

*Navigating Chaos: Leaders, Choices and Outcomes in a Complex World*

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**Conceptualising leadership is a difficult task for IR theories that assume linear causality. Such approaches either relegate leaders to the role of passive, executional intermediaries in the cause-effect chain, or treat agents as an ‘error term’ of sorts who introduce a degree of contingency or irrationality into an explanatory model. Conversely, an exaggerated focus on leaders as linchpins of change is the stuff of historical biography rather than theory. Complexity theory allows for a different take on leadership. I analyse the role of leaders as choice-producing units in a complex adaptive system. Leaders are part of a range of dynamically interacting elements in the chaos of international politics, whose key properties are self-reflection and decision-making. I employ counterfactuals to map out the scope of leadership: by looking at how alternative decisions would have affected US-Soviet relations, I try to demonstrate how leaders both shape and are shaped by the international system. This offers a richer perspective of leadership with the potential for greater policy relevance than existing conceptualisations.**

Structural analyses of the end of the Cold War in International Relations (IR) struggle to meaningfully account for the influence of agency and contingency on the world. The concepts of idiosyncrasy and chance are hard to integrate into arguments that focus on the systemic drivers of world politics, such as the balance of power. This makes it difficult to study policy-making and its impact on the end of the Cold War in IR. An alternative is to analyse the international system as a complex adaptive system, and treat leaders as choice-producing units therein. Leaders make up one class of variables in the array of dynamically interacting elements that constitute the web of international politics. What sets leaders apart are their two essential functional properties: namely, self-reflection (as human beings) and decision-making (as leaders). Politicians make choices, and their decisions are one of many critical nodes that permeate the system of international politics. As it happens, when leaders make a policy choice they provide a 'natural' counterfactual in the form of the alternative decisions considered but not taken. By looking at how alternative decisions by leaders in the 1980s could have affected US-Soviet relations, I try to demonstrate how agency shapes the international system. This offers a richer perspective of leadership with the potential for greater policy relevance than existing conceptualisations: decision-focused counterfactuals shed light on the role that policymakers play in the complex maelstrom of international politics. Probing

how alternative decisions would have affected outcomes helps study the extent of and limits to the influence that leaders have on international relations.

My argument is that choice-driven counterfactuals can track how specific policy decisions can infuse complex systems. I use the reference point of 'leaders' choices' as an analytical opening to clarify the role of agency in the international system, not to argue that agency should be prioritised over other causal factors. My analysis aspires to provide an improved understanding of interactive effects: between leaders, policy choices and outcomes; between leaders and their own staff; between leaders and other leaders; and, most importantly, between decisions taken by leaders and wider developments in the international political system.

In the following I look at various structural realist takes on the end of the Cold War and point out how their inability to integrate choice and leadership limits their explanatory power. I then introduce the outlines of complexity theory and offer an analytical description of the role of leaders therein, arguing that counterfactual analyses of given decisions can clarify the consequences of particular acts of agency. Lastly, I seek to demonstrate the role of leaders in a complex system by looking at two key decisions that, had they been taken differently, would likely have radically changed key outcomes in the 1980s: the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in December 1979, and Ronald Reagan's decision to follow a course of sustained diplomatic engagement with the Soviet Union advocated by Secretary of State George Shultz in the first half of 1983. By studying the implications of a clearly specified alternative in each case – not to invade Afghanistan in the first, and a continued policy of deliberate non-cooperation in the second – I try to show how leaders' decisions can have decisive consequences in international affairs.

The point of this paper is to demonstrate how certain counterfactuals, in conjunction with complexity theory, illustrate the causal interaction between leaders, policy choices and system-wide dynamics. This sheds light on some of the deeper operational channels in international politics that more system-oriented analyses may miss.

In accounting for the end of the Cold War, structural realists are broadly united around assigning causal primacy to systemic material dynamics. The distribution of material resources in international politics is the central driver of such analyses of the foreign policies pursued by states and their leaders: the Cold War ended because the balance of power in the system shifted markedly towards the United States and its allies. Brooks and Wohlforth, for instance, argue that changes in ideas and policies in the 1980s were "endogenous to these changing material incentives; that is, their effects are largely a reflection of a changing material environment."<sup>1</sup> More specifically, Wohlforth sees the relative economic decline of the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies as the basis for the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, 'Power, Globalization and the End of the Cold War', in Goertz & Levy,

Cold War.<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, the Soviet economy was marred by economic crisis, experiencing a recession from 1980 to 1982, declining oil revenue as a result of a slump in world oil prices from 1985 onwards, growth rates that lagged behind their US counterparts by at least one percent per annum and had done so since 1975, and a defence budget that approached 20% of GDP by the time Gorbachev assumed office.<sup>3</sup> The argument goes that the Soviet leadership simply lacked the material means to maintain the Cold War status quo and faced complete economic collapse unless it took steps to end its on-going confrontational relationship with the United States.

Such reasoning rests on the assumption that the material balance of power determines outcomes in foreign policy: “the end of the Cold War was caused by the relative decline in Soviet power.”<sup>4</sup> Agency is not denied outright; realists like Davis and Wohlforth recognise that ultimately, leaders choose foreign strategies.<sup>5</sup> Wohlforth makes it clear that “decision-makers’ assessments of power are what matters” and “rational decision-makers may revise assessments of capabilities dramatically and suddenly when confronted with new information.”<sup>6</sup> Structural developments are translated via governmental officials into actual policy. Individuals thus aren’t irrelevant to the realist explanatory framework, but insofar as they play a role, they are pawns in a wider material game directed by the balance of power. Rational leaders respond to the incentives provided by objective material facts: Gorbachev “could not have been a reform leader ... unless he could point to undeniable material trends” to explain his change in foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> Gorbachev was responsible for dramatic policy changes such as his surprise announcement of a unilateral Soviet troop withdrawal from Eastern Europe in December 1988, but the underlying reason for this change in foreign policy was the USSR’s precipitous economic decline, which made such military commitments unaffordable.

This introduces an intervening variable in the form of agents’ perceptions of power and their reaction to changes in the balance of power. Indeed, in Foreign Policy Analysis, a realist variant – neoclassical realism – maintains that while material conditions determine the behaviour of states, these structural signals are channelled through the foreign policy-making process. The mediation of systemic impulses through agents and bureaucracies introduces two intervening variables: the mis/perceptions of the actors in charge, and the domestic politicising involved in the determination and implementation of foreign policies.<sup>8</sup> This raises the question of whether Gorbachev’s realisation that the USSR’s

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<sup>2</sup> Davis, James W. und William C. Wohlforth. ‘German Unification.’ In Herrmann, Richard K. and Richard N. Lebow (eds.), ‘Ending the Cold War - Interpretations, Causation and the Study of International Relations’, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 133

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 135-136

<sup>4</sup> Wohlforth, William C. ‘Realism and the End of the Cold War’, *International Security* 19.3 (1995): 96

<sup>5</sup> Davis and Wohlforth, 145

<sup>6</sup> Wohlforth, 97-98

<sup>7</sup> Davis and Wohlforth, 151

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Rose, Gideon. ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy.’ *World Politics* 51.1 (1998), 144-172, or Zakaria, Fareed. *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: University Press, 1998)

continued confrontational stance with the US hared to his country's interests was foreordained. Schweller and Wohlforth assert "The Soviet Union's *best* response to relative decline within a US-dominated bipolar system was emulation and engagement [emphasis mine]." <sup>9</sup> This implies that the USSR could have responded differently (and in doing so pursued a sub-optimal policy) to the change in material structures. Agency isn't absent in this explanatory framework, but material change "precedes and prompts change in ... ideas."<sup>10</sup> This begs the question of why Gorbachev chose the policies that defined his tenure: did he identify them as the optimal response to Soviet decline? If so, was their optimality defined by reference to some objective vantage point of 'rationality' or the product of idiosyncratic analysis by Gorbachev? Realists argue that changes in material circumstances beget changes in policy. But the transmission belt from 'material change' to 'policy change' is not entirely clear: the notion that there may be different responses to a materially-induced crisis is left underexplored by realism. An answer of sorts is provided by the micro-level assumptions about agent behaviour that political scientists like de Mesquita utilise: by incorporating a rationality assumption about leaders – namely, that they pursue the biggest benefits at the lowest cost, and don't make deliberate bad choices – the 'winning' strategy out of the many options available can be found.<sup>11</sup>

But surely from the Soviet perspective, Gorbachev's policies were far from optimal, given that they resulted in the country's collapse: that could not have been in the USSR's national interest. Moreover, as per realism's own assumptions, the destruction of their state could not have been the intention Soviet policy-makers.<sup>12</sup> So did Gorbachev choose the wrong policies? Or were his policy choices were irrelevant, since the USSR's fate was determined by other, non-agentic factors? The first response spells trouble for the assumption that leaders will rationally choose the optimal policy response to changing international structural conditions. The second reduces the role of policymakers to that of extras.

The realist response to these objections is unsatisfactory. Their analysis, it is maintained, explains the broad policy direction taken: "We do not claim – no responsible analyst can – to account for each microanalytical decision or

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<sup>9</sup> Schweller, Randall L. und William C. Wohlforth, 'Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War', *Security Studies* 9.3 (2000), 85

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 104

<sup>11</sup> Bueno de Mesquita: *The End of the Cold War - Predicting an Emergent Property*. In technical terms, de Mesquita maintains that the combination of leaders' policy and political satisfaction payoffs determines their policy preferences. Leaders' indifference curves with respect to their present political and policy satisfaction need to be set against the location of the indifference curves of various proposed policies. The policy that best satisfies their political and policy preferences will be chosen. This begs the question of how such calculations are made. Adherents of the rational actor assumption argue that whatever politicians decide they have deemed to be in their best interest. I argue that such decisions can be idiosyncratic, that is, the product of a leader's original thinking. Depending on who happens to be in power, we can expect different decisions, with different consequences.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it wasn't: as Marshal Akhromeyev told George Shultz in December 1987: "My country is in trouble, and I am fighting alongside Mikhail Sergeevich to save it." See George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1993), pp. 1011–1012.

bargaining position adopted during the Cold War endgame.”<sup>13</sup> That may be true, but realists fail to even make an effort to understand the links between decision-making and outcomes. I doubt the latter can be made sense of without investigating its interactions with the former. By counterfactually scrutinizing the potential consequences of alternative decisions, researchers can at least begin to measure the interaction effects between policy-making and its corollaries. The US intelligence community knew from the mid-1970s onwards that the Soviet economy had run into systemic headwinds, that “the Soviet Union as a whole was stagnating or declining economically.”<sup>14</sup> Presumably, then, so did the Soviet leadership during that time. Yet a succession of leaders did not embark on reforms. Gorbachev either did so because of decisions specific to his thinking – a finding that reinforces the influence of agency on outcomes in international politics – or because, as realists argue, he had no choice.

Brooks and Wohlforth, in an impressive display of statistical firepower, demonstrate how the USSR’s acute decline began in the 1970s, a decline from which the country never recovered. By 1985, the Soviet Union had grown less than the US by 1-2% per year for a decade. It was the country’s international position that caused its economic malaise: defence and military outlays consumed too much of GDP.<sup>15</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth speak of a “punishingly high peacetime military burden,”<sup>16</sup> given that “nearly a quarter of all economic activity, the best R&D resources, and the best technical and science expertise were being cannibalized by the massive defence sector.”<sup>17</sup> There are three problems with this analysis. Firstly, despite the unspoken assumption that the size of the Soviet military was a problem, the logic behind this is never spelt out. It is easy to proclaim that defence cost too much and that the military consumed too much of GDP. But how much is too much? The average citizen suffers when national resources are devoted to the military rather than to consumption goods, but whether this inevitably translates into declining national power cannot just be assumed. The Soviet economic model was entirely different from the Western consumer-capitalist paradigm: its military-oriented economy may well have been the logical conclusion of Soviet-style communism, which spurned a market-based supply and demand society – treating this as the cause of class warfare and inequality – in favour of a massive state-led production system. Given that the Soviet behemoth justified its political monopoly by constant reference to the threat of counter-revolution from within and attack from abroad, it made sense to direct a large proportion of GDP to the armed forces: permanent militarization was a core feature of this model of governance. Why this had to be detrimental to economic performance is not spelt out. Kenneth Oye speaks of the potentially

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<sup>13</sup> Brooks & Wohlforth, *Economic Constraints and the End of the Cold War*, 298

<sup>14</sup> Bruce D Berkowitz, *U.S. Intelligence Estimates of the Soviet Collapse: Reality and Perception*, *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 21: 237–250, 2008

<sup>15</sup> Brooks & Wohlforth, 274-5

<sup>16</sup> 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, 2000-2001), 23

<sup>17</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth *Economic Constraints*, 296

positive relationship between economic growth and military spending;<sup>18</sup> it is simply not the case that military spending unavoidably equates to economic weakness. The US currently spends 20% of its federal budget and nearly half of all discretionary spending on its military.<sup>19</sup> Russia faces its worst economic crisis since the late 1990s, with a deep recession predicted for 2015, but is nonetheless continuing its 10-year, \$300bn rearmament plan.<sup>20</sup>

The structural realist story about Soviet decline provided an expedient narrative *after* the state had imploded. At the time the USSR's economic difficulties were first beginning to show this seemed much less determining than Brooks and Wohlforth make it out to have been. In 1984, Robert Heilbroner and Lester Thurow, two prominent economists, asked: "Can economic command significantly compress and accelerate the growth process?" and opined: "The remarkable performance of the Soviet Union suggests that it can. In 1920 Russia was but a minor figure in the economic councils of the world. Today it is a country whose economic achievements bear comparison to those of the United States."<sup>21</sup> That view was empirically valid at the time: between 1950 and 1973, annual Soviet real per capita growth rate exceeded that of the USA by one percent.<sup>22</sup> During the same period, the USSR witnessed a 100% increase in real GDP per person employed, 25% more than in the US. Clearly, the Soviet economy wasn't a disaster from start to finish, and it is unclear why Brooks and Wohlforth deem Soviet economic troubles of the 1980s as terminal, and why the economy's former virility could under no circumstances return. The USSR's rise from an impoverished agrarian state into a superpower was stunning. Its collapse discredited Communist economics, but to conclude that the latter caused the former is spurious in the absence of evidence that the Soviet economy was beyond salvation and *had* to lead to the USSR's ruin.

Moreover, the statistical picture painted by Brooks and Wohlforth is not nearly as clear-cut as it is made out to be. Their figures show that in 1988,

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<sup>18</sup> Oye, Kenneth A., 'Explaining the End of the Cold War: Morphological and Behavioral Adaptations to the Nuclear Peace?' in Lebow, Richard N. and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds.), 'International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War', New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995: 69

<sup>19</sup> Horton, Scott. 'The Illusion of Free Markets: Six Questions for Bernard Harcourt', 'The Stream', Harper's Magazine, September 8, 2011. Web. Accessed on October 5, 2012, at <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2011/09/hbc-90008208>

<sup>20</sup> See Courtney Weaver, Financial Times, 14 January 2015, 'Russia finance minister warns of budget pressure': "Defence spending will remain untouched, Mr Siluanov said, as the Russian government seeks to modernise its military. The Kremlin has allocated Rb20tn to buying military equipment from 2010 through to 2020." See also The Economist, 'What Russia Wants – From Cold War to Hot War', 14 February 2015: "According to IHS Jane's, a defence consultancy, by next year Russia's defence spending will have tripled in nominal terms since 2007, and it will be halfway through a ten-year, 20 trillion rouble (\$300 billion) programme to modernise its weapons. New types of missiles, bombers and submarines are being readied for deployment over the next few years. Spending on defence and security is expected to climb by 30% this year and swallow more than a third of the federal budget."

<sup>21</sup> R. Heilbroner and L. Thurow, 'The Economic Problem', 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall 1984, 629

<sup>22</sup> This and subsequent figures are taken from: Ferguson, Niall. 'The Political Economy of the Cold War,' LSE IDEAS public lecture. Old Theatre, London School of Economics and Political Science. Monday October 18 2010.

economic growth was picking up again.<sup>23</sup> That may just be an outlier, but it certainly defies the deterministic picture that realists consistently paint of Soviet economic performance. Other statistics belie the notion of the Soviet military eating up an ever-greater share of shrinking resources. Oye cites figures showing that Soviet military spending stayed broadly constant as a share of GDP from 1966 onwards, hovering between 12 and 13%.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Brooks and Wohlforth's assertion that the USSR experienced declining productivity relative to the US is based on the use of inaccurate statistics which were inflated by the inclusion of value added by offshore production of intermediate products to American plants, a mistake corrected by the US Department of Commerce in 1991.<sup>25</sup> The revised figures show that Soviet productivity growth from 1972 onwards first exceeded that of the US, and only began to underperform marginally by 1984.<sup>26</sup>

Gorbachev's reforms, the argument goes, were spurred by Soviet economic decline, but at the same time, "Gorbachev's particular economic reforms clearly helped propel the Soviet economy into a severe tailspin by the late 1980s."<sup>27</sup> The conceptual contradiction at work here – that Gorbachev was at once passive respondent to fundamental economic trends *and* responsible for their subsequent course – is ignored. How could Gorbachev's policies simultaneously have been the dependent and the independent variable with respect to the Soviet economy? That only makes sense when the leader and the economy are positioned in a feedback loop, responding to one another. This, of course, suggests a causal role for agency and the potential for Gorbachev to embark on reforms that led to improved economic outcomes. The question is how and when leaders can influence the performance of their state: which decisions affect the wellbeing of a nation state in the international system? To be sure, the Soviet Union's negative economic backdrop of the 1980s provided the context for Gorbachev decision-making. Still, this left open just what response would be taken. In fact, the verdict of US intelligence agencies from the end of the 1970 onwards was that the slowdown in Soviet growth would have profound political effects, but that it could not be predicted how the Soviets would deal with stagnation.<sup>28</sup> My argument is that such a prediction was not possible – structural realists maintain that Gorbachev's policy decisions were not his own, but the product of the USSR's calamitous circumstances by 1985.

The point here is not to dispute that the USSR was experiencing severe economic turbulence by the start of the 1980s, but that the economic picture at the time was a lot fuzzier than Brooks and Wohlforth claim with the benefit of

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<sup>23</sup> Brooks, *Economic Constraints*, 282

<sup>24</sup> Oye, Kenneth A., 'Explaining the End of the Cold War: Morphological and Behavioral Adaptations to the Nuclear Peace?' in Lebow, Richard N. and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds.), 'International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War', New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995: 69

<sup>25</sup> Gray, John 'Al Qaeda and What It Means To Be Modern', London: Faber and Faber, 2007: 51; Kay, John 'A True and Fair View of Productivity', *Financial Times*, London, 27 March 2002

<sup>26</sup> Oye, 68

<sup>27</sup> Brooks, *Economic Constraints* 295

<sup>28</sup> Berkowitz, 240

hindsight. This is especially pertinent because their analysis disregards the economic story of the West at the time. The USSR struggled economically in the 1980s, Western countries suffered from malaise in the 1970s. In 1980, inflation in the United States reached 15% and in 1981 the unemployment rate topped 10%, the highest since the Great Depression.<sup>29</sup> For the first time since the Great Depression, the real value of stock holdings in the UK and the US was lower in 1980 than at the beginning of the decade.<sup>30</sup> Economic difficulties were not limited to the Eastern bloc alone. In the absence of further causes, it appears that hindsight is the main basis for Brooks and Wohlforth's claim that the USSR's economic position made the peaceful and rapid end of the Cold War all but inevitable: their certitude stems from the fact the outcome was already known when they authored it.

This is postdiction, not prediction, an avowed aim of structural realist theorising. Knowledge is generated through post-hoc rationalisation rather than as a product of logical necessity. The more statistics and facts are cited to support the argument that the Cold War's peaceful end was brought about by incontestable material developments which left Gorbachev with no choice but to effectively wind down the bipolar stand-off, the more it begs the question: if this is so obvious now, why wasn't it then? As Philip Everts maintained: "The manifest inability to assess correctly the probability of certain developments in the East-West context since 1988 does not seem to have contributed notably to the modesty of many observers and commentators of this conflict, and to reluctance on their part to make strong claims and predict what would happen next."<sup>31</sup> Quite simply, glasnost was unthinkable in the early 1980s, and to treat political reform of this kind as inevitable – when it was anything but – is a major fault with the realist position. Berkowitz categorised the broad alternatives that faced the Soviet leadership from the mid-1970s onwards: "A more ruthless leader might have held the state together for another ten or fifteen years; witness Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus and Kim Jong-Il in North Korea. A more flexible leader might have managed a 'soft landing' for the Soviet Communist Party; witness the current situation in China. To provide a more definitive estimate fifteen years before the fact was impossible because the future was not yet certain. It never is."<sup>32</sup>

Brooks and Wohlforth argue that the USSR, as the declining challenger in a bipolar system, was especially sensitive to any trends that had negative consequences for its ability to keep up with the leading power.<sup>33</sup> That leaves open why a strategy of retreat was pursued rather than an effort to correct the negative underlying trend, or at least a strategy of maintaining the status quo as far as possible. The importance of this point is illustrated by one of the examples that Brooks and Wohlforth cite in support of their theory: between 1893 and

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<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, Niall, "The Political Economy of the Cold War"

<sup>30</sup> Dimson, Elroy, Paul Marsh and Mike Staunton, 'Credit Suisse Global Investment Returns Sourcebook 2012', Zurich: Credit Suisse AG, 2012: 55 - 56

<sup>31</sup> Everts in Allen & Goldmann, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Berkowitz, 241

<sup>33</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, 26



1913, Britain's economy grew by 56%, compared to 90% in Germany.<sup>34</sup> This is a case of relative decline that, according to neorealist theory, "produced a major reorientation in grand strategy that combined retrenchment and engagement with growing rivals, notably Germany."<sup>35</sup> Again, however, it seems that post-hoc over-determination is at work. Where the case of declining Britain versus rising Germany culminated in the First World War, the case of a relatively declining USSR versus the USA culminated in the former's peaceful implosion. To attribute this difference entirely to the USSR's position as a declining challenger (rather than that of a declining hegemon) is misleading, and seems to miss out on the aspects of political leadership that helped bring this outcome about. Brooks and Wohlforth argue that the rapidly escalating economic costs of maintaining the USSR's international position made the end of the Cold War on American terms the most likely outcome.<sup>36</sup> An alternative explanation is that the interactions between the leadership of the USSR and the USA were transformed at a crucial moment from confrontational to cooperative, in a manner wholly different from the Anglo-German case, and that the nature of this interaction affected the trajectory of relations in both these cases, constructively in the former and destructively in the latter case: the UK and Germany ended up getting into an arms race, while the USA and USSR emerged out of one.

Brooks and Wohlforth maintain that just because some variable (economic malaise in the USSR) did not wholly determine an outcome (the peaceful end of the Cold War), this neither invalidates their theory nor does it show that other causes matter. By misrepresenting their work as 'deterministic', they argue, critics construct a strawman for the purpose of showcasing the significance of the otherwise unremarkable finding that some other cause matters in explaining a complex outcome.<sup>37</sup> But that misses the point: of course, no one demands that political theories can predict single events such as the rise of Gorbachev or the design and implementation of *perestroika*. Instead, what I wish to contrast is the certitude with which Brooks and Wohlforth make statements such as this – "one of many equally probable responses to Soviet material decline, retrenchment was the most likely one."<sup>38</sup> – with the reality of how this material decline was viewed by scholars of international affairs at the time, such as Paul Kennedy:

"There is nothing in the character or tradition of the Russian state to suggest that it could ever accept imperial decline gracefully. Indeed, historically, none of the over-extended, multinational empires which have been dealt with in this survey – the Ottoman, the Spanish, the Napoleonic, the British – ever retreated to their own ethnic base until they had been defeated in a Great Power war, or (as with Britain after

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 19

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 273

<sup>37</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *Economic Constraints*, 273

<sup>38</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *New versus Old Thinking in Qualitative Research*, 99

1945), were so weakened by war that an imperial withdrawal was politically unavoidable.”<sup>39</sup>

Structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz have a response to the objection that their framework is underspecified as history unfolds, and overspecified when explaining of historical change retroactively: “Theory explains regularities of behaviour and leads one to expect that the outcomes produced by interacting units will fall within specified ranges.”<sup>40</sup> That is, realism is a theory about how the international system *works*, one that parsimoniously gets at the operational essentials in order to understand developments in international relations at a deeper level:

“Of necessity, realist theory is better at saying what will happen than in saying when it will happen. Theory cannot say when ‘tomorrow’ will come because international political theory deals with the pressures of structure on states and not with how states will respond to the pressures. The latter is a task for theories about how national governments respond to pressures on them and take advantage of opportunities that may be present. One does, however, observe balancing tendencies already taking place [in the unipolar system that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union].”<sup>41</sup>

Again, the theory is underspecified in the present (is the current, turbulent epoch of world politics one of re-balancing? Or is the US maintaining its hegemonic position and preventing balancing? Either outcome seems possible), but allows for an explanation of systemic developments to be made after the fact (either outcome can be explained). To be sure, the influence of structural pressures on the behaviour of states is real. But to focus only on those pressures without due regard for how national governments, or more precisely national leaders, choose to respond, and how their response ends up affecting the international system, leaves our understanding of the processes at work sorely incomplete.

Alexander George explained why structural-realist theory makes for an appealing package and is thus the dominant theory in IR: “it calls attention to fundamental forces (‘anarchy’, ‘distribution of power’) that do indeed affect relations among states; it lends itself to relatively rigorous and systematic formulation; and it offers a parsimonious theory of the behaviour of states and the outcomes of their interaction with each other.”<sup>42</sup> The structural variables that realists point to are constraints on foreign policy makers, often very important ones. Other variables, like domestic politics, ideas, belief systems, bureaucratic politics, bargaining, have been brought into this analytical framework to explain specific foreign policy decisions and outcomes. It is mistaken to fault structural realism for not also being a theory of foreign policy or of statecraft. But since the nature of the international system is influenced by statecraft, George called

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York: Random House, 1987, p. 514

<sup>40</sup> Waltz, *Theory of Politics*, 1979, p. 68

<sup>41</sup> Waltz, *Structural Realism after the Cold War*, *International Security* Vol. 25 No. 1 2000

<sup>42</sup> Alexander George, *The Transition in US-Soviet Relations 1985-2000*, *Wohlforth Witnesses to the End of the Cold War*, 243

structural realism “necessary but quite insufficient by itself” for the study of international relations, “or certainly for the conduct and management of international politics.” To gain a better understanding of how policymakers influence international relations, we need more than internally consistent but radically simplified models of world politics.

The structural realist research programme is a mechanistic paradigm in which “essentially identical units — interests and identities are assumed to be exogenously formed — are driven by ‘natural laws’ to behave predictably in response to exogenously determined conditions. A rational-choice approach, borrowed from neoclassical economics, is used in an attempt to generate ahistorical, universal explanations of relations between states.”<sup>43</sup> Such simplifications of reality do not always aid our understanding of international politics. For instance, concentrating on the state as the unit of analysis creates an analytically convenient but arbitrary separation of international and domestic politics.

The rapid and peaceful end of the Cold War upset a whole range of realism’s staple axioms, including the notion that when the cost of maintaining hegemony rises, states try to adjust without ever giving up their hegemony voluntarily. Indeed, this was regarded as the reason why the international system is so war-prone.<sup>44</sup> Says Everts: “We should recall that we are not talking here about trivial details, but about central elements and characteristics of the international system. The very incapacity to distinguish between ‘fundamental’ and ‘accidental’ forms of change of the system strikes me as a reason for serious concern.”<sup>45</sup> The analytical focus on Soviet economic performance and its impact on the material balance of power ignores the fact that the USSR’s military capabilities continued to pose an enormous threat to the US at least until the Intermediate Nuclear Force and START treaties had been signed and ratified. In order to understand on a deeper level how and why the hostile relationship between the US and the USSR changed, it seems important to study what steps were taken by the relevant actors on both sides toward this end: agency is one of (though not the sole) the missing links between what Everts calls ‘fundamental’ (i.e. structural) trends and ‘accidental’ (i.e. contingent) outcomes.

This is not to dismiss the structural realist research programme in international relations: it is about recognising its limitations, and thinking about how to push beyond them. One means of doing so is by studying individual policymakers and their interactions with the international system, rather than ascribing reductionist and therefore incomplete unitary characteristics to leaders (such as de Mesquita’s rational choice micro-foundation). There are more fruitful theoretical approaches that allow for the study of such interactions. During a recent speech on the role of nuclear weapons in the international system, Robert Jervis reminded his audience how little we actually know about the influence of

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<sup>43</sup> Neil E Harrison, *Complexity in World Politics*, p. 7

<sup>44</sup> Robert O. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 157

<sup>45</sup> Everts, 71

nuclear weapons: “Their impact on world politics is hard to discern.”<sup>46</sup> I argue that the same is true of leaders. The basic question concerning the causal influence of agents on the international system is: “Do the particular ideas and preferences of senior policymakers drive states, or is foreign policy largely determined by geopolitical, organisational, or economic factors over which individuals have limited control?”<sup>47</sup> Structural realism purposely brackets out individuals, focusing as it does on systemic forces. I contend that this misses out on an essential causal category international relations. In fact, this problem is not limited to IR alone. In 1974, Robert Heilbroner said the following when asked about the difficulties economists faced in predicting the trajectory of national economies: “It may be that this is less possible than it was, because the economy itself is now so much more a creature of decision-making, and so much less the outcome of sheer interplay of impersonal forces, that prediction itself becomes inherently difficult.”<sup>48</sup> Macroeconomists have crafted artful models that describe only part of economic reality, limiting their use to policymakers.<sup>49</sup> In a similar vein, George has maintained that structural-realist “theory by itself does not give us much help in understanding how to promote peaceful change in international relations; how to achieve cooperation among states; how states define their interests and how their conception of interests changes.”<sup>50</sup>

The problem for those studying vast systems is that the aim of finding regularities and causal rules is hard to reconcile with the idiosyncratic predilections of individuals. Niebuhr explained this well: “The realm of freedom which allows the individual to make his decisions within, above and beyond the pressure of causal sequences, is beyond the realm of scientific analysis. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of its reality introduces an unpredictable and incalculable element in the causal sequence. It is therefore embarrassing to any scientific scheme. Hence scientific cultures are bound to incline to determinism.”<sup>51</sup> Of course focusing on leaders and decision-making alone is equally self-limiting. When nudging the study of the end of the Cold War away from vast impersonal forces, to borrow terminology from historians, we shouldn’t end up with a Bad King John/Good Queen Bess approach that looks solely at the

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<sup>46</sup> Cited in H Diplo What We do and Why it matters a response to FKS

<sup>47</sup> Shiffrinson, Man, The State and No War H Diplo

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Almond and Genco, Clouds Clocks and Cuckoos, 516

<sup>49</sup> That is why Richard Koo, head of the Nomura Research Institute, writes: “We are experiencing not only an economic crisis but also a crisis in economics. Most economists failed to predict the current crisis and the economics profession itself has fallen into a state of complete disarray in its attempt to answer the question of what should be done.” Koo, Richard. ‘The Escape From Balance Sheet Recession and the QE Trap: A Hazardous Road for the World Economy’, John Wiley, 2014. Similarly, the President of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank wrote in his 2009 Annual Report, “I believe that during the last financial crisis, macroeconomists (and I include myself among them) failed the country, and indeed the world. In September 2008, central bankers were in desperate need of a playbook that offered a systematic plan of attack to deal with fast-evolving circumstances. Macroeconomics should have been able to provide that playbook. It could not. Of course, from a longer view, macroeconomists let policymakers down much earlier, because they did not provide policymakers with rules to avoid the circumstances that led to the global financial meltdown.” See <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications/the-region/modern-macroeconomic-models-as-tools-for-economic-policy>

<sup>50</sup> George, 244

<sup>51</sup> Niebuhr, The Irony of American History, Scribner 1952, p. 8

causal force of individuals.<sup>52</sup> Instead, studying the interaction between leaders and the systems within which they operate may offer some clues as to how outcomes are generated. After all, despite a century of a formal IR research programme, many events in international relations retain a mysterious quality. Why did the ‘Domino theory’ fail to hold as originally feared after the fall of Saigon, but was at work in Eastern Europe in 1989? Why does hegemony sometimes lead to bandwagoning and at other times to balancing? What does it tell us about IR and the nature of change in the international system when seemingly singular micro-events like the rise of Gorbachev can have momentous consequences?<sup>53</sup> What all these riddles suggest is that the dynamics of the international system permit multiple outcomes. This indicates that complexity is a defining characteristic of the international system, and that a more open-ended means of causal analysis can provide deeper understanding of such complex processes.

I argue that we can study these conundrums more effectively by embracing the very complexities that theories like structural realism seek to eliminate from their analyses for the sake of parsimony. Andrew Abbott has outlined the deep assumptions of the ‘general linear reality’ models that are so pervasive in social science. These axioms are, in short order: the social world is made up of entities that are fixed, though their attributes can change; an entity’s given attribute has only one causal meaning; causality is monotonic and flows from large to small (little things can’t cause big things, the arbitrary does not cause the general); sequencing effects do not matter (the order of things does not influence the way they turn out); casewise independence of the dependent variable holds (an independent variable determines the dependent variable, up to an error term); and, lastly, the causal meaning of an attribute does not depend on its context in space or time (an attribute’s causal effect cannot be redefined by its own past).<sup>54</sup> While general linear reality models are powerful tools for empirical research, it is a mistake to assume that social causality actually obeys the rules of linear transformations.<sup>55</sup> Consider this description of linearity:

“By linear systems, we mean the arrangement of nature to be one where outputs are proportional to inputs; where the whole is equal to the sum of its parts, and where cause and effect are observable. It is an environment where prediction is facilitated by careful planning; success is pursued by detailed monitoring and control; and a premium is placed upon

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<sup>52</sup> Discussed further in E. H. Carr’s ‘What Is History’. See also Epstein review Torpedo, H-Net <http://h-diplo.org/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XVI-14.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Grunberk & Risse-Kappen, in Allen & Goldmann, 105. nobody in academia predicted changes, and forecasts pointed in opposite direction from what happened. Most false predictions followed logically from core assumptions of major IR theories. But Snyder (*Averting Anarchy in the New Europe*), Mearsheimer, and Steven van Evera (*Primed for Peace: Europe After the Cold War*) immediately went on to next predictions

<sup>54</sup> Abbott, Andrew, *Transcending General Linear Reality*

<sup>55</sup> Writes Abbot, “They do this by assuming, in the theories that open their empirical articles, that the social world consists of fixed entities with variable attributes, that these attributes have only one causal meaning at a time, that this causal meaning does not depend on other attributes, on the past sequence of attributes, or on the context of other entities. So distinguished a writer as Blalock has written, ‘These regression equations are the ‘laws’ of science.’ To say this is to reify an entailed mathematics into a representation of reality.”

reductionism. [...] Reductionist analysis consists of taking large, complex problems and reducing them to manageable chunks.”<sup>56</sup>

Does that sound like an accurate description of the workings of international politics? Neil E. Harrison puts it provocatively:

“Despite nearly a hundred years of theorizing, scholars and practitioners alike are constantly surprised by international and global political events. The abrupt end of the much-studied Cold War was widely unanticipated, as were the consequences of the collapse of communism in Europe. The defining characteristics of four decades of international politics were erased in a few short years, but the globalization of economic and social life has continued. The 1997 Asian finance crisis rattled the US and European stock markets, civic strife in Venezuela influences the price of oil, and the needs of AIDS patients in South Africa challenge international agreements on intellectual property. Out of the blue, terrorists attacked within the United States one sunny September morning. A year earlier, in the space of a few months the global economy lurched from rapid expansion to recession and flirted with deflation.”<sup>57</sup>

Complexity theory offers an alternative analytical framework that has been sidelined in International Relations. Non-linearity is at the heart of complexity science, which is best defined as “the study of the phenomena which emerge from a collection of interacting objects.”<sup>58</sup> A complex system is defined by the following qualities: emergence (the system as a whole consists of more than the sum of its parts, and exhibits behaviours different from those of its parts), a dynamic structure (changes in some parts in the system can produce unexpected changes in other, distant parts of the system, and the system as a whole can change when its parts change), and multiple, diffuse chains of consequences (the effects of actions in the system are never isolated).<sup>59</sup> In politics, complexity theory yields what Harrison calls “an *orientation about the essence of political reality* that organises theorising about and empirically investigating events in world politics [emphasis added].”<sup>60</sup> Where realism assumes that basic human characteristics drive political behaviour within fixed structures, complexity theorists treat politics as “emerging from interactions among interdependent but individual agents within evolving institutional formations. So world politics is a more or less self-organizing complex system in which macroproperties emerge from microinteractions.”<sup>61</sup> To understand the operation of the system, one needs to gain a sense of the nature of the interactions between the system’s parts, and how these interactions affect the properties of the system as a whole.

The meaning of this jargon-laden description is best expressed through some basic illustrations of how complexity operates in world politics: the development of nuclear weapons by the US at once restrained Stalin as it

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<sup>56</sup> Complexity and Nat Security, Alberts & Czerwinski

<sup>57</sup> Neil E Harrison, Complexity in World Politics,

<sup>58</sup> Two’s Company, Three’s Complexity, 51

<sup>59</sup> Based on Jervis, ‘Complex Systems: The Role of Interactions’

<sup>60</sup> Neil E Harrison, Complexity in World Politics, 84

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 17

increasing his fear of military confrontation, and also made him “less cooperative and less willing to compromise, for fear of seeming weak.”<sup>62</sup> This is an example of the diffuse, contradictory causal effects of an emergent property in the international system that ended up re-shaping it entirely. Similarly, consider the (deliberately hyperbolic, but apposite) claim, ‘If Edward Snowden killed off the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership in June 2013, Vladimir Putin returned it to the agenda in April 2014.’<sup>63</sup> Small, unforeseeable events that snowball and take on a dynamic of their own (the NSA revelations) can radically restructure perceptions and incentives of various agents in a system (creating suspicion of US intent among even close Allies), but other unanticipated shocks (Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014) can re-shuffle the priorities of agents in a system rapidly (expressed by the degree of US-EU cohesion in the economic sanctions applied to in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion).

Causation is difficult to discern in a complex system, given that a cause may have different effects at different times. From the fact that nuclear weapons stabilised Soviet-American relations it cannot be inferred that they would have a similar impact on other rivalries: variables that interact with nuclear weapons may be different in these cases, contra lots of realist writing on the subject.<sup>64</sup> Those who aspire to study global politics in a way that does its complex ontology justice are not surprised that no general laws of international relations have been found: events in a complex system are brought about by multiple interacting prior events.<sup>65</sup> It makes no sense to seek law-like generalisations in world politics, because as Jon Elster pointed out, “One cannot have a law to the

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<sup>62</sup> David Holloway, *Stalin and The Bomb*, New Haven, Yale Univ Press 1994, p. 272

<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, ‘German fear of tribunals threatens EU-US trade deal’ *Financial Times*, January 28, 2015

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/49b45c04-9cbf-11e4-a730-00144feabdc0.html#ixzz3QtCdIRBt>

“Says Dr Schmucker: ‘It’s an issue of trust. There is widespread anti-Americanism [in Germany], and the Snowden affair erased any trust people had. So when the US now says that we are going to have equal standards, everyone believes that these are bad standards.’”

<sup>64</sup> This point was made by Robert Jervis in “Complex Systems: The Role of Interactions”. Realists have often opined that, since nuclear deterrence held between the US and the USSR, this is a model for conflict de-escalation in many other settings, most recently Kenneth Waltz argued as much in reference to Iran (‘Why Iran Should Get The Bomb’). John Mearsheimer asserted in 1994 that Germany should develop nuclear weapons to keep the peace in Europe, and that Ukraine should retain its nuclear arsenal (“The case for a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent”). The covert nature of Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, of course, is by its very nature an expression of how warfare in the age of complexity is morphing. Nuclear deterrence is of little use against an enemy who is not officially at war.

<sup>65</sup> Neil E. Harrison provides another compelling, intuitively understandable description of how complexity operates in world politics: “The events of September 11, 2001, may be the result of all of the explanations commonly offered: failures of collection, coordination, and distribution of intelligence; a clash of cultures; hatred by fanatics; and so on. But each of these “causes” were themselves caused by multiple prior events. Osama Bin Laden is the product of his family, Islam, the Saudi culture, and personal experience defending Afghanistan against the Soviets. The clash of cultures (or civilizations: Huntington 1993) is as much a consequence of U.S. actions as of Muslim choices. Intelligence failures resulted, in part, from decisions that restricted human intelligence gathering, decisions made by successive US governments after several high-profile misadventures in the 1970s. Thus, September 11 could have emerged from a plethora of choices and events across the globe over decades, not as an inevitable consequence of any of them but as a path-dependent phenomenon. And if it was not path dependent, it was a symptom of a nonlinear system shift that cannot be predicted or explained. In neither case is conventional thinking about causation useful.” *Complexity in the Social Sciences*, 12

effect that ‘if  $p$ , then sometimes  $q$ .’<sup>66</sup> When studying complex systems, we seek instead to uncover causal channels, mechanisms that show us how complex causal forces can operate: “Mechanisms ... make no claim to generality. When we have identified a mechanism whereby  $p$  leads to  $q$ , knowledge has progressed because we have added a new item to our repertoire of ways in which things happen.”<sup>67</sup> If we can identify some of these causal mechanisms operating in global politics, we enrich our understanding of the nature and implications of the interactions between the various parts of the system. Shedding light on how the complex world of international affairs operates will also be of use to policymakers, especially if doing so clarifies the role that agency plays in such systems.

One way to investigate causality in complex systems is through counterfactual analysis, that is, the use of so-called ‘What If’ propositions.<sup>68</sup> Counterfactual thinking emphasises the essential open-endedness of history, by re-opening events of the past and subjecting them to scenarios where things turned out differently.<sup>69</sup> This is what makes ‘What If’ reasoning a powerful antidote to the perils of hindsight bias.<sup>70</sup> But counterfactuals also serve a deeper methodological purpose: analyses that explore the various trajectories events in world politics could have taken (say, during the end of the Cold War) try to point out various mechanisms of change in the international system through the contrastive appraisals of various scenarios. Robert Jervis explains it as follows:

“Counterfactual thinking can be extremely useful for thought experiments that assist us in developing our ideas about how elements are connected and how results can arise. Counterfactuals can alert us to the possible operation of dynamics and pathways that we would otherwise be prone to ignore.”<sup>71</sup>

A counterfactual that credibly and convincingly highlights different possible outcomes in world history thereby describes plausible causal mechanisms that operate in our complex social world.

One way to address such questions is by looking at a specific set of nodes in the complex system of world politics: decision-makers. Consider Hugh Trevor-Roper’s call to explicitly bring in the perspective of agency into historical analyses:

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<sup>66</sup> Elster, J. ‘Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences,’ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 10. That is why it is not particularly useful to speak of hegemony bringing about *either* bandwagoning or balancing. In a complex system, both outcomes are possible. This is not deny probabilistic causation, but a basic philosophical point: if a relationship is truly law-like, it should be possible to break down ‘if  $p$ , then sometimes  $q$ ’ further, to show when  $p \rightarrow q$  and when  $p \rightarrow r$

<sup>67</sup> Elster, Nuts and Bolts, 10

<sup>68</sup> For a detailed discussion of the role of counterfactual research in IR, see Benjamin Mueller, ‘Using Counterfactuals to Investigate Causality in International Relations’, Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention in March 2014, in Toronto. Available online at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/people/pdf/Mueller-counterfactuals-causality-IR-theory-DRAFT.pdf> Estimating the Impact of Leadership and Diplomacy on the End of the Cold War

<sup>69</sup> See, in particular, Richard N. Lebow, ‘Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations,’ Princeton University Press, 2014.

<sup>70</sup> On this point, see Philip Tetlock and Richard N. Lebow, ‘Poking Counterfactual Holes in Covering Laws: Cognitive Styles and Historical Reasoning’

<sup>71</sup> Jervis in Tetlock and Belkin, Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics



“At any given moment in history there are real alternatives ... How can we explain what happened and why if we only look at what happened and never consider alternatives ... It is only if we place ourselves before the alternatives of the past ... only if we live for a moment, as the men of the time lived, in its still fluid context and among its still unresolved problems, if we see those problems coming upon us... that we can draw useful lessons from history.”<sup>72</sup>

Complexity theory provides an analytical framework for such investigations. Decision-makers, by adjudicating between different policy options and selecting particular policies while rejecting others, influence the operation of the international system. Situations in which a policy choice is particularly narrow – i.e. between two clearly specified alternatives, the actual choice vs. the one considered but not taken – provide a natural counterfactual of sorts. What would have happened if the alternative had been selected? Showing, through documentary evidence, how events could have turned out differently requires a description of the causal channel constituted by the policy under examination. If the evidence suggests the alternative policy would *not* have changed subsequent events dramatically, said policy channel is shown not to have causal force in a complex system, implying either directly or indirectly that other causal drivers – possibly systemic – are more salient in that instance. Either way, knowledge about policy-related mechanisms in complex systems is generated. Counterfactually contrasting the impact of policy alternatives helps to illustrate how given decisions taken by agents filter through the international system, or if they do so at all.

Counterfactuals also illustrate what Rosenau calls ‘the power of small events’, an important characteristic of complex systems.<sup>73</sup> Decision-makers sometimes influence international affairs inadvertently through their behaviour, producing outcomes that are the product of non-purposeful choices. A good example thereof is the curious tale of the Cuban Brigade Affair and the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. A few minor re-writes of entirely contingent choices could have substantially altered the Soviet strategic picture in the run up to the invasion of Afghanistan. This ties in to the notion that in complex systems, decisions and conditions in one area of the system can causally influence future outcomes elsewhere in a system in a manner disproportionate to the seeming significance of events at the time. If event *x* is brought about by a confluence of many different causes, then the fewer such causes need to be removed to prevent event *x*, the more contingent is *x*.<sup>74</sup> In the run-up to contingent events, a multiverse of pathways presents itself along each of which history could unfold differently. Outcomes brought about by such non-linear confluences rely on path dependencies. This poses a problem for theories that attempt to draw linear causal connections between events. The indirect and convoluted links between

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<sup>72</sup> “Trevor-Roper, ‘History and Imagination’, pp. 363ff

<sup>73</sup> Rosenau chapter in *National Security and Complexity*

<sup>74</sup> By extension, the more causes need to be removed to prevent event *x*, the more redundant is event *x*. For more on this, see Richard Ned Lebow, “Contingency, Catalysts, and International System Change,” *Political Science Quarterly* 115: 4 (Winter 2000-2001): 591-616

the Cuban Brigade Affair and the invasion of Afghanistan underline this point. At the end of the 1970s, the Soviet Politburo's main benchmark to measure US engagement was the Carter Administration's handling of the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty ratification process.<sup>75</sup> SALT II was formally submitted by President Carter to the Senate for consideration in June of 1979. During the summer months, a political storm unrelated to SALT II in a teacup was brewing, which through a confluence of unfortunate timing, miscommunication and misguided judgment eventually assumed an urgency wholly disproportionate to its actual relevance, and in the process managed to derail the ratification SALT II – accidentally removing a key barrier to the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan.

Throughout 1979 Senator Richard Stone, a Florida Democrat threatened by a Republican bid for his seat, used his position on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to press for intelligence on Cuban military affairs. At a hearing of the committee in July, Stone asked Secretary of Defence Harold Brown and CIA Director Stansfield Turner to comment on reports that a Soviet brigade of combat troops had recently arrived in Cuba. Brown and Turner responded that there was no new information on Soviet activities in Cuba – a factually correct statement, as the brigade in question had been stationed there since 1962 to train and provide support to Cuban forces.<sup>76</sup> Idaho Senator Frank Church, who chaired the hearing, made a public statement afterward confirming that the situation in Cuba remained unchanged. At the same time, news about an apparent Soviet military build-up in Cuba began to leak to the press.<sup>77</sup> By July 20, an ABC news report mentioned “a brigade of Soviet troops, possibly as many as six-thousand combat-ready men, has been moved to Cuba in recent weeks.”<sup>78</sup> Senator Stone wrote a letter to President Carter four days later enquiring about the unit in Cuba and received a reply on from Cyrus Vance, the Secretary of State, again reiterating what Turner and Brown said to the committee. Vance cleared his letter with the White House, the Department of Defense, and CIA. But on August 22, the National Foreign Assessment centre issued a co-ordinated intelligence finding based on fresh satellite imagery that confirmed the presence of a Soviet combat brigade consisting of about 2,600 men – a finding falsely presented as new. Senator Church's statement of July now seemed to be contradicted. Church was at the time under political pressure from a Republican Political Action Committee targeting his seat, which was airing a TV commercial showing Church smoking a cigar with Fidel Castro on a recent trip to Havana.<sup>79</sup> Church, advised that this intelligence finding was due to be published in the media imminently, decided to pre-emptively leak the news and

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<sup>75</sup> Musgrove conference transcript: Leslie Gelb comments p. 148, Dobrynin 95, Caldwell 214 “SALT, and the broader Soviet-American relationship, were intertwined like the strands of a rope.”

<sup>76</sup> See statements by Wayne Smith, Director of Cuban Affairs Bureau at the State Department, at the Pocantico Hills conference, transcript p 157 - 160

<sup>77</sup> One such leaker was through John Carbaugh, an aide to hardline Senator Jesse Helms. See Garthoff comments, Pocantico Hills conference, transcript p. 166

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Duffy, Gloria, ‘Crisis Mangling and the Cuban Brigade’, *International Security* 8:1 (Summer, 1983): 78

announced the presence of the brigade live on television, stating “there is no likelihood whatever that the Senate would ratify the SALT II Treaty as long as Russian combat troops remain stationed in Cuba.”<sup>80</sup> This happened on Saturday, a day after a phone-call between Senator Church and Cyrus Vance, in which Church informed Vance of his intention to make a statement on the matter. Secretary Vance advised the Senator not to blow the affair out of proportion.<sup>81</sup> Senator Church had also tried to reach President Carter by phone but was told by the White House operator that Carter was in Georgia and unavailable throughout the weekend.<sup>82</sup>

The Soviets interpreted this turn of events as a deliberate effort by Carter to torpedo SALT II before the ratification process had even begun. It took a week for the intelligence community to confirm that the Soviet brigade was not new but stationed there for almost 20 years. When Vance explained to Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador, how the brigade affair came about, Dobrynin shook his head in disbelief and exclaimed, “How am I ever going to persuade the people back at home that this is what happened? They’ll never believe me.”<sup>83</sup> Alexander Bessmerthnyk, Counselor at the Soviet Embassy, described the affair as “so artificial it was almost like an attempt to sabotage the SALT treaty,” while Dobrynin later commented, “We simply could not believe the story. We could not believe it! It was ridiculous – all this talk about a brigade, quote unquote, that had just arrived in Cuba.”<sup>84</sup> An editorial in Pravda, the mouthpiece of the Soviet Communist Party, entitled ‘Who needed this and why?’ asked how something that had been a non-issue for 17 years could all of a sudden threaten to derail

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<sup>80</sup> See Smith, Pocantico hills transcript p. 162, Reported on the front page of the Washington Post, 6 September 1979, see Shoultz, Lars, ‘That Infernal Little Cuban Republic’, Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009: 669

<sup>81</sup> Vance responded to Church’s question of ‘Would you mind if I made a statement on the brigade?’ in his trademark gentlemanly, but indirect form of communication: “Well, Senator, that would not be at all helpful, but of course the decision is up to you. I know you’ll use your best judgment in what you say.” Smith testimony, Pocantico Hills transcript p. 157

<sup>82</sup> Les Denend, then a staff member on the NSC: “The first thing to realise is that the Cuban Brigade was a summer event ... so nobody was there. Everybody takes vacation, and the first team is not there. And getting two people in 1979 wasn’t like it is today. There was no e-mail, there were no cell phones, there was no messaging, and so on. When I would travel, they would have to hand-carry cables to me, which I would give to Brzezinski, get back, and carry around in my briefcase until I could get them back to somebody, because they were top secret, carry them around until I could give them back to somebody from the message center. ... The Church flare-up – here we go. So the Brigade is about 3,000 people. The second point to make is: almost every government in the world has continuity of government through a professional civil service. Except the United States. There is no continuity. We are capable of making the same mistake, or failure to take into account previous experience – unless, by some rare chance, there’s somebody who served as a Junior Officer some place, and is now sitting in the circle. And in the White House, there’s not very many of those kinds of people. It was somebody in the White House Situation Room, who worked for me, who went down there and, going through the old material, had found the press release from 1962 that said that a Brigade would remain. But by then the damage was done. And that this would be in addition to – I remember, I can see the image. It was one of those early, early copying machine on that funny paper, we had it in Brzezinski’s office. And we had agreed to the situation that Church was outraged about. In December of ’62 that had been agreed to.” Interview with Les Denend, September 7 2013, Palo Alto

<sup>83</sup> Testimony by Marshall Shulman, Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for Soviet Affairs, Pocantico Hills transcript, p. 154

<sup>84</sup> Statements by Alexander Bessmerthnyk and Anatoly Dobrynin, Pocantico Hills transcript, p. 150-151

SALT II, the crown jewel of the arms control process.<sup>85</sup> The Soviets flat-out refused to remove or alter their brigade in Cuba, treating the issue as a wilful and clumsy attempt by the Carter Administration to extract concessions from them after the treaty had already been signed. By mid-September, Vance admitted the U.S. had no right to demand that the troops be removed, under 1962 and 1970 understandings with the Soviet government about the nature of relations between the USSR and Cuba.<sup>86</sup> The affair was thus doubly damaging for the Carter Administration, in that it both failed to elicit a change in Soviet behaviour and weakened its credibility. President Carter used a televised address to the nation on October 1 1979 to announce that “the presence of Soviet combat troops in Cuba is of serious concern to us,” but seeing as the brigade would not be moved, could do no more than announce a few toothless unilateral steps to increase US monitoring of Soviet behaviour in the Caribbean region.<sup>87</sup>

The timing of this unforeseeable turn of events was crucial to its subsequent impact. Until the brigade issue rose to the fore, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had undertaken a number of weeks’ worth of detailed hearings on SALT II, and “the prospects for its passage looked at least equitable.”<sup>88</sup> However, in light of the ‘new’ intelligence about Soviet behaviour in Cuba, Frank Church – the committee chairman – decided to link further hearings to the outcome of the brigade affair. This meant that the Committee only ended up concluding its hearings by November, and by the time it was finally tabled for debate in the Senate, the invasion of Afghanistan had already taken place, which effectively ‘killed’ SALT II.

The various contingencies involved in the entire debacle must not be underestimated: when Senator Church received the supposedly novel but entirely misleading intelligence about the Soviet brigade late in August 1979, some of the key members of the Carter Administration were on holiday and could not be reached in a timely fashion for non-emergency matters, including Secretary Vance, National Security Advisor Brzezinski and President Carter.<sup>89</sup> Senator Church, by contrast, was campaigning in Idaho, feeling the heat regarding his ‘soft’ approach to foreign policy. In the event, Vance’s failure to appreciate the potential fall-out from the affair and Church’s handling of it substantially damaged SALT II’s prospects before it even made it to the Senate floor. For example, Senator Russell Long, a senior figure in the Senate, announced on September 12 that he was going to change his vote and reject SALT II, stating that “Soviet bad faith,” demonstrated by the brigade in Cuba, made this

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<sup>85</sup> Duffy, 80

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 72

<sup>87</sup> Carter, Jimmy. ‘Peace and National Security Address to the Nation on Soviet Combat Troops in Cuba and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty’. Televised Address .October 1, 1979. Text available at

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=31458&st=SALT+treaty&st1=Strategic+Arms+Limitation+Treaty>

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 81

<sup>89</sup> Jimmy Carter was on the paddle wheeler Delta Queen on the Mississippi and Brzezinski holidaying in Vermont. Garthoff testimony, Pocantico Hills transcript, p. 168

necessary.<sup>90</sup> The fact that Church, during the August 27 press conference, linked the ratification of SALT to the departure of the brigade boxed in the Administration's response, deriving it of an opportunity to craft a face-saving response – indeed, the leak-driven nature of the entire affair gave it such a nefarious quality in the eyes of the Soviets.<sup>91</sup> As Vance remarked subsequently, the brigade affair “was a real blow that set us back substantially.”<sup>92</sup>

This seemingly minor episode brought about large-scale ramifications down the line. The Carter Administration presented itself in confusion over the brigade issue, handling it in a contradictory manner and reacting with bluster that later turned out to be hollow when it became clear that the brigade could not be removed. The impression this made on the Soviets was that Carter was an unreliable partner in that he was willing to risk SALT II ratification over an issue that had in effect been made up. Moreover, it signalled that Carter's Administration was inconsistent and confused over its aims regarding the US-Soviet relationship. The deterioration of détente, then, began before the invasion of Afghanistan. The brigade ‘crisis’ removed any positive reasons for the Soviets not to invade: SALT II was already dead-in-the-water in the eyes of the Soviet, even if not to Carter. Viktor Komplektov, Head of the US Department at the Soviet Foreign Ministry at the time, later noted, “SALT was finished before Afghanistan ... to us [ratification] was impossible, no matter what [Carter] did.” This despite the fact that Carter's aim to ratify SALT II remained unchanged: “It is important to understand that Carter was determined to go ahead with SALT even as he was making his October 1 speech.”<sup>93</sup> A more elegant resolution of the Cuban brigade issue, with an attendant smooth passage of SALT II through the Senate Foreign Relations issue, could thus easily have altered the Soviet risk calculus. In the event, the Politburo, in the run-up to the Afghanistan invasion, did not pay much attention to the Carter Administration's potential response; or rather, they felt no need to pay much attention to it: “Gromyko [the Soviet Foreign Minister] was an experienced man. He knew that the United States would react strongly, as Carter did. But all the same, I think they felt that they would survive it.”<sup>94</sup> This was compounded by the fact that the Carter Administration failed to signal to the Soviets what repercussions awaited in the event of an invasion, leaving implicit and indirect what could have been a more potent concern for the Soviet leadership – namely, the American reaction to any invasion – as they mulled whether to send troops into Afghanistan:

“By not repeatedly warning against direct Soviet military intervention as the Soviet stake in Afghanistan grew, the Carter administration left the

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<sup>90</sup> This again made front-page news on the Washington Post, September 13, 1979; see Shoultz, 670

<sup>91</sup> A point made by Robert Pastor, Director of Latin American Affairs on Carter's National Security Council. See Pocantico transcript, p. 145

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 226. Cited in Duffy

<sup>93</sup> Robert Pastor, Pocantico transcript, p.150

<sup>94</sup> Wohlforth, ‘Witnesses’, 128

erroneous impression that what happened in Afghanistan was of no great importance to the United States.”<sup>95</sup>

By August 1979, increasing Soviet involvement in the political affairs of Afghanistan had prompted speculation that a military engagement might be in the offing. This led National Security Advisor Brzezinski to give a speech in which he stated that after the US exhibited prudence with regard to Iran, others were expected to “abstain from intervention and from efforts to impose alien doctrines on a deeply religious and nationally conscious people.”<sup>96</sup> Brzezinski did not explicitly mention either the USSR or Afghanistan, but the New York Times titled its report of speech “US Indirectly Pressing Russians to Halt Afghanistan Intervention.” By September 6, the Times – citing diplomatic sources – reported that the Soviet’s inability to resolve the political turmoil in Afghanistan according to their aims was pushing them toward direct military intervention. Clearly, the possibility of a Soviet incursion was not considered a complete non sequitur. But an Inter-Intelligence Memorandum (IIM) on September 28, after taking a wide range of sources and analyses into consideration, concluded (with no dissenting opinion) that on balance, the cost of a Soviet invasion would outweigh its potential benefits.<sup>97</sup>

How did the US’ intelligence agencies arrive at this verdict? This is where the Cuban Brigade affair becomes important again. The uproar in its wake and involvement of key Administration members convinced the Soviet side that Carter was acting in bad faith over SALT II. The suspension of the treaty’s discussion in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee either signalled that the Americans wanted to extract further concessions, or were not interested at all in ratification. Either way, to the Soviets the Cuban Brigade affair spelled the end of SALT II. And this was of great consequence, particularly regarding the September IIM. It relied on “a senior Soviet political counselor in Kabul, Vasily Safronchuk, [informing] the US chargé [in Kabul] on 24 June that the USSR had no intention of sending combat troops to Afghanistan. He pointed to the harm such a move would do to the SALT-II Treaty, and to the USSR’s political position worldwide.”<sup>98</sup> That is the reason why “intelligence assessments at the time continued to portray the insertion of Soviet combat forces as unlikely, although it was not ruled out.”<sup>99</sup> Whereas to Carter and Vance, SALT II was still

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<sup>95</sup> Matlock, ‘End of Détente’, 32

<sup>96</sup> See MacEachin, Douglas, ‘Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community’s Record’, Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, April 2002. Web. 24 Feb. 2013.

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/predicting-the-soviet-invasion-of-afghanistan-the-intelligence-communitys-record/predicting-the-soviet-invasion-of-afghanistan-the-intelligence-communitys-record.html>>

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, see also Director of Central Intelligence, Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, ‘Soviet Options in Afghanistan’, NI IIM 79-100771, September 28, 1979 (Declassified 18 Jan 1999)

<sup>98</sup> Director of Central Intelligence, ‘Soviet Options in Afghanistan’, 9; and Director of Central Intelligence, Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, ‘The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Implications for Warning’, October 1980, 14-15. The latter cites a ‘pro and con’ invasion assessment disseminated 16 June 1979.

<sup>99</sup> MacEachin, ‘Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan’

salvageable until the invasion of Afghanistan<sup>100</sup>, in actual fact the Cuban Brigade Affair turned out to alter Soviet perceptions of the Carter Administration to the point that ratification was no longer seen as feasible. Valentin Varennikov, Deputy Minister of Defense and Chief of Ground Forces in the Soviet General Staff at the time of the invasion, has explained that the main motive for the invasion of Afghanistan were the security interests of the USSR, which shifted after Moscow perceived the US to have unilaterally frozen the process of ratifying SALT II.<sup>101</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin has also been clear about this: “Brezhnev was very glad to have signed the [SALT II] treaty, but [events like] the Cuban brigade affair signalled major problems in our relations” and eventually, “it became very clear that there would be no SALT.”<sup>102</sup> This is even more significant in light of the fact that the decision to invade was made last-minute in December of 1979.<sup>103</sup> The implication is that the successful ratification of SALT could have given the Soviets a reason not to jeopardise their relations with the US. Dobrynin phrased it starkly: “By the end of the Carter administration, there was very little left on our bilateral agenda. There was really only one small link – the SALT talks – which we tried to maintain as a bridge between us. But when it failed, we had nothing left.”<sup>104</sup> Simply put, the fact that the artificial Cuban Brigade crisis spelt the end of SALT II, which in turn removed the Politburo’s concerns over the effects the Soviet invasion would have on détente. The IIM of September 28 argued that the costs to the Soviets of invading Afghanistan were greater than the benefits –but “the Soviet leadership had long written off what the United States saw as the costs of Soviet intervention. Soviet leaders were pessimistic about the prospects of SALT II and improved trade before they decided to send troops to Afghanistan. They consequently did not consider these as costs.”<sup>105</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that when Nur Mohammed Taraki, the Communist-leaning President of Afghanistan, requested Soviet troops to enter his country in March 1979 to help quell political unrest, the Politburo rejected this because it would wreck preparations for Brezhnev-Carter summit and threaten SALT II.<sup>106</sup> Nine months later, the Soviet calculus had shifted, as SALT II – so the Soviets believed – had been wrecked by the Carter Administration, though in truth it had been killed by the Cuban Brigade affair.

A combination of timing, contingencies and unintended consequences conspired to needlessly kill off SALT II by the autumn of 1979, thereby

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<sup>100</sup> See transcript of Pocantico Hills conference, p. 162

<sup>101</sup> The intervention in Afghanistan and the fall of détente. In: Nobel Symposium 95. Oslo: The Nobel Institute. Westad OA. (1996); accessed at [http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/carterbrezhnev/docs\\_intervention\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_and\\_the\\_fall\\_of\\_detente/fall\\_of\\_detente\\_transcript.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/carterbrezhnev/docs_intervention_in_afghanistan_and_the_fall_of_detente/fall_of_detente_transcript.pdf). P. 75

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 109

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 153

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 221

<sup>105</sup> Afghanistan, Carter, and Foreign Policy Change: The Limits of Cognitive Models (Lebow & Stein). Lebow and Stein’s assessment of Soviet leaders’ perspectives is based on an interview of Soviet leaders by Gary Sick in 1988 and subsequent personal communication to one of the authors by Gary Sick in March 1988. See also Dan Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control: The SALT II Treaty Reaffirmation Debate*

<sup>106</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 435

strengthening Soviet incentives to intervene militarily in Afghanistan whilst simultaneously blinding the Carter Administration to this. The outcome was avoidable. The implications of the combination of micro-decisions in these small-scale contexts – which are extremely difficult to incorporate into a modelised account of world politics – are profound. None of the agents involved at the time appreciated nor could foresee the eventual consequences of the episode. As Robert Pastor, Director of Latin American Affairs on Carter’s NSC, explained: “Though the Carter Administration may have appeared to some to be coming apart at that moment, the main players were not consciously self-destructive.”<sup>107</sup> Blight describes the Cuban Brigade affair as “intriguing, multidimensional, full of peculiar interactions between US domestic politics and the foreign policies of the US and Soviet Union toward one another.”<sup>108</sup> It shows how convoluted and indirect micro-causal processes can escalate in a complex system and end up bringing about dramatic shifts. Causality can flow from small to large in international relations, an empirical finding that theory needs to take into account. Had the Cuban Brigade story been nipped in the bud, and SALT II ratification proceeded as planned, the USSR would have been much less likely to invade Afghanistan – by all accounts a peculiar decision with a weak strategic rationale – and a significant source of trouble for the Soviets in the coming decade could have been avoided.<sup>109</sup> More resources would have been available to deal with the turmoil in Poland in 1980/81. It was a strange kind of luck that the USSR dealt itself a self-inflicted blow by invading Afghanistan in 1979, in that it was the unintended result of foreign-policy blundering in Washington. Such is the nature of complexity in international affairs.

Another useful tool to understand how policymakers’ decisions can infuse the international system are counterfactual analyses of clear-cut, bifurcated decisions between one of two policy options. The comparison of two alternative policy trajectories, while subject to the normal caveats that stem from the speculative nature of such analyses, sheds light on how agency influences outcomes in world politics. The progression from a policy decision to an outcome is not straightforward. By linking an alternate decision to possible ways in which this could have changed outcomes, links between decisions and effects are explored. The theoretical contribution here is to advance our knowledge of how different causal effects interact. This is not to definitively demonstrate the explanatory victory of one class of causes over another.<sup>110</sup> Instead, the purpose of complexity counterfactuals is to study the interrelationship between different causal trajectories. Counterfactuals, in the first instance, distinguish between incidental and coincidental events (e.g. it is extremely hard to conceive of Soviet retrenchment in the absence of economic weakness, so the decline in material power of the USSR is likely a necessary [but, as I argued earlier, insufficient] cause of the end of the Cold War; similarly, the absence of diplomatic

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<sup>107</sup> Pastor in Pocantico

<sup>108</sup> Pocantico, p. 168

<sup>109</sup> Wohlforth Witnesses, Afghanistan discussions notes (Bessmerthnyk etc)

<sup>110</sup> That is likely a Quixotic idea to begin with, as the various causal elements in the Cold War’s end are too intertwined for their different cause-effect sequences to be isolated and ranked



breakthroughs such as the Intermediate Nuclear Forces and START treaties precludes the normalisation of East-West relations; likewise, the peaceful revolutions of 1989 would not have occurred without the emergence of a transnational epistemic community in Europe in the 1970s and the resulting normative-ideational evolution it brought about<sup>111</sup>). Such broad counterfactuals establish expansive causal drivers, but on their own do not tell us how various incidental causal dynamics relate to each other. Following from the theoretic baseline that causation operates on all three levels of analysis in a complex system, one way 'into' complexity is on the level of leadership. In the complex adaptive system that is the realm of international affairs, leaders are critical nodes as choice-producing units. My argument is not that agents are the only critical nodes, but they do form one set of causal linchpins. As it happens, when leaders make choices they provide a 'natural' counterfactual in the form of alternative decisions considered but not taken.

After Ronald Reagan replaced Alexander Haig with George Shultz as Secretary of State in the summer of 1982, Shultz began to pivot the Administration's Soviet strategy away from seeking confrontation and towards a more cooperative approach.<sup>112</sup> As Shultz began to press for deeper engagement with the Soviet Union in late 1982, National Security Advisor Bill Clark and fellow travellers like Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey pushed back, advising Reagan not to follow Shultz's course. The positional divide in the Administration grew and came to a head during a series of White House meetings between these principals in the spring of 1983, when Reagan had to decide which strategic course to follow, and threw in his lot with Shultz. This decision produced a series of ripple effects (such as the replacement on the National Security Council of Richard Pipes, a hardline anti-Communist intellectual, by Jack Matlock, a consummate Sovietologist and diplomat who set about implementing Shultz's goal of improving relations with the Kremlin where possible). In the absence of Reagan's choice to engage, rapprochement with Gorbachev a few years later would have been much more difficult: the entire US-Soviet partnership would have had to be built from scratch, rather than from the small but noticeable foundations of East-West engagement that were in place by 1985 thanks to Shultz's efforts. This mattered because Gorbachev needed successful early negotiations with Reagan to show his own hardliners that a Soviet change in strategy was warranted in the face of a more cooperative US. Thus, Reagan's March 1983 decision to endorse Shultz's strategy is one causal channel of consequence in the complex fabric of US-Soviet relations in the 80s.

Realists make much of Soviet economic weakness and its supposedly inescapable effects in terms of compelling the USSR to sue for peace. The fact of

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<sup>111</sup> See, for instance, 'Ideas Do Not Float Freely' by Thomas Risse-Kappen in Breslauer & Risse-Kappen, 'International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War', or for a more recent and detailed explanation in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Sarotte, 'The Collapse', 2014

<sup>112</sup> For more detail, see Benjamin Mueller, 'Estimating the Impact of Leadership and Diplomacy on the End of the Cold War' Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention in March 2014, in Toronto. Available online at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/people/pdf/Mueller-Leadership-Diplomacy-Cold-War-Haig-Shultz.pdf>

the matter is that in the early 1980s, the Reagan Administration was aware of the deteriorating economic situation. A Special National Intelligence Estimate of November 1981 stressed the mounting economic problems faced by the Soviet Union, and how the burden of military expenditures was increasingly making it impossible for the USSR to raise its citizens' standard of living.<sup>113</sup> In March 1981 Reagan noted in his diary, "Briefing on the Soviet economy. They are in bad shape, and if we cut off their credit they'll have to yell 'uncle' or starve."<sup>114</sup> Reagan started to raise the prospect of the Soviet Union's collapse as early as May 1981, announcing at a commencement speech in Notre Dame, "The West won't contain communism. It will transcend communism. It will dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written."<sup>115</sup> But, contrary to realist theorising, Soviet economic weakness was not heralded as a sure-fire sign of the country's coming ruin. Granted, structural realist theory makes claims about the operation of the international system on a macro-level, so from this perspective the statements of agents are irrelevant – what matters to realists is their claim that economic weakness translates into dwindling power regardless of whether political leaders accept this reality. But politics is not just the manifestation of abstract developments: it is also a human enterprise, and the abstract material developments that realists precipitate responses by policymakers. To look only at material developments is to tell only half the story. The Soviet Union's economic problems produced two competing strategic approaches advocated by key members of the Reagan Administration. They are well summed-up in an August 1983 NSC briefing for the President on the Soviet Union, which presents a 'state of play' analysis of US-Soviet relations and concludes with a brief section titled 'Implications for US Policy' and is worth repeating in full:

"The struggle is long-term. There are no quick fixes. This means that we must devise a strategy which can be sustained for a decade or, probably, more. Two broad options in theory:

1. Unrelenting pressure on the Soviets; and
2. Negotiation of specific differences on basis of strength, with follow-up to keep gains permanent rather than temporary."<sup>116</sup>

In the early months of 1983, a behind-the-scene struggle had broken out in the Administration concerning which of these roads to take. By August, Shultz's preferred approach had received Reagan's endorsement, which is why the NSC briefing presents the two strategies in loaded terms. This strategic choice only occurred after fierce bureaucratic infighting, the records of which imply what a Reagan foreign policy of 'unrelenting pressure' would have entailed – this is the 'What if' from which the significance of the policy shift can be inferred.

On March 3 1983, George Shultz presented his take on how US-Soviet relations should develop in a memo to the President.<sup>117</sup> He called for an agenda of

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<sup>113</sup> See *Successful Strategies: Triumphant in War and Peace from Antiquity to the Present* edited by Williamson Murray, Richard Hart, p. 407

<sup>114</sup> Reagan diaries p. 34

<sup>115</sup> Cite

<sup>116</sup> Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Matlock Box 41

sustained dialogue with the USSR on arms control, regional issues, human rights and bilateral issues (such as economic and cultural links), outlining specific proposals the US should to advance and improve relations. This prompted William ‘Judge’ Clark, the National Security Advisor, to write his own memorandum for the President, in which he first berated Shultz for failing “to reflect a full understanding of the nature of the Soviet threat and the way the Soviets operate.” Clark went on the offensive, stating that Shultz’s memo was “another attempt to explain how increased dialogue can pressure the Soviets into more acceptable behaviour. The many reasons given as to how dialogue can pressure the Soviets to do anything are weak and unconvincing, as they reflect a wishful-thinking perception about the nature of the Soviet system and its willingness to compromise.” If Shultz’s recommendations were followed, “we will be sending all the wrong signals to the Soviets. We will be ‘improving’ US-Soviet relations on Soviet terms, and not on our terms and thus portraying an image of political weakness that is the exact opposite of the image of revived spiritual strength that your election symbolised.”<sup>118</sup> This pattern of Clark undermining Shultz’s advocacy of a somewhat moderated negotiating position and constructive engagement with the Soviet Union was not isolated. In January, after Shultz sent Reagan a memo arguing for “an intensified dialogue with Moscow to test whether an improvement in the US-Soviet relationship is possible” and calling for a “process of dialogue”, Clark followed up with his own memo, maintaining that:

“I have serious reservations about the proposed timing and method of implementation of [Shultz’s] memo [...] This course of action would be sure to arouse even more public expectations and would make it difficult for us to maintain a firm policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. [...] I have grave reservations not only about the overall thrust of the proposed strategy for ‘improving US-Soviet relations’ [...] A ‘process of dialogue’ at all levels (Departments/Desks, Ambassadors, Ministries, Summit) would not be fruitful but counterproductive, as it would serve primarily Soviet interests. [...] I see little point in summitry until the Soviets have made a major move which clearly demonstrates a willingness to reduce threats to us and the rest of the free world.”<sup>119</sup>

On March 10 1983 a meeting took place in the Oval Office concerning Soviet strategy. Wilson described how it unfolded: “In advance [of the meeting], Clark summoned [Richard] Pipes [a hardline anti-Communist who ran the Soviet desk on Reagan’s NSC before returning to his academic post late in 1982] back from Harvard ... [Pipes] proceeded to eviscerate Shultz’s efforts to set up a meeting between Reagan and [Soviet Foreign Minister] Gromyko in New York that October. In [the hardliners’] view, the Kremlin needed to modify its behaviour before serious negotiations could get under way. [Secretary of Defense]

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<sup>117</sup> ‘USG-Soviet Relations – Where do we want to be and how do we get there?’ Box 41

<sup>118</sup> William P. Clark, Memorandum for the President - Secretary Shultz’s New Memorandum on US-Soviet relations, RRPL Matlock Box 41

<sup>119</sup> William P. Clark, Memorandum for the President – US-Soviet Relations in 1983, RRPL Matlock Box 41

Weinberger and [CIA Director] Casey seconded the notion that Shultz was too soft.”<sup>120</sup> Thus the battle-lines were drawn: Reagan opted for Shultz’s course of action.

In her 1997 book titled ‘The Reagan Reversal’, Beth Fischer made the then unorthodox argument that changes in Reagan’s Soviet policy dated back to late 1983, after tensions had peaked over the downing of Korean Airlines Flight 007 and the Able Archer exercises. I argue here that the crucial strategic switch from confrontation to dialogue occurred during the first half of 1983. On May 21, Shultz sent Reagan another memo recommending a dialogue with the Soviets in the four issue areas he highlighted on March 3, along with concrete, detailed suggestions for what to discuss in each area.<sup>121</sup> Around this time, a permanent replacement for Richard Pipes on the NSC was hired – Jack Matlock, a career diplomat fluent in Russian and at the time US Ambassador to Czechoslovakia. Matlock was initially reluctant to return to Washington, fearing he would be marginalised in a NSC staffed primarily by former CIA and military types advocating uncompromising anti-Soviet policies, but changed his mind when he was told, “we want you back because the president’s decided it’s time to negotiate with the Soviets and he doesn’t have anybody on the staff here with any experience doing it.”<sup>122</sup> Matlock proceeded to craft a workable negotiating strategy on the basis of Shultz’s proposals, which eventually became known as the ‘Four-Part Agenda’. Shultz formally announced it in his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in June 1983. Realising that his own strategy was being jettisoned, Clark wrote a memo to Reagan early in July arguing that he and his deputy Bud MacFarlane should take over the Administration’s Soviet policy, while Shultz, “a solid economist, should take charge of the Pacific Basin initiative.”<sup>123</sup> When Shultz found out about this effort to undermine him, he tendered his resignation to Reagan – who declined to accept it, and offered Shultz more authority to conduct foreign policy as well as regular one-on-one meetings.<sup>124</sup>

The relevant counterfactual to consider is the alternative strategy advocated by the likes of Clark and Weinberger. Clark wrote Reagan in 1982 that he should only participate in a summit meeting with the Soviets after “Moscow demonstrates by deeds rather than words that it is prepared to negotiate seriously.”<sup>125</sup> This strategy – waiting for a ‘major move’ by the Soviets that demonstrated their good faith – was in effect a recipe for continued East-West antagonism, since it set an unattainable benchmark before any actual conversation between the leaders of the US and the USSR, let alone

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<sup>120</sup> Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation*

<sup>121</sup> George P. Shultz, ‘Memorandum for the President – Next Steps in US-Soviet Relations’,

<sup>122</sup> Jack Matlock, cited in Wohlforth, *Eyewitnesses to the End of the Cold War*, p. 76

<sup>123</sup> Cited in Wilson, p. 75. On April 4, NSC staffer John Lenczowski sent Clark a handwritten note stating, “The next time Shultz asks you about US-Soviet relations you might consider asking him about comments on the Pacific Basin that we gave him several weeks ago.” RRPL, William P. Clark files. It appears that this was the final NSC effort to dislodge Shultz from his efforts to pivot the Administration’s strategy towards the Soviets.

<sup>124</sup> Wilson, 75 and Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to a New Era*, 42

<sup>125</sup> William P. Clark, *Memorandum for the President – Summits with Soviet leaders*, RRPL, Ex. Sec. NSC Head of State Files

rapprochement, could begin. In the event, the first Reagan-Gorbachev summit (in Geneva in 1985) took place without any such prior 'good faith' demonstration on the part of the Soviets. Bud MacFarlane himself admitted that the NSC's strategy toward the USSR consisted solely of "stressing their system as best as we can."<sup>126</sup>

After KAL 007 was shot down in September of 1983, hardliners saw it as self-evident that any incipient engagement with the Soviets had to be shut down – while Shultz saw it as an opportunity to maintain the dialogue he was in the process of setting up, even if only to register American anger with the USSR. Shultz argued forcefully that he should stick to his previously arranged meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko. By contrast, "Weinberger objected violently: 'George should not go.'"<sup>127</sup> Shultz won the argument: "The President did not agree [with Weinberger]. [...] Weinberger advocated [saying] to Gromyko that there would be no more arms control negotiations until we had a satisfactory explanation of the downing of the KAL. The President brushed this aside [...] he was not about to break off from important dealings with them."<sup>128</sup> Shultz met with Gromyko in what he describes was one of the angriest diplomatic encounters in his careers – nonetheless, a complete breakdown in relations had been averted.<sup>129</sup> Matlock remembers a statement made by General Secretary Andropov in the autumn months of 1983 to the effect of, "We can't deal with the Reagan administration. If we'd ever had illusions we could, they have now been dispelled." This prompted Shultz and Reagan to double down and plan a major speech announcing a broad policy of engagement. Eventually delivered in January of 1984, it became known as the 'Ivan and Anya' speech, noted for Reagan's softening in tone towards the Soviet Union.<sup>130</sup> Shultz co-ordinated this speech with his own efforts to engage Gromyko at talks in Stockholm in January of 1984, drily remarking that "the initiative was under way."<sup>131</sup>

Halfway through 1983, a workable strategy of engagement was thus in place: now it took a shift in the Politburo's position to generate momentum in US-Soviet relations. The Soviets had been aware of the new strategy from the summer of 1983. During meeting between Shultz and Dobrynin in July 1983, the Ambassador presented a statement from the Politburo that read, "It has been noted in Moscow that the Secretary of State [...] spoke of the wish of the US leadership to see Soviet-American relations somewhat more improved," before listing a well-trodden litany of complaints about Soviet grievances and calling for a return to détente. This reflects a hardline negotiation stance on the part of the Politburo, no doubt the product of three years of tense US-Soviet relations. The point is that the shift in Reagan's approach made engagement feasible once a leader emerged on the Soviet side who reciprocated this desire. After Andropov's death in February 1984, Reagan began pushing quite forcefully for a summit

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<sup>126</sup> Interview of Don Oberdorfer with Robert MacFarlane, October 9 1989, Don Oberdorfer papers, Box 2, Princeton University Library, Public Policy papers.

<sup>127</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil & Triumph*, p. 365

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>129</sup> Interview with George Shultz, November 2012

<sup>130</sup> Described by Matlock in *Wohlforth, Witnesses*, p. 76

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*

with Chernenko. On March 2 1984, the President opened a high-level Administration meeting on US-Soviet relations “by observing that he felt the time had come to think of something between a get-acquainted meeting and a full summit with the Soviet leader. Such a meeting would allow them to talk about the situation and to lay plans for the future.”<sup>132</sup> In a further indication of what the hardliners’ alternative Soviet strategy envisioned, Weinberger warned in another meeting three weeks later, “If we become too eager the Soviet Union will sense weakness” and argued that the US should not pursue progress on strategic arms reduction talks in 1984.<sup>133</sup> Reagan was undeterred. In a letter to Chernenko in the same month, he wrote that “our dialogue has reached a point where [...] we should look for specific areas in which we can move our relationship in a more positive direction.”<sup>134</sup> He proposed steps such as trade-offs in arms reduction talks and a chemical weapons ban.<sup>135</sup> Little came of this initiative: now it was the Soviets’ turn to be intransigent. Chernenko replied by stating that a summit was out of the question. In an interview with *Pravda*, the Communist Party mouthpiece, Gromyko explained that the “US Administration continues to place its bet on military force, on securing military superiority, and on forcing its concepts on other peoples”, adding that arms reduction negotiations could not begin until US Pershing missiles – deployed in November 1983 in response to the Soviets’ SS-20 deployment of 1979 – were removed again (a stance as uncompromising and unrealistic as Clarke’s insistence that the Soviets make a ‘major move’ before any meeting could take place). In June, Chernenko wrote a letter that once again focused on familiar but worn-out Soviet complaints about NATO encirclement and the Strategic Defense Initiative. By this point, Reagan’s thinking about the Soviet Union had shifted considerably. His private thoughts about Chernenko’s letter are illustrative: it strengthened his conviction to push for a summit.

“I have a gut feeling we should pursue [a summit]. [Chernenko’s] reply to my letter is in hand & it lends support to my idea that while we go on believing, & with some good reason, that the Soviets are plotting against us & mean us harm, maybe they are scared of us & think we are a threat. I’d like to go face to face & explore this with them.”<sup>136</sup>

In fact, Reagan continued to prepare the ground for a summit and intensified his correspondence with the Soviet leadership in 1984. Chernenko reiterated that the US had to remove its intermediate nuclear force missiles from Europe before any meeting could take place.<sup>137</sup> Matlock suggests that this antagonistic stance had to do with the fact that “the Soviet leadership did not want to deal seriously with Reagan in 1984 lest they aid his re-election.”<sup>138</sup>

Still, as a result of Reagan’s new engagement strategy, all the pieces were in place for major moves in US-Soviet relations once a suitable partner emerged

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<sup>132</sup> Notes, ‘Private Meeting on US-Soviet relations, RRPL Matlock Box 42

<sup>133</sup> Cited in Wilson, p. 85

<sup>134</sup> RRPL, Ex. Sec. NSC Head of State box

<sup>135</sup> Matlock, Reagan & Gorbachev, 88

<sup>136</sup> Reagan Diaries, 14 June 1984

<sup>137</sup> See Fitzgerald, ‘Way Out There In The Blue, p. 239-240 for a good account of this period

<sup>138</sup> Reagan & Gorbachev, 88

on the Soviet side – which happened in 1985 after Gorbachev assumed power. Reagan and Gorbachev met within less than a year, and while there was little concrete progress at their Geneva Summit (other than a commitment to more talks, and minor symbolic steps such as the re-opening of consulates in Kiev and New York which had been shut after the invasion of Afghanistan), the fact that the US side was ready to enter serious negotiations without first having to put in place a strategy was a crucial factor that facilitated the subsequent development of rapidly improving relations. Gorbachev officially launched the process of perestroika with a speech to his Foreign Ministry and a personal memorandum to the Politburo in May and July 1986, respectively.<sup>139</sup> When a renewed snag arose in US-Soviet relations in the form of the Daniloff affair in 1986 (the arrest of a US journalist, wrongly presumed to be a spy), the NSC once again reverted to its usual advocacy of taking a tough stand against the Soviets. Reagan stuck to the Shultz strategy, and supported quiet negotiations which led to Daniloff being freed and enabled the Reykjavik summit to go ahead as planned.<sup>140</sup> At long last, an approach crafted three years earlier began to pay dividends: “After Geneva and Reykjavik, the Soviet new thinkers did not believe that the West would attack them, or ever seriously intended [...] Gorbachev’s most important interlocutors were West, not East. [...] He kept pressing the American leaders for more progress on arms control, and general removal of international tensions, which would allow him to devote more resources to his domestic reforms. He cherished and greatly benefitted from the interactivity that emerged in his contacts with Reagan.”<sup>141</sup>

Such ‘positive feedback’ patterns of interaction between leaders can effect dramatic change in a complex system and overturn even entrenched structures of hostility. This kind of interaction does not come about randomly or by chance: it takes specific policy choices and decisions by leaders to make such positive feedback loops become a reality. In the case of Reagan, it meant ignoring his conservative advisers, following Shultz’s advice in 1983 to prepare a meaningful dialogue even in the absence of concrete Soviet signals, and eventually recognising Gorbachev not as a continuum of Soviet leaders but as a significant break from the past and concomitant opportunity for change in the Soviet Union.<sup>142</sup> This judgement required trust and conviction on the part of Reagan – and the same was true for Gorbachev as he pursued deep domestic reforms.

The Reagan-Shultz constellation was well-described by Oberdorfer:

“Ronald Reagan knew he wanted a less dangerous and more business-like relationship with the Soviet Union, but he did not know how to go about achieving it [...] Shultz provided two ingredients that were otherwise lacking: a persistent and practical drive toward improved relations through the accomplishment of tangible objectives, whether they were arms control pacts, the settlement of regional conflicts, human rights

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<sup>139</sup> Masterpieces of History, Blanton and Savranskaya

<sup>140</sup> See James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, Chapter 6 for more

<sup>141</sup> Savranskaya, *h Diplo* Vol XI No 19 2011

<sup>142</sup> An argument that Nixon and Kissinger never tired of making, which James Mann amply documents in *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*

accords and bilateral accords, and organisational skills to mobilize at least parts of the fractious US government to interact on a systematic basis with the Soviet government. Reagan wanted it to happen, Shultz was the key figure on the US side who made it happen.”<sup>143</sup>

Caspar Weinberger, by contrast, “was utterly convinced that there was no potential benefit in negotiating anything with the Soviet leaders and that most negotiations were dangerous traps.”<sup>144</sup> As late as 1988, Weinberger wrote the following:

“A recent, rather startling poll indicated that 71% of Republicans and 74% of Democrats believe that the United States can trust the General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Trust in what sense? Trust that Mr Gorbachev will turn his back on the goals of the Soviet state? Trust that he is becoming more like us in economic values? Trust that the Soviet Union will never violate an agreement with the United States (the historical record notwithstanding)? Trust that Mr Gorbachev is diametrically opposed to the precepts of the Communist Party that he heads (precepts that are, of course, diametrically opposed to Western values and principles)? All of this is highly unlikely.”<sup>145</sup>

In 1983, the policy choice Reagan faced was one between dialogue or relentless pressure. As I argue here, this choice mattered greatly. Staying the hardline course would have made it significantly more difficult for Reagan to reach out to Gorbachev, and vice versa, in 1985. It would have taken more time for the two leaders to establish a working relationship, which in turn would have created less breathing space for Gorbachev to pursue domestic reforms that lessening international tensions made possible. Moreover, the actual wind-down of the Cold War took place only after the US and USSR signed arms reduction agreements that undercut the two states’ hostile posture. These substantial milestones in US-Soviet relations are hard to envisage had the Reagan Administration stuck to its policy of exerting implacable pressure on the USSR until the Soviets made a first conciliatory move.

I argue that it is a mistake to trace a linear causal movement from Soviet weakness to retrenchment: this was the least likely outcome in a climate of animosity, as events in contemporary Eastern Europe suggest. The fact that the USSR faced severe economic hardship was in and of itself indeterminate of the future course of Soviet foreign policy. As Matlock has argued, Reagan and Shultz “recognised that the Soviet leaders faced mounting problems, but understood that US attempts to exploit them would strengthen Soviet resistance to change rather than diminish it.”<sup>146</sup>

What I have tried to show in this paper is the inadequacy of structural accounts in explaining the peaceful end of the Cold War. Systemic trends present policymakers with facts, but rarely with a *fait accompli*. Structural realism is

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<sup>143</sup> Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 438–439

<sup>144</sup> Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 114

<sup>145</sup> Weinberger, ‘Arms Reduction and Deterrence’, *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1988

<sup>146</sup> Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev* 76



thus a necessary but insufficient theory to explain outcomes in international relations. It helps us understand the international situation faced by Gorbachev and Reagan in the 1980s, but it does not account for how the two handled this situation. An alternative course of action regarding the Soviet Union was open to Reagan in early 1983 that he rejected. Had he not done so, the subsequent benign development of relations between the US and USSR becomes much harder to envisage. Complexity theory – which is an explanatory approach, not a unified theory about the social world per se – consists of a series of ontological assumptions that entail certain epistemological consequences. I use it to push beyond existing, compartmentalised accounts of the end of the Cold War and advance our understanding of how different causal effects interact. Counterfactual analyses of decisions (both unintended and intended) show how agency featured in the changing web of East-West relations. We know that economic weakness gradually worsened the Soviet position; we know that fundamental social and ideational developments were underway in civil society in East and West that changed established political and cultural practices; and we know that both Reagan and Gorbachev made remarkable choices in domestic and foreign policy that improved East-West relations. Each of these stories is described by different IR paradigms in isolation: my goal is to figure out how these accounts are linked, which I do by examining how leaders featured in the network of interrelated causes of the end of the Cold War.

Complexity theory suggests that the international system is open-ended, that causation flows in many directions, and that contingency and causal indeterminacy abound. Leaders play an important role in this conception of international relations: their choices can push the system in particular directions, opening up particular avenues and closing down others in the process. Ronald Reagan embarked on a course of conciliation long before relations with the Soviet Union actually improved: had he opted for the alternative, it appears likely that the trajectory of East-West relations would have taken a different direction following the rise of Gorbachev. The iterated, positive interactions between Reagan and Gorbachev would not have taken place so quickly, giving Gorbachev less manoeuvre to lessen the USSR's aggressive international posture. As a result, reconciliation and trust-building would have taken longer, and may well not have taken place until much later, if at all.