and National Security: The Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution and the End of the Cold War', in Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security. Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> David Shumaker, *Gorbachev and the German Question. Soviet-West German Relations 1985–1990* (Westport: Praeger, 1995), p. 146.

### Explaining Gorbachev's moves

How do we make sense of Gorbachev's choices at the end of the Cold War? What can explain Gorbachev's change from 'nyet' to 'da' in the German case but his and Yeltsin's persistent 'nyet' in the Japanese case? There is no easy answer to the question of why the Soviet Union acquiesced to German but not to Japanese wishes. Germany was not more powerful—in traditional terms—than Japan. The differences in power between Germany and Japan were quite small, and not always in favour of Germany in comparison to Japan.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, from the Soviet point of view the German question was initially more sensitive and valuable than the Kurile Islands question. From the Soviet perspective, there was more at stake in the German question. As Stephen Larrabee has argued, 'with German unification, Moscow has lost its ability to manipulate the German Question and has been deprived of one of its prime sources of leverage over Germany'.<sup>19</sup> In the Kurile Islands dispute, by contrast, the rewards 'for breaking the stalemate would be high'.<sup>20</sup> Also, historically the Soviets had been more open to consideration of the Kurile Islands issue rather than the German question.

#### *Power*

According to the power political theory German unification and its membership in NATO was a result of increased Soviet weakness.<sup>21</sup> Because of the changes in the international power structure, the relative power-political position of the Soviet Union declined during the 1980s. The state was economically weak and could not afford a new arms race against the West. This led to the 'new thinking' which was a way to reform the economic basis of the communist economies and seek accommodation with the West. By accepting Western values, the Soviet leaders tried to seek new allies among the rich Western powers in order to break the alliance and mend the rapidly deteriorating economy. All this aimed at preserving the status of the Soviet Union as a superpower. We now know that the Soviet Union did not succeed in this, but by showing its weakness it paved the way for the revolutions in Eastern Europe, including East Germany.

When East Germany collapsed and West Germany moved towards the politics of unification, the Soviet Union had no means of resisting it. By risking war, it knew it

<sup>18</sup> One possible point could be that the commitment of (other) Western states to solve the issue in a certain way was weaker. Yet in 1991, George Bush was clearly backing the Japanese. When visiting Moscow, he persuaded Gorbachev to resolve the dispute and told the Russian audience that he supported the Japanese claim in the islands dispute warning that the continuation of the dispute could hamper Soviet integration into the world economy. See Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, p. 621; *The Guardian*, 31 July 1991.

<sup>19</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee, 'Moscow and the German Question', in Dirk Verheyen and Christian Soe (eds.), *The Germans and Their Neighbors* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p. 222.

<sup>20</sup> Rajan Menon, 'Japan–Russia Relations and North-East Asian Security', *Survival*, 38:2 (1996), pp. 59–78.

<sup>21</sup> One example of a realist reading of the end of the Cold War is offered by Douglas Lemke, 'The Continuation of History: Power Transition Theory and the End of the Cold War', *Journal of Peace Research*, 34:1 (1996), pp. 23–36.

would bear severe costs. According to Gerhard Wettig, Gorbachev needed a sympathetic and helpful Western environment. Therefore, he was compelled to accept German unification and the only thing he could do was to get out of it those benefits that were achievable:

Gorbachev displayed political courage when he realized that there was no chance of avoiding German membership in NATO. He therefore made up his mind to make the concession soon and on a voluntary basis rather than being eventually forced to do so later. At this stage he could and did still ask for substantial concessions in return.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, the Soviet Union was able to get only a declaration from NATO, which emphasised friendship, but no concrete changes to NATO structures. There were cosmetic cutbacks in the armed forces of unified Germany, which she had done anyway as a part of the ongoing negotiations on arms reductions between the Warsaw pact and NATO. The Soviet Union also received economic assistance which was, however, patently insufficient to help the Soviet state out of her economic disaster.

On this account, the Soviet Union was forced to accept the terms set by the Western powers. The outcome did not reflect its initial goals and therefore realists may easily conclude that the main reason behind the Soviet acceptance of the German unification and its NATO membership was power politics. Although West Germany was militarily weak, the Soviet Union could not pressurise Bonn, since the German policy of unification was fully backed by the United States. As Anne Deighton has argued, 'it was Gorbachev's *increasing weakness* that led him to accept German unification on German and Western terms, with a tacit recognition of the assumption that a united Germany in NATO could be a factor of stability.'<sup>23</sup>

In the Japanese case, the realist theory has less apparent problems. Realists can claim that the islands were strategically important to the Soviet Union and there was no reason why she should make a deal over them with Japan. Japan was not able to take the islands by force, but was strong enough not to let the dispute be buried. Hence the result, namely that the dispute ended up in a stalemate, simply reflected the power relations.<sup>24</sup>

There are some easily compatible elements in both cases, which make this account seem reliable. First of all, it is hard to omit entirely the fact that the Soviet economy was bankrupt and that consequently the Soviet Union was not able to compete with the West in terms of power politics. Power relations were part of the reasoning process that led to the 'new thinking'. As Shumaker pointed out, Western inflexibility aided Gorbachev in proving to his domestic audience that traditional Soviet approaches were no longer effective in protecting core national interests. He was able to contend that pressure tactics did nothing to moderate West German behaviour, and may even have forced Bonn to follow the US security line even more closely.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the rejection of power politics was partly caused by power politics.

<sup>22</sup> Wettig, *Changes in Soviet Policy Towards the West*, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Anne Deighton, 'Winds of History or Acts of Men. The Unification of Germany', *Contemporary European History*, 2:3 (1993), p. 290 (my italics).

<sup>24</sup> There are also additional realist explanations which put emphasis on the Japanese motivation to dispute in order to avoid a collision in Japanese-American relations and, depending from the point of view, either avoid increasing or increase defence spending.

<sup>25</sup> Shumaker, *Gorbachev and the German Question*, p. 4.

The power-political interpretation is backed by some comments of Soviet decision-makers. Gorbachev himself stated at the concluding press conference after the Stavropol meeting that he and Kohl had acted in the spirit of the well-known German expression 'Realpolitik'. Shevardnadze, in turn, described the situation afterwards in the following way:

Gorbachev's and my position looked as follows: we should either reunify Germany or the reunification would occur spontaneously, but violently. In that case, thousands, tens of thousands or maybe millions of people would die. Unification could demand a great many human lives, many losses. That was a real danger, when one thinks about the massive concentration of weapons.<sup>26</sup>

To his fellow comrades, Shevardnadze argued that realities dictate one line of conduct, although feelings rise up against it.<sup>27</sup> When explaining why the Soviet Union accepted NATO membership, he contended that he and Gorbachev did not want to swim against the tide. Finally, the realist theory can well explain why the benefits the Soviet Union was able to get out of the process were limited: there was simply no bargaining space for the Soviet leaders. As Hannes Adomeit concluded in his study, 'Gorbachev had no options but to ratify various *faits accomplis* and try to negotiate the best *quid pro quos* for the Soviet Union'.<sup>28</sup>

Although realist theory can provide a plausible explanation for the outcome of German unification and tells us why the Kurile Islands were not returned, there are apparent weaknesses, too. Firstly, military power relations had not changed significantly. In 1989, the Soviet army was still intact and military expenditures almost the same as five years earlier. The year of 1989 was a turning point, but it was only in the 1990s when the weakness of Soviet military power was seen in figures. In particular, if there was any remarkable change in military statistics of those three countries it was that Japan's military expenditures were rising.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, military power relations did not seem to play any crucial role in bargaining. For one thing, the Western states did not threaten force. They even tried to avoid humiliating the Soviet Union, as Bush said, 'I won't beat on my chest and dance on the wall'.<sup>30</sup> And if we look at the Soviet reasoning process, the opposite was the case: the Western threat had been the most important reason to resist any changes in Germany's international position.

The aversion to war tells us why the Soviet Union did not use military power in East Germany, but it does not explain why Gorbachev did not even threaten force in order to get a better deal. The Western states were certainly reluctant to use military power for the sake of unifying Germany. In fact, the Western leaders reckoned with and feared the possibility that Gorbachev or somebody else could use military force. In that case they were even ready to retreat. Indeed, both Western observers and the domestic critics of Gorbachev have repeatedly stressed that the Soviet Union could have achieved more, had it used all the means available. As Zelikow and Rice stated,

<sup>26</sup> Ekkehard Kuhn, *Gorbatschow und die deutsche Einheit. Aussagen der wichtigsten Beteiligten* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1993), p. 152 [translation mine].

<sup>27</sup> Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed. A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 243.

<sup>28</sup> Adomeit, 'Gorbachev and Collapse', p. 226.

<sup>29</sup> I have used the data of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, <http://www.acda.gov>.

<sup>30</sup> Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified, Europe Transformed*, p. 105.

although it is tempting to think that the Soviet position was hopeless by this time, no senior officials in either Washington or Bonn believed this. They knew that the USSR still had significant leverage over events in Central Europe. Moscow could force the German people to choose between unification and membership in NATO, channeling the surging tide for unity against the supporters of the alliance.<sup>31</sup>

As changes in military power relations were minimal, many people have argued that instead of military relations, it was economic stagnation that forced the Soviet leadership to redefine their policies.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the change in economic power relations seems self-evident in terms of received wisdom, but in reality, it is not that easy to prove on the basis of economic data. It is difficult to explain why the political change occurred when it occurred and why the growth in Japanese economic power did not have any major influence on Soviet foreign policy.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Kohl did not use West Germany's economic power coercively except vis-à-vis the East German state. Positive, rather than negative sanctions were the primary nature of German economic statecraft in her relations with the Soviet Union. Even more importantly, although economic assistance was elementary for the Soviet Union, Gorbachev explicitly denied that he had been pressed in this issue. In the Japanese case, by contrast, the Soviet and Russian leaders needed to show that their decisions were *not* based on Japanese pressure. As this was difficult, they could not make any deal.<sup>34</sup>

Some scholars have also wanted to stress the determination of German and Western position and the relative fluctuation of Gorbachev's stance as an explanation of the outcome.<sup>35</sup> This explanation, which rests on the power of persuasion, is not necessarily tautological, but it is relatively far away from typical realists accounts which stress that persuasion must be backed by material power. But it leaves unexplained what led Gorbachev to believe that the Western position was firm, or what made Gorbachev change his position. The simple repetition of the same position by the Western leaders? In particular, this explanation does not tell us why the Japanese, who were clearly more determined than the Germans in their attempts, did not achieve their goals.

If one wants to stress external relations of power, it is most sensible to emphasise the civilian movements in East Germany, but neither is this conception of power something realists normally endorse. In the realist view, public opinion does not lead foreign policy, but is led by policy-makers. Moreover, although any explanation cannot fail to see the importance of what happened on the ground, the reference to the changes in the GDR does not solve the puzzle entirely. It is correct to say the Soviet Union could not resist the unification of Germany, once the events started to roll, but the acceptance of the German participation in NATO was anything but inevitable. Neither East German citizens nor public opinion in the Soviet Union wanted it, and many people in the West, including Genscher, considered that full

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Nikolai Pawlow, *Die deutsche Vereinigung aus sowjet-russischer Perspektive* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 236.

<sup>33</sup> First, the GNP of Japan was rising faster than that of Germany's and, second, the fall of the Soviet GNP started really only in 1990. See <http://www.acda.gov>.

<sup>34</sup> William Nimmo, *Japan and Russia. A Reevaluation in the Post-Soviet Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 142.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. James M. Goldgeier, *Leadership Style and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), chapter 6, 'Gorbachev and German Unification'.

membership in NATO would be detrimental. It is one thing for something to happen, and another thing to accept it.

In short, neither military and economic resources, nor the reasons of the key actors for their behaviour in these specific cases, match very well with the realist theory according to which changes in power relations explain the outcome. If one wants to overcome these discrepancies, the theory runs into difficulties. If one wants to emphasise Soviet weakness, power has to be defined in a way which is either atypical for neorealists or becomes so complicated that it cannot function as a simple theoretical tool. There is also something peculiar in the account that sees Gorbachev's motivations as power-political, but simultaneously projects his weakness back to his dependence on Western states, which would help him in the economic crisis rather than exploit his weakness. Finally, the realist theory does not tell us why Gorbachev reacted to the situation as he did, namely peacefully.<sup>36</sup>

Against the evidence provided by Soviet leaders, which fits well with the power-political position, one may suggest that such arguments deliberately underplay their range of choice. For Shevardnadze, for example, it was meaningful to present the choice as narrow, because this allowed him to escape from later criticism. Gorbachev has followed a similar line of argumentation but he has never admitted that he was *forced* to give up the GDR and Eastern Europe in general because of Western military and economic strength. Moreover, if it was the case that Gorbachev had no other choice but to accept German NATO membership, it is unclear why Kohl wanted to reward him with economic assistance. Indeed, Kohl himself did not believe power was ultimately on his side. On the contrary, Kohl has admitted that had Gorbachev offered unification only on the condition of neutrality, it would have had 'fatal consequences'.<sup>37</sup> In other words, any explanation of the outcome that assumes that Gorbachev had little bargaining power must confront the question of why Kohl rewarded him if it was not necessary. Explanations in terms of domestic politics will not do, as there was no considerable public pressure demanding such moves. On the contrary, for example, Kohl's decision to grant a loan to the Soviet Union was done secretly.

Finally, the realist explanation starts from the prior assumption that the asymmetrical outcome stands as evidence of the fact that the Western states had more power. But what makes people believe that the benefits for the Soviet Union were minimal is partly the realist account itself. By changing the theoretical perspective, one may be able to say that the benefits were, in fact, reasonable. This is exactly what interest-based liberal accounts of the case are doing.

### *Interests*

According to the interest-based account Gorbachev had considerable freedom in accepting German unification and her membership in NATO. The clue to the change was that Gorbachev defined Soviet interests in an absolute manner, not in

<sup>36</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, 'The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War and the Failure of Realism', *International Organization*, 48:2 (1994), pp. 249–77.

<sup>37</sup> Helmut Kohl, *Ich wollte Deutschlands Einheit* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1996), p. 254.

relation to the Western states. What changed was the definition of the interests: 'Economic reform and development rose in the hierarchy of Soviet national security interests'.<sup>38</sup> This change was caused more by domestic political shifts in leadership and learning processes than changing power relations and external constraints. Earlier, because of the communist ideology, the leaders of the Soviet Union felt a Western threat and stressed the necessity of confrontation. These parameters changed radically along with the 'new thinking'. First of all, the leaders of the Soviet Union realised that they did not have to fear war from the side of the West. They believed that security of the Soviet state was already guaranteed by nuclear weapons and that the West was cooperative rather than hostile in its basic nature. Therefore, there was no reason to keep a large number of troops in Eastern Europe. It was not only unnecessary in terms of security reasoning, it was also costly for the Soviet economy.<sup>39</sup>

In line with this thinking, even unification of Germany or its inclusion into NATO was not a problem to the Soviet Union. On the contrary, a unified Germany was seen as the closest partner in the common European home, and it was Germany in particular which was regarded as being able to help the Soviet Union in its economic problems. German economic aid and especially promises of future aid were important for the Soviet Union whose economy needed modernisation. In other words, the Soviet Union regarded Germany as a partner in the new Europe. Moreover, the changes in NATO made it possible to see that a unified Germany participating in a transforming NATO—which was, after all, compatible with the CSCE principles—would reflect Soviet interests.<sup>40</sup>

Alternatively, one may propose, as the critics of Gorbachev have done, that it was the relative inexperience of the Soviet leaders that led to the acceptance of German membership in NATO. It was not learning, but 'lack of knowledge' which led to an outcome that was, correspondingly, not favourable but unfavourable to the Soviet Union. As Anatoly Dobrynin has argued,

In exchange for the generous Soviet concessions Gorbachev and his devoted lieutenant Shevardnadze offered the West, they could and should have obtained a more important role for the Soviet Union in European security and a stronger Soviet voice in European affairs. But they did not. Able but inexperienced, impatient to reach agreement, but excessively self-assured and flattered by the Western media, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze were often outwitted and outplayed by their Western partners. On occasion they went farther than necessary in concessions in agreements on arms control, Eastern Europe, German unification,

<sup>38</sup> Celeste A. Wallander and Jane E. Prokop, 'Soviet Security Strategies toward Europe: After the Wall with Their Backs up against It' in Robert O. Keohane, Joseph Nye and Stanley Hoffmann (eds.), *After the Cold War. International Institutions and State Strategies in Europe, 1989–1991* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> Michael McCgwire, *Perestroika and Soviet National Security* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1991), pp. 357–63.

<sup>40</sup> One may also support the view that Gorbachev's deal reflected Soviet interests from a realist perspective. In this variant of the story, the emphasis is laid on the Soviet–German treaty in general and its Article 3 in particular, in which Germany pledges not to support any offensive against the Soviet Union. This Article, although it was paid a lot of attention at the time because it raised the fears that Germany had made a kind of 'neutrality pact' with the Soviet Union, has had very little direct significance since then. For reasons which merit a study of its own, it has also had very little visibility in retrospective accounts and memoirs of the process. From the realist perspective one may, however, point out as one of the consequences of the pact that Germany was very reluctant to condemn the war in Chechnia.

and the Persian Gulf crisis and they continued doing so right up to the breakup of the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, neither does this account tell us why Gorbachev and Shevardnadze stood firm in the Kurile Islands issue, unless one explains why the flattery of the Western and not Japanese media was the key to the solution.

On the surface, the interest-based theory has some problems in explaining the Japanese case, since the rational value of the islands—whether strategic or economic—was not particularly great. In terms of strategic and economic thinking, if the Soviets found it rational to retreat from East Germany, it would have been equally logical to retreat from the Kurile Islands. Furthermore, the Japanese economic potential and her offers of aid even exceeded the German ones. There was, however, some doubt about the credibility of Japanese offers. Indeed, some observers have suspected that Gorbachev might have been willing to cede the islands, if he had been sure of receiving some tangible investment in return.

Moreover, the reluctance to return the islands can be explained by pointing out that the time factor in each case was different. According to this view, German unification was possible because of Gorbachev's enforced position as the leader of the Soviet Union. In 1990 he was at the zenith of his power. If Gorbachev had been as strong at home in April 1991 as he was one year earlier, the argument goes, he could and perhaps would have attempted to persuade the Soviet people that it was absolutely necessary to make diplomatic concessions to Japan on the islands issue.<sup>42</sup> One might even contend that Soviet inflexibility in the Northern Territories dispute compensated for the concessions made in the process of German unification.<sup>43</sup>

Alex Pravda and Neil Malcolm have summarised the reasons in the following way:

In the case of Kuriles—the uncertainty of the financial gains flowing from major concessions and the fragile position of the Japanese government reduced the advantages of an early deal. Weighed against such uncertain benefits, the domestic costs of a settlement appeared to be considerable, given the strength of public as well as elite feelings against any concessions.<sup>44</sup>

The changing domestic context applies to Yeltsin's view of the dispute as well. Yeltsin had also initially announced his readiness to discuss the cession of the disputed islands against Japanese aid. His attitude changed when he realised that he needed support from the conservative camp and that a tight position in the Kurile Islands issue was a way to stress national unity and strengthen his position as the leader of Russia. At the same time, there was a growing recognition that promises of Western aid were not being translated into hard cash.

Again, there is a lot of evidence to support the liberal interpretation of the two cases, according to which Soviet acceptance of German unification and her NATO membership was based on a deliberate redefinition of Soviet interests. By contrast,

<sup>41</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence. Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962–1986)* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p. 627.

<sup>42</sup> Kimura, 'Gorbachev's Japan Policy', p. 815.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Tsyioshi Hasegawa, 'Continuing Stalemate', in James Goodby, Vladimir Ivanov and Nobuo Shimotamai, *Northern Territories' and Beyond. Russian, Japanese and American Perspectives* (Westport: Praeger, 1995), p. 104.

<sup>44</sup> Alex Pravda and Neil Malcolm, 'Conclusion', in Alex Pravda, Neil Malcolm, Roy Allison and Margot Light, *Internal Factors in Russian Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 303.

contextual factors in the Japanese case did not allow for such a reinterpretation. Looking at German unification in terms of its benefits was exactly the idea that was advocated by Vyacheslav Dachev, who presented his views to the Soviet leadership.<sup>45</sup> According to him, a continuing division of Germany was detrimental to Soviet interests, and in conflict with the idea of a common European home. From this perspective, the Soviet Union did really not make any concessions. As Anatoly Chernyayev, Gorbachev's advisor, has argued,

I have to say to you that the word concessions is here inaccurate. It was the understandable, inevitable consequence of the logic of foreign policy which had an inherent relationship with perestroika.<sup>46</sup>

This means, however, that interests are interpreted more from the normative point of view than on the basis of security or economic benefits. Although Gorbachev and Shevardnadze also defended several times the agreement with Germany saying that it reflected the 'balance of interests', they had difficulties in spelling out how Soviet interests were served as a result of the outcome.<sup>47</sup> Gorbachev could not persuade the conservatives about the benefits of German unification as he defined the interests of the Soviet Union within a different moral framework. Pavel Palazchenko, Gorbachev's interpreter, has argued:

I believe that what finally persuaded Gorbachev and his associates that German unification had to be accepted was not only their awareness that it would be enormously risky to try to stop it by political or military intimidation, but also their sense of fairness. Someone once said that in any situation the most important was the moral issue involved. And the moral issue was simple: Should a nation be kept from uniting? Should this be a goal of our policy? Should we base our security on the division of Germany?<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, one may end up with an almost idealist depiction of what the Soviet interests in the issue were. As Shevardnadze answered to the question of what German unification meant to him:

To me, this date meant the victory of justice in the politics between great powers, in other words, the moral principles had won and that was why I consider it also as my personal fortune.<sup>49</sup>

There are, however, also problems with this interest-based account. Even if one would subscribe to the view that the Soviet Union aimed at justice, it remains an open question why the Soviets followed the principles of justice in the German case but not in the Japanese case. If the aim of the Soviet leaders was to follow justice, time factors and domestic political pressures should not be considered as crucial. Maybe a better way to put this is to say that the Soviet leaders defined 'justice' in a different way in the Kurile Islands case. This is where the constructivist explanation enters the picture.

<sup>45</sup> But when first formulating the idea, even he was clearly against the NATO membership of unified Germany. See Wjatscheslaw Daschtschew, 'Aus den Anfängen der Revision der sowjetischen Deutschlandpolitik. Ein Dokument zur Deutschen Frage aus dem Jahre 1987', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 8 (April 1994), pp. 36–46.

<sup>46</sup> Kuhn, *Gorbatschow und die deutsche Einheit*, p. 152 [translation mine].

<sup>47</sup> Pawlow, *Die deutsche Vereinigung*, p. 234.

<sup>48</sup> Pavel Palazchenko, *Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 172.

<sup>49</sup> Kuhn, *Gorbatschow und die deutsche Einheit*, p. 173 [translation mine].

*Trust*

Roughly speaking, if realist explanations pay attention to external factors, and liberal to the internal, constructivist explanations of the end of the Cold War focus on the processes of interaction. Particularly, they stress the independent role of shared ideas and identities that shaped the interests of the key actors and their understanding of the ongoing political change. According to the constructivist explanation, the Soviet acceptance of German unification and her membership in NATO was not predetermined on the basis of power relations, nor was it a logical consequence of the rational calculation of the Soviet interests; rather it resulted from the fundamental redefinition of the Soviet identity in relation to Germany. The point of constructivists is that the Soviet understanding of their security needs changed due to an interactive process in which the role of ideas—knowledge, values and strategic concepts—was central.<sup>50</sup>

The focus on interaction is crucial, since changes in the Soviet identity which culminated in the adoption of ‘new thinking’ do not yet tell us why Soviet responses to the two cases were different. Why did the Soviet identity change vis-à-vis Germany, but not vis-à-vis Japan? The idea of an identity change as an explanation of ‘new thinking’ in Soviet foreign policy may have similar problems as power political and interest-based explanations. On the other hand, without bringing in the ‘interactive process’ the transformation of the 1980s makes little sense. As Greenstein has argued ‘the great bulk of change consisted of transformations in mind-sets, perceptions and expectations. Where suspicion and animosity had been, guarded trust and goodwill came to be.’<sup>51</sup>

The development of trust in East-West relations was gradual. During the Cold War, the relationship between West Germany and the Soviet Union was characterised by mistrust. The lack of trust inhibited German unification in the 1950s and was manifest in many crises. The level of trust enhanced when Germany started the new *Ostpolitik*. As Zelikow and Rice noted, years of West German cooperation in the post-war period clearly softened Soviet attitudes about the FRG and built up ‘a reservoir of trust’. At least some Soviet officials were ready to regard the Federal Republic as a state and the Germans as a new nation which had genuinely broken with the past.<sup>52</sup>

It was, however, only in the late 1980s when the barriers in German–Soviet relations were overcome. As leaders of their states, Gorbachev and Kohl were the key players who mediated the trust between the two states or ‘nations’. During the first years in his office Gorbachev still held suspicions of the West German government because Kohl had supported the SDI program. Moreover, Kohl’s remarks on Gorbachev in 1986 that likened him to Goebbels kept the personal relations complicated for a long time. Their mutual relationship became cordial only at the eve of the opening of the Berlin wall. It was especially the meeting in Bonn in the summer

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Risse-Kappen ‘Ideas Do Not Float Freely’, in Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds.), *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 188.

<sup>51</sup> Fred Greenstein, ‘Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War’, in William Wohlforth (ed.), *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 207.

<sup>52</sup> See Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*.

of 1989 that provided the basis for shared understanding and trust between the two men. At the end, Gorbachev trusted that the German leaders were not going to misuse his initiatives, and the German leaders trusted that Gorbachev was sincere in his attempts to end the Cold War. The emergent trust allowed for the Soviet Union to adopt cooperatively oriented views of power, and commit itself to norms which downplayed the role of military power in international relations.

The negotiation process between the Soviet Union and West Germany started informally by developing the sense of mutual trust, probing ideas of cooperation and investigating the sincerity of the other. The Soviets tested their views of German reliability several times before the opening of the wall. They also consulted third parties. For example, in the autumn of 1989 Shevardnadze drew Baker's attention to Kohl's speech at the CDU party conference, saying that he found Kohl's remarks 'very similar to statements made by German leaders in the 1930s' and added that 'it is to be deplored that fifty years after World War II some politicians have begun to forget its lessons'.<sup>53</sup> Gorbachev expressed similar worries when meeting Bush at Malta. According to Zelikow and Rice, Americans were able to assure the Soviet leaders that the Germans were reliable.

More importantly, Gorbachev also tested directly Kohl's willingness to help the Soviet Union. During his visit to Germany in June 1989, he asked Kohl whether he was ready to support the reform process. As Kohl recalls, this understanding was decisive for the process that began half a year later.<sup>54</sup> Through these discussions Gorbachev was able to be assured that requests of assistance were not seen as signs of Soviet weakness. German preparedness to help the Soviet Union was proved several times after the Berlin wall was opened. Kohl decided to deliver food aid, organised a state guaranteed loan for the Soviet Union and actively supported increases in economic assistance to the Soviet Union when meeting EU and G7 leaders in the summer. That all this happened very quickly strengthened Gorbachev's belief that Germany was *really* willing to be a partner. The case was different with Japan. Although the Soviet officials were reluctant to make direct appeals to Japan for aid, the personnel of the Soviet embassy in Tokyo gave indirect hints of the need to meet such help. But Japanese responses were far from the ideas of partnership for which Gorbachev was hoping.

The common understanding and trust between Gorbachev and Kohl was created communicatively. As Anatoly Chernyayev saw the relationship between Kohl and Gorbachev:

If they had not had a common language, had not understood each other from the beginning, not trusted each other and been frank together, then unification would have had entirely different consequences.<sup>55</sup>

Gorbachev further emphasised the importance of understanding and trust:

I believed that in the new emerging international climate, personal 'compatibility' and understanding of your partner's motives would become increasingly important in world politics. We could achieve such understanding only if we worked together, maintaining regular contacts and mutually comparing each other's words and deeds. Many difficult issues

<sup>53</sup> Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, p. 72.

<sup>54</sup> Kuhn, *Gorbatschow und die deutsche Einheit*, p. 34.

<sup>55</sup> Kuhn, *Gorbatschow und die deutsche Einheit*, p. 8 [translation mine].

are far more easily and quickly resolved if there is trust between political leaders, without unnecessary diplomatic moves and formalities.<sup>56</sup>

This common understanding and trust did not, however, start from the beginning. Only several meetings, discussions, promises and commonly made plans for the future Europe created an atmosphere of trust. Gorbachev recalled that they had

three meetings, three one-to-one talks with the Chancellor, direct, serious, trustworthy. We did not negotiate as partners but as people who trusted each other. All this enabled us to achieve a high degree of mutual understanding in all fields of politics.<sup>57</sup>

Respectively, Kohl, too, felt that it was much easier for Gorbachev to make the decision on German unification as there was mutual trust. In Kohl's view, trust consolidated when he had a chance to fulfill promises he had given to Gorbachev before the fall of the Berlin Wall about economic and other assistance to Gorbachev in his attempts to modernise the Soviet Union.<sup>58</sup>

What also shows the importance of the communicative action—achievement of shared understandings and fulfilment of promises—in trust building was that Gorbachev was unusually angry when the Germans did not inform him about their moves. Kohl's ten point plan was one example of such a manoeuvre, and what irritated Gorbachev was obviously more the unilateral form than the actual content of that particular statement. When Gorbachev for the first time met Genscher after Kohl's speech he was furious:

[Gorbachev stormed:] 'One should say that this is an ultimatum, a "diktat"'. The move had been an absolute surprise to Gorbachev, who thought that he and the Chancellor had reached an understanding in their phone conversation on November 11. 'And after that such a move!'<sup>59</sup>

The best example of Gorbachev's commitment to his basic principles and ideals of what a common European home would be like was the very moment when he accepted Germany's membership in NATO. This happened when Bush asked Gorbachev whether it was the case that a unified Germany had the sovereign right to choose her alliances. When Gorbachev surprisingly agreed, there was no supplementary pressure—promises or threats—that should have changed his mind. According to Chernayev, Gorbachev's affirmative comments were spontaneous. In other words, it was not only that Gorbachev was precommitted to certain norms, which he then only followed, but he had to decide which were rationally the best norms, not instrumentally but consistent with his larger ideals. Gorbachev noticed that he could not convince European states that changes in German NATO membership would improve European security. Against this background, it is not inappropriate to suggest that Gorbachev agreed, because he simply thought that Bush's argument, after all, was better than his. As Zelikow and Rice have noted,

Gorbachev's and Shevardnadze's behavior at the meeting seemed and still seems quite unusual. It is actually very rare in diplomacy to change one's mind right at the table.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (London: Doubleday, 1996), p. 519.

<sup>57</sup> Kuhn, *Gorbatschow und die deutsche Einheit*, p. 35 [translation mine].

<sup>58</sup> Kohl, *Ich wollte Deutschlands Einheit*, p. 280.

<sup>59</sup> Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified, Europe Transformed*, p. 136.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279; see also Thomas Risse, 'The Cold War's Endgame and German Unification', *International Security*, 21:4 (1997), pp. 159–185.

According to Zelikow and Rice, Gorbachev violated the established practices of diplomatic conduct by allowing himself to be persuaded without pressure. Indeed, the harsh criticism of those diplomats and party officials who thought that Gorbachev and Shevardnadze were amateurs in the field of foreign policy, who did not know the rules of diplomacy but acted in person, underscores that the change was more to do with practices than core interests themselves.

Thus, according to this explanation of trust, much more than an adjustment of power relations or a rational calculation of costs and benefits was going on. It was the interactionist process which influenced Soviet action. As Janice Gross Stein has argued, 'the evidence suggests that Gorbachev did not learn in an orderly linear fashion or through deductive reasoning. Rather, the development and articulation of Gorbachev's 'new thinking' imply a complex interactive relationship between political learning and action that provided quick feedback'.<sup>61</sup> Against this background it becomes more understandable that Gorbachev's experiences in relations with Germany and Japan could push him in divergent directions. In other words, the Soviet acceptance of German unification and its membership in NATO was not caused by power relations, nor reflected a rational redefinition of Soviet interests, but was a result of a search for trust and shared understandings. This was not a process in which the outcome was predetermined, but as Gorbachev argued, the way to partnership and friendship was very complicated.<sup>62</sup>

Gorbachev's political moves were thus tied to his understanding of how international politics should ideally be made, but he needed feedback to strengthen the idea that that goal was achievable. The German–Soviet relationship was forward looking, and open to changes in terms of identities. German NATO membership became acceptable for Gorbachev as a step towards a 'common European home' in which the freedom of nations was one of the corner stones. Respectively, the Japanese defined the relationship on the basis of the past, which pushed the Soviets to dig deeper into those identities which legitimated the ownership of the islands in the first place. When thinking in terms of history, the Soviets were not able to change their view of Japan that was based on suspicion and hostility. Japanese policy that insisted on the return of the islands was also contrary to Gorbachev's beliefs that borders should become less important.

In relations between Japan and Russia, there was a historical and cultural gap in understanding. 'If we were to try to establish a general theme of the history of Russian/Soviet–Japanese relations', in words of Robertson, 'it would on balance have to be one of distrust and fear'.<sup>63</sup> Japan remained distant and strange to Russia: 'to the Soviets the Japanese [were] still very much an alien race with which they have had comparatively little contact and correspondingly little substantial experience'.<sup>64</sup> Even in Asia, Russia preferred China to Japan.<sup>65</sup> The cultural distance between Russians and Japanese was according to Sarkisov 'a product of their past negative

<sup>61</sup> Janice Gross Stein, 'Political Learning by Doing. Gorbachev as Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner', in New Lebow and Risse-Kappen, *IR Theory and the End of the Cold War*, p. 242.

<sup>62</sup> Kuhn, *Gorbatschow und die deutsche Einheit*, p. 35.

<sup>63</sup> Myles Robertson, *Soviet Policy Towards Japan. An Analysis of Trends in the 1970s and 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 143.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Blank, 'We Can Live Without You: Rivalry and Dialogue in Russo-Japanese Relations', *Comparative Strategy*, 12:2 (1993), pp. 173–98, esp. pp. 175–6.

relations and the lack of real contacts between the two countries and the two peoples'.<sup>66</sup> As a consequence of these perceived differences, the Soviet Union/Russia did not value relations with Japan as much as those with Germany.

The Japanese, in turn, required from the Russians a prior commitment to the return of the islands before the discussion of mutual future cooperation could really begin. In the Japanese view, such a decision would have established a relationship of trust. In Hiroshi Kimura's words,

Russia, as a military power, must show Japan that it is a neighbor worthy of Japan's trust. The four islands might be returned as a gesture of proof or goodwill or as a gift to establish relations of friendship and cooperation between neighbors. This may sound like an extremely selfish proposal. However, it may well take such a dramatic gesture to erase the mistrust of Soviets and Russians that has festered so long in Japan.<sup>67</sup>

To conclude, the determination that helped Germany to achieve its objectives did not work in the Japanese case. On the contrary, the Russians were irritated by the rigidity of the Japanese position. As Tsuyoshi Hasegawa has argued, 'the irony of the Northern Territories issue from the Japanese perspective lies in the fact that the more this issue has become known by the Russians and the more the Japanese government has propagated the position, the more hostile Russian public opinion has become toward Japan'.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusions

The different outcomes of the German Soviet and and Japanese Soviet relations at the end of the Cold War provide a puzzle for explanatory theories of international relations. I have outlined three possible explanations for Gorbachev's choices: a realist explanation according to which the difference in success can be explained by power relations. Germany succeeded simply because it had more power than Japan. Then, there is a liberal explanation which argues that the Soviet Union redefined her self-interest. German unification simply matched with those interests whereas the return of the Kurile Islands did not. Finally, I put forward a constructivist explanation that is based on the view that the difference in the outcome had to do with changes of identity. According to this view, different strategic processes that contributed to the development of trust between the Soviet Union and Germany on the one hand, and Japan on the other, led to different outcomes.

I have claimed that accounts that are based on trust and mistrust point to a central difference that can explain the divergent outcomes of the cases and that the development of trust cannot be directly reduced to other factors. It is evident that

<sup>66</sup> See Konstantin Sarkisov, 'Overcoming the Psychological Impasse', in James Goodby, Vladimir Ivanov and Nobuo Shimotamai (eds.), *'Northern Territories' and Beyond. Russian, Japanese and American Perspectives* (Westport: Praeger, 1995).

<sup>67</sup> Hiroshi Kimura, 'Japanese Perceptions on Russia', in James E. Goodby, Vladimir Ivanov and Nobuo Shimotamai (eds.), *'Northern Territories' and Beyond. Russian, Japanese and American Perspectives* (Westport: Praeger, 1995).

<sup>68</sup> Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, 'Conclusion: Russo-Japanese Relations in the New Environment—Implications for the Continuing Stalemate', in Hasegawa, Haslam and Kuchins, *Russia and Japan*, p. 448.

Soviet weakness and 'the new thinking' were part of the process that contributed to trust building. Yet, without focusing on trust building that included various elements of diplomatic interaction, the reasons why the Cold War ended cannot be fully grasped.