Power and Identity

Reply to Doty, Neumann, and Oren

Deborah Larson

Areas of Agreement

In our essay on Gorbachev and the Revolution in Soviet foreign policy, Alexei Shevchenko and I argue that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his advisers chose the new thinking over competing foreign policy programs because it provided a global mission that would enhance Soviet international status while preserving a distinctive identity. Gorbachev sought to attain a new status for the Soviet Union as a moral and political leader in creating a new international order around the principles of the new thinking. This new identity, based on “soft power,” would have allowed the Soviet Union to achieve the status of a great power without first attaining a level of economic and technological development comparable to that of the United States. For that reason, we term Gorbachev’s strategy a “shortcut to greatness.”

Roxanne Doty suggests that identities are “more multifaceted and hybrid” than presented in our study. She asks whether the seeds or possibilities for a different identity were present within Soviet identity. I would agree that in the Russian case, at least, there are several alternative identities. The intellectual origins of the new thinking go back to the 1950s thaw after the death of Stalin and the Brezhnev détente period. The Soviet identity had within it several alternative strands, and the choice of identity depended on who held power in the Kremlin.

We maintain that at times, the formation of state identity is guided by instrumental considerations. Leaders may strategically select from alternative identities,
given their perception of the international environment. In this respect, our position is similar to that of Jeff Checkel and Sarah Mendelson, who argue that ideas cannot be studied outside a political context and that the power of the proponents plays a major role in determining which ideas get implemented. The Soviet Union had tried for several decades to compete with the United States for military power, but was still not recognized as an equal by the west. Gorbachev then turned to a strategy of social creativity, one that sought to exercise “soft power” based on the attraction of ideas and norms promulgated by the Soviet Union.

Doty asks whether nonrational, motivational considerations also enter into the choice of identity. Social identity theory (SIT) argues that people are motivated for their group to be evaluated positively by others. Leaders would probably not admit to themselves the extent to which their moves on the international scene are driven by the desire for prestige and recognition. Interestingly, Iver Neumann infers that we believe that Gorbachev’s strategy was irrational.

Ido Oren points out that our reconstruction of the “New Thinking” identity does not “delve into Soviet/Russian culture beyond the views of narrow elite.” Indeed, the New Thinkers were a small minority of Soviet specialists in international relations. Perhaps because Gorbachev’s revolution did not have broad support among Soviet academicians and foreign policy specialists, the new thinking did not survive external shocks to U.S.-Russian relations such as the enlargement of NATO and bombing of Yugoslavia. The Soviet Union, however, was a highly centralized state in which a narrow group of Soviet communist party elites could and did determine the direction of the country, regardless of the views of Soviet public opinion.
Areas of Disagreement

Oren charges that our article reproduces the metaphor of a “learner that is forever just about to make the transition into Europe.” To the contrary, we argue that the “new thinkers believed that the Soviet Union would have to act in a tutorial role, exercising moral leadership in persuading the West to abandon its ‘old’ thinking and behavior.” (p. 84). We emphasize, drawing from social identity theory (SIT), the need for groups to forge a distinctive identity. The learning metaphor implies that Gorbachev should have tried to imitate the views of Western powerholders, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, instead of proposing ideas that were completely opposed to their Hobbesian worldview.

In the article, Alexei and I argue that Russian rulers have repeatedly tried to modernize their military, political, and social organization to catch up with the West. These reform efforts, though, have typically been top-down and hasty. In part because of the pressures of great power competition, Russian rulers did not believe that they could afford to wait for a slower, more organic reform process to take shape from within the country. Premodern elements of society and culture therefore coexisted with Russian innovations and importations from the West. We do not, however, characterize these premodern forms of social and political organization as “Asiatic.” Indeed, during the 1980s the Soviets regarded Japan as a technological powerhouse.

Oren goes on to say that “the authors’ visions of their own nation are not neatly separable from their characterization of Russia’s identity.” He asks whether my “own identity as an American, liberal IR scholar and . . . a liberal democrat” intrudes upon my characterization of Russia. In asking this question, Oren overlooks my co-author Alexei
Shevchenko, a Russian citizen who was educated and spent his formative years in the
Soviet Union.

Alexei and I reconstructed basic elements of the New Thinking from secondary
sources, Gorbachev’s major foreign policy speeches, and the writings of various Soviet
foreign policy reformers. It is indeed remarkable how the much the new thinking
resembled Western liberal and social democratic writings on interdependence,
nonoffensive defense, and mutual security. Nascent elements of the new thinking,
however, can be found in Soviet academicians’ writings as far back as the 1950s and the
1970s détente. We did not impose our preferences in characterizing the works of
Gorbachev and the new thinkers.

Neumann argues that “in order to call a strategy magic, one must take it for
granted that the game being played cannot be changed by the strategy.” Consequently, in
his view, when we refer to Gorbachev’s strategy as “magic” we are in effect saying that
the international system could not be changed. In reality, we use the term “magic”
because Gorbachev hoped that he could reorient the practices of states from Cold War to
a cooperative system solely through the persuasive force of his ideas. To argue that
words alone cannot change a system does not imply that the system cannot be changed by
deeds. If Gorbachev did not succeed in establishing a comprehensive security system
based on the balance of interests, by his actions he did set forces in motion that ended the
old Cold War bipolar system. By allowing Eastern Europe to leave the Warsaw Pact,
Gorbachev unilaterally enacted the principle of freedom of choice. Gorbachev and the
New Thinkers permanently altered the Russian foreign policy identity, so that it is almost
unthinkable that Russia would return to Cold War discourse characterizing the United States as an implacable enemy.

Neumann questions whether SIT can be applied to states, since the stakes of the game are so different from experiments with football teams and smokers. Indeed, whether a theory can be applied to a new domain is an empirical question. By the same logic, one might also legitimately ask whether speech act theory or symbolic interactionism, also developed to analyze societal relations, can be transferred to the anarchic realm of international politics. Social identity studies have been carried out concerning the self-images of French Canadians, Southern Italians, East Germans and others.

Neumann observes that SIT gives a cognitive rather than social interpretation of ideas and meaning. But SIT is social in that group members and outsiders have a common understanding of traits that comprise the group’s social identity. SIT was developed by Europeans in reaction to the individualistic, cognitive emphasis of U.S. social psychological.

Areas Needing Further Research

There are several issues that Alexei and I need to think about further. What is the relationship between Russian public opinion and national identity under Putin? Does the foreign policy identity put forward by Russian elites require public acceptance? Or does the centralization of the Russian state allow Putin to behave much as Soviet rulers did in the past?

What is the relationship between hard and soft power? Can a country exercise soft power because of the persuasiveness or appeal of its culture and ideas without having
any material power? Was it irrational for Gorbachev to pursue moral and political
greatness through the new thinking? Does U.S. “soft power” ultimately have a material
base—i.e., the size and strength of its economy, its technological advances?

**Issues Needing Further Clarification**

I would appreciate it if Oren explained to me in more detail what “Russianism” is,
and how it might apply to our treatment of Soviet identity. Also, as a practical matter,
how does one “theorize the politics of identity in a more reflexive manner,” taking into
account “our theory’s embeddedness in the history and politics of our nation?”

To Neumann, I would ask what an “analytical primitive” is. What is the
significance of calling the international system an analytical primitive? I wonder if he
could elaborate more on the statement that “actor intentionality and social effects of
deeds are assigned too much and too little of a role, respectively.”