

# Social Constructivism Vs. Neorealism in Analysing the Cold War

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CHAN JUN HAO, AUG 6 2019

The Cold War spanned from the end of World War II (WWII) to 1991 (Wenger & Zimmermann, 2003, pp. 13-261). This paper explores if the social constructivist or neorealist account is more convincing in explaining the Cold War. The ambit of this paper is as follows: First, it will highlight the foundational assumptions of neorealism and social constructivism. Second, it will assess if neorealism's or social constructivism's core arguments can better explain three important dynamics of the Cold War – namely, bipolarity; the alliance behaviors of states; and the end of the Cold War. It will then conclude that social constructivism is most convincing in explaining the Cold War.

### Neorealism's Foundational Assumptions of IR

Any discussion of which IR theory best accounts for the Cold War should include the foundational assumptions of the IR theories in question. Neorealism argues that states are functionally similar 'like units' that strive for some level of independence, and that anarchy- the absence of a central government above all states- is a constant, structural defect undergirding IR, so that there is decentralized competition among states for none is required to obey or entitled to command, and there is constant uncertainty about the intentions of other states- situations that entail that interstate wars may break out anytime (Milner, 1991, p. 75; Waltz, 1979, pp. 88-114). The basic principle of survival hence informs state behavior, so that world politics is a self-help system fundamentally reliant on force and 'internal efforts'- consolidations of military and economic capabilities and inventions of percipient strategies (Milner, 1991, p. 75; Waltz, 1979, pp. 91-118).

According to neo-realists, although states are like units, they differ largely in capabilities; the dispersion of capabilities across states- the 'distribution of power'- is hence categorical in comprehending world politics (Dunneet *et al.*, 2011, pp. 72-74; Waltz, 1979, pp. 104-111). These capabilities are: population and territorial sizes, natural resources, military strength, economic capacity, and political adeptness and stability, and a 'great power' ranks substantially higher in all these tenets, but the final arbiter in IR that grants 'superpower' status to a state is the level of advanced industrial and scientific capabilities associated with 'state-of-the-art weapons' and the ability to deploy massive and well-equipped conventional forces (Lebow, 1994, p. 256; Waltz, 1979, pp. 131-181; Waltz, 1993, pp. 50-51). Neo-realists also argue that great powers matter most in the international system; the number of interstate wars in this system is a function of the number of great powers it comprises (Dunne *et al.*, 2011, p. 74; Waltz, 1979, p. 94).

Security to neo-realists, is the highest end in anarchy, and power is the means to achieving it; consequently, defensive neo-realists argue that states in anarchic orders tend toward this equilibrium where they balance against each other's capabilities to uphold a 'balance of power' (BOP) to curb the rise of a potential hegemon, which in turn, involves previous-mentioned 'internal efforts', and secondary 'external efforts' of joining weaker alliances to square off with stronger coalitions of states; the offensive neo-realists in turn, argue that in their efforts to balance against each other, states do not seek an equilibrium, but maximize their power to tilt the BOP to their advantage to become the foremost hegemon, for only then can they be assured of maximum security from others (Lawson, 2015, pp. 57-61; Walt, 1985, pp. 4-6; Waltz, 1979, pp. 118-127). Importantly, balancing contrasts with 'bandwagoning'- a strategy where states join the stronger coalition instead so that the leading great power of the alliance becomes the

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world hegemon (Waltz, 1979, p. 126). If there are two superpowers defining the international system, the system is bipolar, and if there exist only great powers, and more than two of them, the system is multipolar; bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar systems, with 'stability' being defined by neo-realists as changes in number of great powers defining polarity and number of wars among great powers (Hopf, 1991, p. 476; Waltz, 1979, pp. 135-203).

## Social Constructivism's Foundational Assumptions of IR

Social constructivists, in turn, argue that meaningful actions and behavior are plausible only within an inter-subjective context, which is sustained by a set of norms and corollary social practices- a 'structure'-, and discourse- ideas, knowledge, language, culture and ideology- makes this structure possible (Hopf, 1998, pp. 173-177). Constitutive norms, in turn, delineate a particular identity via designating actions that allow Others to recognize this identity and then responding to it appropriately, and identities are powerful as producers of conceptions, feelings and understandings because they are cognitively imperative to a predictable social environment (Hopf, 1998, p. 173; Hopf, 2012, p. 9).

These arguments inform three important tenets vis-à-vis the ontology of IR proposed by social constructivists. First, state identities tell the Self and Other who each other are and imply a set of interests with respect to possible actions in specific issue domains vis-à-vis specific actors fixed by structure; anarchy hence implies various degrees of perceived threat between different states predicated upon how they understand each other, so that not all states resort to self-help (Hopf, 1998, pp. 174-175; Wendt, 2005, p. 76). Second, a structure in IR is a set of relatively immutable norms and practices that constrain the behavior of states, and these constraints comprise material dis/incentives and the capacity of particular actions to reproduce both the actor's identity and the structure (Hopf, 1998, pp. 172-179). Third, unlike neorealism's conception of material (economic and/or military) power as the foremost indicator of influence and authority in IR, both material and discursive power- the ability to produce inter-subjective meanings of social structures via discursive practices- are categorical in explaining IR (Hopf, 1998, pp. 177-180).

That said, the systemic constructivists contend that structures are created and stabilized by interactions involving repetitive 'signaling, interpreting and responding' between states; normative constructivists argue that structures are formed by circularization of constitutive norms via treaties, diplomatic correspondences and negotiations among state actors; and societal constructivists assert that every society has a 'social cognitive structure' within which discursive formations clash and dominate, and that this structure is constructed both within states and via interstate interactions, by societal masses, and that political elites of different states interact with each other by choosing from a range of possible actions defined by their societal structures and corollary identities (Finnemore, 2003, pp. 105-137; Hopf, 2002, pp. 1-283; Hopf, 2009, p. 300; Wendt, 2005, pp. 79-80).

With the fundamental assumptions of neorealism and social constructivism covered, this paper will proceed to evaluate how they explain three important dynamics of the Cold War- namely bipolarity, alliance behaviors of states and the end of the Cold War.

## Bipolarity during the Cold War

The literature is dominated with the characterization of the Cold War as being bipolar based upon the neorealist idea of the distribution of power (Wagner, 1993, pp. 77-98). However, based on neorealism, the USSR could not have been a 'superpower' *right after* WWII, because its Gross National Product (GNP) was a small proportion of the U.S'; her industrial output was comparable with Britain's with each producing 12% of the world's steel in comparisons with the U.S' 54%; both Britain and her contributed 12% and 9% to the world's energy output respectively as compared to the U.S' 49%; and Britain had more advanced transportation and technological systems and more engineers than the USSR (Lebow, 1994, pp. 256-257). In fact, it was only from 1955 that the USSR had ranked second in the world in total capabilities vis-à-vis neorealist criteria, so that by the same benchmark, there was no bipolarity vis-à-vis the U.S. and USSR between 1945 and 1955 (Lebow, 1994, p. 257). Therefore, events from 1945 to 1955- the Berlin Blockade, creation of NATO, and Korean War- do not vindicate the neo-realists' idea of bipolarity as they so claim (Hopf, 2002, pp. 272-273; Lebow, 1994, p. 257; Waltz, 1979, p. 171).

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Social constructivism can however, account for how the U.S. and USSR understood themselves and each other between 1945 and 1955 and hence the events that flowed from these understandings that seemingly vindicate neorealism's 'bipolarity'. According to social constructivists, what was supposedly a bipolar setting between the U.S. and USSR during this period, was but a binarised conflict between two different state identities whose actions mutually reinforced each other's identities (Hopf, 2006, pp. 662-674).

The predominant discursive elements of identity shared by Soviet society and elites beginning from 1947 were subsumed by this Soviet identity known as the New Soviet Man (NSM)- a supranational, ultra-modern and secular conveyor of working class-consciousness and the vanguard of socialism that would lead pre-modern, undeveloped peripheral states into modernity; this identity instituted a strict dichotomy between the Soviets and the dangerous deviant Western Other, which then led to the Stalin regime's extreme intolerance and fear of difference between socialist Eastern European countries and the NSM model (Hopf, 2006, p. 663; Hopf, 2012, pp. 43-84). Simultaneously, the U.S. had ruled out the USSR as an offensive military threat to Western Europe; however the American public and elites had understood Western Europe as imperative to their security interests, for two world wars had been waged over it, plus it was seen as the linchpin of the liberal world order that Roosevelt and Truman had envisioned, so that its possible economic collapse after being weakened by WWII and the consequent rise of Communism there constituted American insecurity (Risse-Kappen, 1996, pp. 361-374).

This American insecurity led to the US Marshall Plan that provided monetary aid to Western Europe, which threatened Soviet NSM identity and motivated the consolidation of Soviet power in Eastern Europe via repressive institutions and military buildup and the formation of communist Czechoslovakia to defend socialism from Western democratic-capitalist encroachments (Hopf, 2012, pp. 83-265; Wenger & Zimmerman, 2003, pp. 20-24). Soviet consolidation subsequently prompted a chain reaction of events between the USSR and the West driven by worsening perceptions of each other as ideological/military threats; it led to the Pact of Brussels by West European states-a defensive alliance against the USSR- and the establishment of the democratic-capitalist West German state by the U.S. and its allies, which the Soviets then responded to with the Berlin Blockade, which the U.S. subsequently reacted to with the establishment of NATO (Hopf, 2012, pp. 136-267; Risse-Kappen, 1996, pp. 360-378; Wenger & Zimmerman, 2003, pp. 20-27).

Social constructivism, in fact, does not just explain why the Korean War had happened, but why China and not the USSR was involved in it; it argues that Stalin's circle had understood China as the USSR's 'revolutionary comrade-in-arms' and 'oldest little brother' who aimed to emulate or better its elder- hence the external projection of the Soviet hierarchy involving the vanguard center and its periphery, modernity and pre-modernity (Hopf, 2006, pp. 671-672). Therefore, Stalin's regime perceived communist China as the 'surrogate vanguard' defender of its NSM model in Asia, and so delegated to her, military support of communist North Korea in the Korean War waged against the democratic-capitalist South Korea (Hopf, 2006, pp. 671-672; Hopf, 2012, pp. 126-130).

## Alliance Behaviors of States

The neorealist proposition on distributions and balances of power within the international system also cannot explain the alliance patterns that had arisen during the Cold War, for otherwise the U.S. and not the USSR would have been balanced against by other great powers, for the U.S. was generating half the world's Gross Domestic Product and was the world's strongest military power after WWII, and had enjoyed a wide technological and economic lead over the USSR during the Cold War (Hopf, 2016, p. 5; Walt, 1987, pp. 275-276; Waltz, 1979, p. 201). Instead, the West European powers bandwagoned with the U.S. to balance against the weaker USSR, resulting in a preponderant Western coalition of aggregate power, with the U.S. and its NATO allies owning two times and three times, respectively, that of the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies' aggregate population size and GNP; and winning the Soviet coalition by a thin margin in aggregate sizes of armed forces and defense spending (Hopf, 2016, p. 5; Walt, 1987, pp. 274-276).

The social constructivists' argument of identity shaping interests can however, account for this indeterminacy vis-à-vis neorealism; the West European powers did not balance against the U.S. during the Cold War, but instead, with her, because they understood themselves as democratic-capitalist states nearer to U.S. identity than to the

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authoritarian-communist identity enshrined by the USSR (Hopf, 2016, p. 5). Even before this were racial identifications between the U.S. and European powers right after WWII, which had resulted in the U.S. pursuing a multilateral system of alliances with Europe and only bilateral relations with the then-nascent Southeast Asian region (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002, pp. 587-588). Neorealism argues that material power threatens, yet power is necessary but not sufficient to do so, for the meaning of power is interpreted and not pre-given; threats are socially constructed by states both via interactions with other states and their own societies- so the West European powers' closer racial, political and economic identifications with the U.S. than with the USSR made them view the latter as more dangerous and so ally with the U.S. against the USSR instead (Hopf, 2006, pp. 662-663).

## End of the Cold War

Neorealism is also indeterminate in accounting for the end of bipolarity associated with the end of the Cold War (Waltz, 1993, pp. 45-50). In the 1970s, neo-realists argued that bipolarity between the USSR and the U.S. would survive because barriers to gaining superpower status then had become unprecedentedly greater, and that shifts in Soviet-U.S. relations from confrontation to cooperation had been in line with bipolar settings (Gaddis, 1992, pp. 33-34; Waltz, 1979, pp. 183-204). The neo-realists then conceded in 1990 that bipolarity was ending with the USSR's retreat from Eastern Europe designed initially to arrest its economic decline as a superpower after 1985 (Lebow, 1994, pp. 254-264; Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 5-54; Waltz, 1993, pp. 45-66). However, the USSR's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a percentage of the U.S' GDP was 35% in 1950 and *higher* in 1985 at 39%, and Soviet growth in the mid-1970s had declined to 2% and then zero by 1980 parallel to an increase in military spending as a percentage of GNP; if bipolarity was to end primarily due to Soviet economic performance, it should have been so in 1950 and/or the 1970s and not only after 1985 (Lebow, 1994, p. 264; Wohlforth, 1999, p. 12).

The core reason behind neorealism's indeterminate account of change in IR, is its position that states are like units, which precludes a fair amount of plausible alterations to the international system; the constructivists' argument that identities shape preferences, and that there are multiple identities, however, precludes the acceptance of pre-given interests and hence allows for a wider variety of options of action for states and hence agency than is assumed by neorealism, but which are constrained by the social structures mutually formed by states and their societies (Hopf, 1998, pp. 175-181). Consequently, the social constructivists provide more coherent explanations for the end of the Cold War.

Constructivists argue that the end of the enduring rivalry between the U.S. and USSR was due to Moscow under Gorbachev conceiving the USSR as a 'normal social democratic great power' instead of a 'communist superpower' (Hopf, 2016, p. 7). The ideational ingredients for this new identity had been around since Khrushchev's governance, but were increasingly cemented by the preliminary success and subsequent disenchanting demise of the 1970s rapprochement between the U.S. and USSR, with liberal detractors of Brezhnev's détente approach rejecting notions of harmonious coexistence with the U.S. as being a type of class struggle; ideas of Western accommodative policies as being coerced in favor of socialism; views that capitalist states were inherently aggressive and that there existed irreconcilable interests between the two superpowers' ideological systems; and beliefs in nonexistent prospects of removing risks of armed conflict between both ideological blocs via rapprochement (Herman, 1996, pp. 288-292). Coupled with this were anti-totalitarian movements in Eastern Europe in the late 1970s, which further coaxed the masses of the Soviet Socialist republics into understanding the USSR not as the imperial vanguard of socialism, but rather, as merely a socialist suzerain they were still associated with (Hopf, 2009, p. 300; Koslowski & Kratochwil, 1994, pp. 234-237).

These attitudinal changes represented the societal rejections of the NSM, which made the Gorbachev regime understand the USSR as a faltering yet perfectible socialist project that required democratization to attain the Marxist-Leninist goal of becoming a beacon of social democracy for states worldwide (Brown, 2013, pp. 208-211; Hopf, 2006, p. 694; Koslowski & Kratochwil, 1994, pp. 234-237). This shift in elite understandings entailed the Gorbachev regime's empowerment of previously-repressed domestic discourses of Soviet identity via the de-institutionalization of the NSM, with efforts including *glasnost*- demand for transparency and public dialogue about issues plaguing the Soviet economy; *perestroika*- reformations of Soviet rule; and the foreign policy of New Thinking abroad designed to assuage other states that they could coexist with the USSR in liberal harmony- moves that led to the Cold War's end

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(Herman, 1996, pp. 271-316; Hopf, 2006, pp. 694-700; Hopf, 2009, p. 300; Wenger & Zimmermann, 2003, pp. 203-261).

## Conclusion

Neorealism is limited in explaining the Cold War mainly because it sees anarchy as a constant structural defect of IR, states as functionally similar units, and states as having identical pre-given interests predicated only upon their degree of material power- reasons that obscure the greater amount of agency that states realistically have in IR empowered and constrained by domestic and interstate structures of discursive practices, which is why developments that had shaped the Cold War had eluded neorealism's theorized predictions (Hopf, 1998, pp. 174-199). Social constructivism, on the other hand, better captures this agency that states have with its understanding of state identity as a variable constructed through discursive and material elements within societies and in interstate interactions, and so provides more convincing accounts of the Cold War than neorealism, as this paper has attempted to show – as with how a strict binary between U.S. and USSR state identities had resulted in events between 1945 and 1955 that neo-realists had argued were products of 'bipolarity' which, based on neorealist terms, did not really exist; how West European powers should have allied with the U.S. and not the USSR unlike what neo-realists posit for their state identities were closer to the former – which they actually did; and how bipolarity can end with a change in state identity and its corollary domestic and interstate social practices unlike what neo-realists theorize – as was with the USSR under Gorbachev, and the conclusion of the Cold War (Hopf, 1998, pp. 174-199).

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# **Social Constructivism Vs. Neorealism in Analysing the Cold War**

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