Security dilemmas and the end of the Cold War

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Alan Collins is to be congratulated for highlighting the role Gorbachev’s strategy of Graduated Reciprocation in Tension Reduction (GRIT) played in ending the military conflict between East and West.1 By offering an alternative view to the conservative opinion that America’s material strength forced the Soviets into submission, it suggests that statesmen caught in security dilemmas have real options and are not simply forced to compete for power. As a policy that fostered transparency which assisted the creation of security regimes2, GRIT undoubtedly played a role in the way the military conflict ended. Yet the Cold War was not simply about the military balance. Collins’ account of this period is restricted by his bias towards state-centric and rationalist explanations of state behaviour. He underestimates the role ideology played in ending the Cold War and as such only offers half a Cold War story. The influence of the US during this period, as a cautious agent of liberal individualism, is completely ignored, yet, as this reply demonstrates, it is crucial to understanding the way the US reciprocated Soviet policies. Moreover, if ‘debate over what the Cold War was is part of the politics of deciding what the post-Cold War is’, the significance of this criticism is not merely academic.3 The implication of Collins’ unwritten assumption that state’s identities are egoistic is that a security community based on a common identity is impossible.4 The lesson that the Cold War, as opposed to the military conflict, only ended when a common identity based on liberal individualism was instituted, suggests that a transatlantic security community including Russia was and still is a possibility.

This reply will focus on two main points. While it was clearly Gorbachev’s intention to reduce tensions, Collins underestimates the difficulties he faced in translating that aim into policy. The ideas Gorbachev articulated, such as ‘reasonable sufficiency’ and ‘defensive defence’, did not, to use Risse-Kappen’s term, ‘float freely’ through the Soviet policymaking community.5 Soviet policy became increasingly radical not because of a graduated strategy, but because it took time for conservatives to accept radical ideas. The fate of those ideas partially explains the way the

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US responded to Gorbachev. Until a consensus of US opinion saw Gorbachev, the agent of radical ideas, as politically secure and in complete control, the US administration was reluctant to reciprocate concessions.

This leads to the second and perhaps more fundamental point. The Reagan and Bush administrations failed, as Collins suggests, to positively reciprocate Gorbachev’s concessions. Yet this was not because ‘common security was an unfamiliar concept’ to the US, but because it had a more demanding definition of common security. American policy was built on a coalition of Realists and Liberals within the policymaking community. As a result it sought not only to stabilise the military balance in its favour, but also to force a change in Soviet identity as well as in its behaviour. In this sense, the Soviets could disarm all they liked but the US administration would never be in a political position to fully reciprocate those military concessions until it, Congress and the American public were certain the Soviets shared their liberal identity. That is Americans needed to be sure that the Soviets had changed in ways that ensured the worthwhile and enduring peace that they believed existed between liberal democracies.

Collins’ desire to identify GRIT’s role in ending the military conflict has led him to overlook these points. For the GRIT approach is motivated by the claim that actors in a prisoner’s dilemma can reach a mutually satisfactory outcome through iterated practices which are eventually reciprocated. This reply will demonstrate, however, that the end of the Cold War was not about reaching a mutually satisfactory outcome. The end of the Cold War required a fundamental change in the identity of one superpower and in this sense the GRIT approach had less of an influence than Collins argues.

Definition of a security dilemma

The assumptions Collins makes not only leads him to an incomplete analysis of the end of the Cold War, but also an unsustainable definition of a security dilemma. He tells us that GRIT was an appropriate strategy for Gorbachev to adopt because ‘neither superpower intended any harm to the other; they just perceived the opposite to be true.’ This ‘illusory incompatibility’ is used by Collins elsewhere as criteria for a situation to be called a security dilemma. Yet there are epistemological problems inherent in this definition. Both at the level of policymakers facing a potential enemy and analysts taking a retrospective view, there is a constant uncertainty of knowing that perceptions and reactions are correct. The latter case is reflected in historiographical debate, while the former is reflected in the political debate between advocates of competing intelligence analyses and policy recommendations. Had the ‘illusory incompatibility’ thesis been suggested to Margaret Thatcher and others with the same preconceptions, for instance, it would undoubtedly have been dismissed as advocating appeasement regardless of its claim to objectivity.

6 Collins ‘GRIT’, p. 213.
7 Collins ‘GRIT’, p. 201.
The point is that a number of perceptions and recommendations—each informed by the preconception of their bureaucratic, political, social and moral position—compete with each other to influence policy decisions. The uncertainty of the government, whose task it is to make those decisions, is represented by this political battle. This uncertainty and not ‘illusory incompatibility’ is the only epistemologically valid way of identifying a dilemma.

**A US–Soviet security dilemma?**

When states, according to Collins, realise that ‘their fear of one another was based on a false premise’ they would do well to practice the GRIT approach. That is, ‘conciliatory policies would be able to reduce the suspicion and tension which marred their relationship . . . These conciliatory policies are pursued through the implementation of unilateral initiatives which depend on reciprocation for success.’

The difficulty, as Collins points out, is that one side can never be certain that the unilateral initiatives of the other have benign or malign intent. This uncertainty, Collins suggests, was an obstacle to the US reciprocating Gorbachev’s concessions.

While there were voices in the US arguing that Gorbachev’s ‘new thinking’ was part of a Soviet deception, they were marginal. US–Soviet diplomacy during the end of the Cold War clearly demonstrates that the US failed to reciprocate Gorbachev’s unilateral gestures, not because it was uncertain of his goals but because it was uncertain of his political position and ability to implement those goals. Moreover, the US could not answer this question because Gorbachev himself could not. In this sense Collins’ claim that Gorbachev followed a strategy of unilateral concessions, cleverly calculated to induce reciprocation is inaccurate. Gorbachev stumbled between foreign policy initiatives only making concessions when it was domestically feasible to do so. For instance, Collins suggests that the unilateral conventional withdrawals were part of a gradualist strategy. The evidence suggests that such concessions had to wait for the long drawn out process of reformulating military doctrine to be concluded before they could be implemented with the blessing of the military.

The point is that Collins’ depiction of the process of how the Cold War ended is far too rationalist and statist. He misses the important insights that the literature on transnational coalitions offers. This literature has made clear that ideas can be held in common by similar factions across states if not by the states themselves. These coalitions then seek to assist each other in their respective domestic battles to attain control of policy. What is less evident is the inadvertent nature of some of these coalitions. For instance, the Soviet hardline drew political strength from US state-

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9 Collins, ‘GRIT’, p. 201.
ments that were meant to deter attack. In turn a Soviet policy that followed hardline recommendations suited the interests of the American right-wing as it could then point to Soviet hardline activity to increase US defence budgets.

More importantly the Realist-Liberal coalition that combined power-politics with a fervent ideological drive to promote its version of democracy would always regard the Soviet Union as an enemy so long as it was communist. Indeed President Reagan urged the American public to dismiss ‘the doctrine of moral equivalence’ that illusory incompatibility may have implied. Secretary of Defense Weinberger stated clearly his belief ‘that religion and morality call us to recognise that injustice is an offence against peace even when there is no war’. Thus when Collins equates the end of the Cold War with arms control and a reduction in interstate tension, essentially overcoming ‘illusory incompatibility’, he misses another crucial point. The identity of the states involved and their respective treatment of their citizens made their incompatibility real (in the sense that these values were considered absolute by their respective cultures) and not illusory. ‘[It is] impossible’ President Reagan stated, ‘to have a constructive relationship with a government that tramples upon the rights of its people’.

The extent to which democratisation was linked to arms control concessions was of course a matter of dispute between the two sides of the Realist and Liberal coalition. While George Shultz, followed by his successor at the State Department James Baker, fought hard to delink the four issue areas of arms control, regional conflicts, trade and human rights, they and others recognised that the identity and political system of their own state would inevitably mean they had to be treated as a whole. This was the political reality that US policy-makers worked within and as such would not be able to reciprocate Gorbachev’s co-operative gestures until perestroika and glasnost were accompanied by democratization. In this sense ‘common security’ was not an ‘unfamiliar concept’ to Americans. They simply saw it in terms of a common political identity rather than radical disarmament.

Collins’ analysis of the conventional arms control negotiations is again instructive. He suggests that Bush’s May 1989 initiative represented an effort to construct a security regime which reduced the fear of a surprise attack and the tragic implications of any misperception caused by that fear. The initial US approach was limited to such motives. In March 1989 for example Secretary Baker stated that the US approach ‘focuses on the achievement of a significant reduction in key military capabilities that are designed for invasion . . . [and] is prepared to introduce new confidence building measures in the near future, aimed at increasing transparency and reducing the possibility of surprise attack’. Yet by May, and clearly by January 1990 when the US tabled a more radical cut, the US was motivated by a more ambitious agenda. As the democratic revolutions swept through Eastern Europe the opinion emerged that reformers would be encouraged if they could witness the peaceful removal of Soviet troops from their countries. Thus Baker would tell

Congress in June 1989 that US arms control policy was designed to ‘help free the political reform process in Eastern Europe from the heavy weight of an excessive Soviet military presence. While we tend to see the Soviet forces as a potential invasion force, to millions in the East, the Soviets remain an occupation force’.18

The point is that the Liberal ideology in America’s security discourse influenced how the US approached the end of the Cold War. This is not to say Realism was not a factor motivating US policy. The asymmetry of an additional 30,000 US troops above the 195,000 Soviet troop ceiling, a condition which jeopardised agreement and with it the Liberal strategy, was demanded by Realists who considered it essential to make up for the logistical difficulties of defending Europe from the other side of the Atlantic.19 This was the price Liberals had to pay to see their strategy become policy with the necessary support of the Realists.

Collins is correct to suggest the 1989 political revolutions could not have happened without Gorbachev’s renunciation of the Brezhnev doctrine, but he underestimates the US role by suggesting it was limited to negative reciprocation, that is not seeking advantage of Soviet concessions.20 The Realist-Liberal coalition in the US made sure that the events set in motion by Gorbachev were guided in the direction of democracy, self determination and US interests. It was this approach, for example, that made sure Germany was reunified and NATO strengthened in the process.21

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that as a conceptual piece of work GRIT, Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War suffers from epistemological flaws. Moreover, as a diplomatic history it overlooks important evidence.22 Yet this reply has focused on the assumptions that underpin Collins’ analysis for two reasons: firstly it is likely that those assumptions would have limited the conclusions of a more extensive empirical analysis. Secondly, interpreting the end of the Cold War is, as was pointed out at the start of this reply, more than an academic exercise. A limited analysis of the past restricts support for possible futures by denying their advocates the historical lessons they need. It is important that the political project of constructing future security communities is not obstructed by the limited academic frameworks used by Collins.

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20 Collins ‘GRIT’, pp. 212–9.