

## QUERY FORM

<b>Journal</b>	<b>IP</b>
<b>Manuscript ID</b>	<b>Collins [Art. Id: ip201115]</b>

**PLEASE NOTE THAT UNLESS WE HAVE RECEIVED A SIGNED COPYRIGHT FORM FROM THE AUTHOR, WE WILL BE UNABLE TO PUBLISH THIS ARTICLE**

Papers published via advance online publication (AOP) are fully citable using the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) system and the publication date. For example, per the IP style guide:

Thorup, M. ,(2010) Cosmopolitanism: Sovereignty denied or sovereignty restated?.  
International Politics, advance online publication November 30, doi: 10.1057/ip.2010.30

**Author** :- The following queries have arisen during the editing of your manuscript. Please answer queries by making the requisite corrections at the appropriate positions in the text and acknowledge that a response has been provided in 'Response' column.

<b>Query No.</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Response</b>
Q1	Do you wish us to remove your email address from the correspondence details that appear on this proof? If you would like it to be retained, please be aware that it cannot be removed at a later stage. Please note that your paper will publish online and your email address will be visible to anyone accessing it on the journal website. Do you wish us to remove your email address? Yes/No.	
Q2	Please confirm whether the insertion of the heading 'Introduction' is ok.	
Q3	Please confirm change of McAdam et al, 2001 to McAdam et al, 2000 as per reference list.	
Q4	Please confirm change of Collins, 1986 to Collins, 1980 as per reference list.	
Q5	Please confirm change of Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/2001 to Brooks and Wohlforth, 2000/2001 as per reference list.	
Q6	Please provide place of publication in the reference Collins (2004).	
Q7	Please provide place of publication in the reference Hobson (1997).	
Q8	Please provide place of publication in the reference McAdam (2000).	

## QUERY FORM

<b>Journal</b>	<b>IP</b>
<b>Manuscript ID</b>	<b>Collins [Art. Id: ip201115]</b>

**PLEASE NOTE THAT UNLESS WE HAVE RECEIVED A SIGNED COPYRIGHT FORM FROM THE AUTHOR, WE WILL BE UNABLE TO PUBLISH THIS ARTICLE**

Papers published via advance online publication (AOP) are fully citable using the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) system and the publication date. For example, per the IP style guide:

Thorup, M. ,(2010) Cosmopolitanism: Sovereignty denied or sovereignty restated?.  
International Politics, advance online publication November 30, doi: 10.1057/ip.2010.30

**Author** :- The following queries have arisen during the editing of your manuscript. Please answer queries by making the requisite corrections at the appropriate positions in the text and acknowledge that a response has been provided in 'Response' column.

<b>Query No.</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Response</b>
Q9	Please provide place of publication in the reference Tilly (2008).	

UNCORRECTED PROOF

---

## Original Article

# Explaining the anti-Soviet revolutions by state breakdown theory and geopolitical theory

Randall Collins

Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, 3718 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6299, USA.

E-mail: collinsr@sas.upenn.edu

Q1

**Abstract** A major area of advance in social science in recent decades has been the state breakdown theory of revolution. This is part of a larger body of theory about the rise of the modern state and the crises that can befall it along the way. It is sometimes referred to as the military/fiscal theory of the modern state, and as a branch of that larger theory, the state-centered theory of revolution. Here I will link military/fiscal theory of the state to geopolitical theory. Military/fiscal theory shows us the central mechanism, both of state growth and state breakdown; these are proximate causes, and further back in the causal chain are geopolitical conditions. Geopolitics tends to be the primer mover in any particular historical sequence, what sets off the changes that eventually lead to state growth or breakdown. *International Politics* (2011) 0, 1–16. doi:10.1057/ip.2011.15

**Keywords:** decline; USSR; USA; Reagan; military build-up; geopolitics

---

Q2

## Introduction

In 1980, I presented a paper at Yale, Columbia, and elsewhere called ‘The Future Decline of the Russian Empire’. It applied principles of geopolitics to the international power positions of the United States and the USSR. I laid out five principles, drawn from comparisons of changes in state borders in historical atlases, which predict growth or decline in territorial size over long periods of time (Collins, 1978). Plugging in available data from the 1970s, I was surprised to find that four of the five principles predicted the declining territorial power of the Soviet Union (SU) – which I treated as a continuation of the old Russian empire – whereas the four principles predicted no decline for the United States. The fifth principle, which I called showdown war, encompassed as one of its branches the possibility of nuclear war destroying both

rivals. Although obviously less favorable an outcome, it too fitted the prediction of Soviet decline.

My paper met with a very skeptical reaction in 1980. One prominent mindset was the unshakeable power of totalitarianism – this was particularly strong among scholars of the Russian Research Institute at Columbia. In policy, I was primarily concerned to argue that continued escalation of the nuclear arms race was unnecessary for the United States to triumph over the USSR; but the prevailing tone of politics at the time was to argue for the so-called second strike capability of the Soviets that left the United States in a window of vulnerability. After the election of Reagan, further military build-up, both nuclear and conventional did indeed take place; by the latter part of the decade, strains in the USSR were apparent to both sides; and in 1989 to 1991, my prediction turned out to be true.

Was it just a lucky guess? That depends on whether the geopolitical theory that I used is true more generally. And as theories are linked together by shared mechanisms, and the mechanisms can be tested separately by specialized researches, it is possible to look at the entire intellectual enterprise that supports, or fails to support, this geopolitical line of argument (Collins, 1995). A major area of advance in social science in recent decades has been the state breakdown theory of revolution. This is part of a larger body of theory about the rise of the modern state and the crises that can befall it along the way (Skocpol, 1979; Mann, 1986, 1993; Parker, 1988; Goldstone, 1991; Tilly, 1991; Collins, 1999; Centeno, 2003). It is sometimes referred to as the military/fiscal theory of the modern state, and as a branch of that larger theory, the state-centered theory of revolution. Here I will link military/fiscal theory of the state to geopolitical (GP) theory. Military/fiscal theory shows us the central mechanism, both of state growth and state breakdown; these are proximate causes, and further back in the causal chain are geopolitical conditions. Geopolitics tends to be the primer mover in any particular historical sequence, what sets off the changes that eventually lead to state growth or breakdown.

## **Historical Sociology and International Relations Theories**

Military-fiscal sociology of the state is an intellectual cousin of the realist branch in IR.<sup>1</sup> Disciplinary networks of discourse over past decades have somewhat different debates and terminologies. This may give some advantage insofar as the sociological side contributes to resolving controversies in IR among sub-branches of realist theory and in relation to constructivist theories.

In regard to the downfall of the USSR, realist theory has been pressed on such points as: why was the end of the regime a peaceful one? Why did the SU end at all, instead of merely de-escalating its confrontational stance with the



West? And why did it territorially fragment, instead of transforming as a whole into another regime type? A key to answering these questions is to recognize that GP theory and state-breakdown theory are a unified package, aspects of the military-fiscal theory of state dynamics. States do not necessarily decline only by defeat and conquest in war; this is because the internal structures of state finances, elite cohesion or split, and legitimacy are linked to external power prestige. Major GP shifts can cause revolutions going far beyond the initial scope of pull-back in military posture, by mechanisms that are spelled out in the following.

The historical sociologists who have developed GP/state-breakdown theory tend to be Weberians, and hence multi-dimensional and non-reductionist. Max Weber's trio of class, status and power – that is economic, cultural and power dimensions – applies to all social phenomena. In particular spheres, one of these may be causally more central; the state exists historically in the first place as a military/fiscal organization seeking internal legitimacy through power prestige. State elites are not necessarily cynical calculators (although they sometimes are, under conditions that remain to be specified by comparative analysis); emphasis on power-prestige can override material cost/benefit concerns in their subjective decision-making, or more to the point, in their social-interactive context. That means that state actors tend to respond – whether strategically or emotionally – to the same dynamic conditions surrounding them; in either case, their own power and prestige are linked to the fortunes of their state in relation to GP conditions.

Thus debates over the role of ideas and ideals, in alleged contradiction to material realities, are off the mark. The material components of military/fiscal state theory make themselves felt, whether one's ideology recognizes them or not; crises are structural and actors are impelled to respond to them, and their responses are only successful if they happen to address the key features of the crisis. On the whole, the public language of politics is rarely cynical or calculating, because this kind of discourse is weak in mobilizing energized supporters. Ideals should be seen, not as transcending the social world, but as acts of discourse, with varying degrees of emotional commitment, which are raised to a heightened level when shared by groups mobilized into dramatic scenes of social movements. (Theory on this point would lead us on a tangent; for the micro- and meso-level research on mechanisms, see McAdam *et al.*, 2000; Collins, 2004; Tilly, 2008.) Ideas are the medium in which social action takes place; but prominent ideas are the ones that carry collective emotion; and this is a mechanism linking local action to larger structure.

A related issue must be disentangled. State actors seeking power-prestige in the interstate arena are not necessarily operating in a condition of Hobbesian anarchy, hence untrammelled by any normative dimension of what is proper. There may indeed be, in particular historical periods, no coercively enforceable

order; but any particular era tends to have its procedures for dealing with enemies (for example, tacit limits on the length of battles in tribal relations; the practice of hostage-giving and enrolling defeated armies into winning coalitions in ancient Roman warfare; parade-ground manners in European balance-of-power wars of the early modern period and so on). My version of GP specifies, through historical comparisons, when warfare is more restrained or ferocious (Collins, 1978; this will be discussed below in connection with Showdown Wars). Interstate norms are not disjunctive of geopolitics, but are part of the medium through which GP operates.

### **State Breakdown Theory**

State breakdown theory is a paradigm revolution in the theory of revolutions. Traditional theory of revolution is bottom-up; state breakdown theory is top-down. The traditional view is that revolution is mobilized from below, in a popular uprising against an oppressive regime. The theory has been widely shared, by both Marxists and non-Marxist scholars – who differ chiefly in what identity they give to the popular forces rising from below. It continues to be the staple explanation of journalists, and in the rhetoric of protestors themselves. The people cannot be oppressed forever; eventually they rise up and overthrow a hated regime. This is the rhetoric of enthusiasm at the moment when, by dint of other conditions, the mobilization is experiencing success.

The causal theory of bottom-up revolution is inaccurate. As long as the state security apparatus holds together, popular risings are crushed by the military and the police. Popular uprising is one component in successful revolutions; this is what distinguishes them from mere coups d'état. But popular uprising is a late and contingent feature of revolutions; their occasional success is prepared by what happens at the top.

State breakdown theory requires a conjuncture of three factors. In order of importance, and also in order of time: First, structural paralysis of the state, most typically through fiscal crisis, and often in connection with military defeat. Second, elite deadlock over how to deal with the crisis. Third and last, popular mobilization from below – although not necessarily very far below.

A few words of elaboration of each of the three factors. Structural paralysis of the state is most likely to happen when the state cannot pay its bills. This is one reason why the security apparatus becomes ineffective; soldiers who are unsupplied or police who are unpaid stop being a reliable instrument of control, and may even go over to the opposition. In several of the classic revolutions, this fiscal crisis happened in the midst of a war: this was the case both with the Russian revolution of 1917, and – what is less well known – the mutinies in Germany at the end of 1918 that led to the collapse of the military



and overthrow of the German monarchy (Klusemann, 2009). It is also possible for the fiscal crisis to happen in times of peace, or of recent military victory, through the accumulation of debts from previous wars – this the pattern of the 1789 French Revolution; or the sudden demand for increased military funding, which led to the English Civil War and revolution of the 1640s. It was the pattern again in the crisis of the SU in the 1980s, leading to the eastern European revolutions of 1989 and the anti-Soviet revolution of 1991. Military issues are prominent in the great revolutions, because the military is historically the largest item in the budget; today we should say it is the most volatile large item in the budget. A crisis in the budget arising from military costs links, on the upstream side, to geopolitical theory; on the downstream side, fiscal crisis is the most incapacitating thing that can happen to the monopoly of organized force upon a territory, to paraphrase Max Weber's definition of the modern state.

There is also a direct path from military events to state breakdown and revolution. Military defeat of sufficient magnitude can directly incapacitate the state and open the way to its overthrow domestically. This was a pathway to the Russian revolution of 1917 (combined, as I have mentioned, with a fiscal crisis of the government). It was the pathway that led to the Meiji revolution in Japan in 1867; the precipitating event was the incursion of Western warships demanding concessions, against the background of a long-standing fiscal problem of Japanese government revenues.

Military defeat delegitimizes whoever is in power. What Max Weber called the power-prestige of the state is its degree of prominence in the world arena, its acting like a great power in dealing with other important states and in regulating the affairs of minor states. States that have built up power-prestige are loathe to lose it; this is one reason why the major revolutions tend to be ones that happen in the biggest, most militarily important states, unwilling to scale back. Power-prestige requires world-class military power, and that means a potential fiscal problem. A major military defeat gives domestic opponents an opportunity to portray themselves as more patriotic than the existing regime, and to claim that reform is the necessary path to restore national honor.

To draw together the threads of this part of the argument: military strain is a major component of state fiscal crisis; military defeat both tends to incapacitate the apparatus of repression that prevents revolution; and to delegitimize the existing regime and embolden its domestic opponents.

Turn now to the second factor, elite split. Elite split arises in its most debilitating form as factions disagree over how to deal with state crisis, and especially fiscal crisis. There are usually multiple factions, multiple competing sources of policy advice, but they boil down to a recurrent pattern: state-oriented reformers attempting to solve the state's fiscal and military problems; and elites allied with the state but who are most concerned to preserve

or resurrect their traditional privileges and liberties. In the case of the French revolution, lofty ideals are expressed on both sides, either returning to an idealized regime of the past, or moving forward into an idealized future. This ideological side of the situation plays an important part in the deadlock among elites. Both sides use the language of reform, although they mean opposite things by it; and this deepens the delegitimation of the regime.

As Theda Skocpol (1979) pointed out (following in the steps of Tocqueville), there is also a material side of the elite split. The state is an economic interest in its right, apart from the interest of the dominant social class; its interest is its own budget. Accordingly, the dominant property class is latently in conflict with the state administrative class, insofar as those who control the most wealth are the ones who could potentially contribute the most to solving a budgetary crisis. In a traditional Marxian model, both state and upper class live on the backs of the laboring poor; but generally the popular classes are squeezed enough as it is, and a state budget crisis cannot be solved by squeezing more blood from a stone. Thus there is an element of genuine economic conflict in the state breakdown path to revolution; it is not conflict of top versus bottom, but of top versus top, the two-headed monster of state elite versus dominant class elite.

Can this apply to a socialist regime that presumably lacks a privileged class other than the state elite itself? It can; in the 1980s Soviet Union, the elite split pitted reformers who wanted to reduce the state budget by cutting military expenditure, against the so-called conservatives in the military-industrial complex who were the beneficiaries of the lion's share of budgetary spending. Survey data from the late 1970s showed that those who worked in the military industries were the best paid and housed, and had the greatest ideological loyalty to the communist ideal (cited in Collins, 1980). Even within nominally state industries, the split emerges along lines of interests; those responsible for the direction of the state as a whole are most concerned with budgetary problems, and they come into conflict with those who have a more proximate interest in their own segment of the budget.

Q4

Budgetary crisis tends to come to a head in a situation of military crisis; and the combination of these two conditions puts overwhelming pressure on all factions of the elite to do something. Structural splits within the elite further publicize and dramatize the deadlock at the top of the state. Mobilization of elite factions at loggerheads with each other only increases the tension, like drawing back both ends of a bow. It is in these circumstances that popular mobilization from below becomes effective in tipping the balance.

The third condition is popular mobilization. In all modern revolutions it has been the scenes of the masses in action that have captured the dramatic center of attention; and the ideology of mass movements has usually given their name to any successful revolution (the Bolshevik revolution, the Jacobin revolution,





Puritan revolution and so on). Mass mobilization does not mean it is made up of the poorest and most deprived part of society; typically it is the best organized part of the working class or lower-middle class, and its leaders almost invariably come from a fraction of the upper or upper-middle classes that hives off to join the dissidents.

Mass movements have been greatly facilitated by modernizing conditions. Modernizing states penetrated into society, laying down infrastructure – transportation, communication, education – as well as providing a central focal point to which dissidents could take their grievances. The fact that we live in an era of social movements, however, does not mean that the movement is the prime mover of revolution. Social movements only successfully take power when the first two components of state breakdown have done their work: existing elites must have been thrown into a condition of irresolvable deadlock; and that in turn flows from a deep structural crisis of the state with military and fiscal components. Without the first two conditions, mass uprisings are almost invariably crushed.

Jack Goldstone (1991) gives an impressive test of the three core conditions for state breakdown. Goldstone's research answers the criticism of the case-study method in historical sociology, that it involves sampling on the dependent variable, and hence misses the cases where the theorized conditions are present but the outcome did not occur. Goldstone measures all three conditions over a period of 250 years of English history; the three conditions are added into a composite measure of pressure for state breakdown. They peak at 1640, a remarkable analytical prediction of the English revolution (pp. 143–144). In another chapter, Goldstone performs a similar analysis for 170 years of French history, and successfully predicts the timing of both the 1789 and 1848 revolutions.

The three-factor model is the core of state breakdown theory. We can also go further back in the chain of causality, and look for conditions that feed into the three factors; most important are geopolitical conditions that feed into the first and most important factor, state crisis.

## Geopolitical Theory

Three leading principles of geopolitical theory may be briefly summarized in terms of variables that determine geopolitical success or failure. The same principles that, at the negative end of the continuum, lead to state crisis and potential revolution, at the positive end of the continuum, foster military victory and, in times of peace, strength and power-prestige in the interstate arena.

First: resource advantage. The state with the greater economic base and population size, other factors being equal, will dominate opponents with lesser

resources. Richer and bigger states tend to defeat smaller and poorer states; over a period of time, the former expand at the expense of the latter, either as territorial empires or as spheres of influence.

Second geopolitical principle: logistical costs and overextension foster defeat.<sup>2</sup> The farther from home base that military forces are projected, the more cost there is in supply and transport. Distant wars are more costly than nearby wars; mathematically, there is always some distance at which a war is unsustainable because the fraction of resources eaten up by logistics reduces the fraction available for fighting to zero. Overextension occurs when logistics costs are too great to sustain the amount of force necessary to meet enemy forces at that spot on the globe. Historically, the problem of logistical overextension has not improved for many centuries, and may have gotten worse. Thus, although it is possible by air transport to reach any spot in the globe from any other rather quickly, the costs of supplying a war in this way is increasingly high, especially with the increasing expense of high-tech munitions and equipment. This was a major reason for the US failure to win in Vietnam, and has been a serious drag on sustaining the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Overextension is relative to one's total resources and the resources of one's opponents. An extremely rich state, compared to others, can project force at considerable distances for an indefinite period. Nevertheless, even very dominant states tend historically to reach a time and place where the sheer strain of fighting at long distance, and with attenuated resources at the front itself, risks major defeat merely because the enemy is nearer home base. This was repeatedly the pattern in the dynastic history of China; as the empire grew very large, its forces at the frontiers became increasingly expensive; because of increased fiscal strain at home, a defeat on a distant battlefield often would start the empire unraveling, bringing uprisings and civil war in the heartland. Overextension not only risks defeat but state breakdown. A corollary is that empires tend to collapse much more rapidly than they expand.

Third geopolitical principle: fighting on multiple fronts causes geopolitical strain. Traditionally, historians referred to this as the advantage of the marchland position: having enemies in only one direction, because of location on the frontier of settlement or with one's back against a natural barrier. Far-flung fronts means multiple demands on resources, and if the fronts are very distant, increases the danger of logistical overextension. But multiple fronts *per se* additionally increases the chances of military defeat; a crisis on one front tends to pull resources away from other fronts, thus increasing the chance for a second or third crisis and defeat. The defeat of King Harold at the battle of Hastings in 1066 was of this sort; he had just marched his forces to Yorkshire to defeat a Norwegian invasion, and now had to march back to meet a second enemy. Germany in the Second World War was defeated through all three geopolitical principles, notably through logistics costs in Russia and North



Africa, but the end became inevitable when a full-scale multi-front war was opened up in 1944, and collapse on eastern and Western fronts accelerated each other.

The weakness of multiple fronts might seem contrary to the classic principle of the strength of interior lines. But this is a matter of scale: interior lines are an advantage at the theater level; but at longer distances, they become a liability. On the largest geopolitical scale, where there are multiple states contending for power, the interior region is where balance of power politics prevails; multiple fronts and shifting alliances keeps any state from expanding long enough to accumulate a critical mass of resources that will overweigh all its opponents. Historically, it has been the marchland states who have made the sustained conquests, especially when they could pick up the smaller pieces of states in an interior position who block each other from expanding. In Chinese history, after the collapse of a dynasty, it was always one of the states on the periphery of the settled area who finally conquered the others and reunited a new dynasty.

This was the case with the expansion of Russia as well. In the fifteenth century the Grand Duchy of Moscow began to expand from the edge of northern taiga down into the crumbling remnants of the Mongol empire. States nearer the center of civilized settlement, such as Lithuania and Poland, were subjected to pressures from multiple sides; eventually Moscovy became a Russian empire, accumulating more land and populace while its nearest enemies were losing them. By the eighteenth century, Russia was a juggernaut that could put far larger forces on the battlefield than any state it encountered. The Russian empire underwent crises in mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as its rivals modernized and raised the technical quality of their armaments faster than the Russians. But the Russian empire survived to undertake reforms; in part because it faced some geopolitical soft spots where it had a steady string of successes, southwards into the crumbling Ottoman and Persian empires, and eastward into the sparsely inhabited territory of Siberia. Its revolutionary crises – periods of full-scale state breakdown – occurred when Russia had to fight armies more modern than its own, at the end of long logistical lines. Hence the defeat by Japan in 1904–1905 brought a temporary state crisis and attempted revolution; defeat by Germany in 1915–1917 in a much more massive war brought fiscal crisis and a deadlock of elites that opened the way for mass mobilized revolution that brought down the regime.

A revolution in a large country often leads to renewed geopolitical strength. The old sources of fiscal crisis and elite deadlock are removed, and the new regime can muster more directly the resources of its economy and population. Here it is useful to mention a corollary to the first geopolitical principle, relative resource advantage: Resources are geopolitically effective only to the extent they are mobilized by the state; the efficiency of the tax extraction for the central state plays a crucial role in delivering resources.<sup>3</sup>

A successful revolution tends to solve the problem of extracting domestic resources and putting them at the service of military power. History does not proceed in a continuous trajectory, however, not least because processes that increase the geopolitical resources of a state tend to feed its expansive tendencies; and that in turn risks logistical overextension, commitment on multiple fronts and becoming overmatched by the resources of one's opponents. This latter happens because one has expanded so far that one has absorbed all the easy targets, and now confronts the big and successful states that have been expanding in some other part of the world. History tends to go through a geopolitical sequence of successful local expansions that winnow down to a few states; these reach geopolitical limits, which cause state fiscal crises, elite deadlocks and state breakdowns; revolutions solve these problems and allow states to muster resources and expand again. This is of course an analytical simplification, and there are numerous other causal patterns going on at the same time; but beneath the hubbub of world history, the major geopolitical patterns impose themselves over the long run.

The Russian state, having gone through a series of crises at the time of the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese war and WWI, came out with thoroughgoing reforms that made it again a great power. The radical simplification of world geopolitics resulting from the defeat of Germany and Japan in WWII left two major blocs. Nuclear weapons, and other considerations of strategic equilibrium, ruled out direct full-scale confrontation; instead the Cold War era turned toward expanding the two rival spheres of influence, above all by military aid, intervention and proxy wars elsewhere on the globe.

In this contest, as we now know, the Western alliance won. But contrary to much triumphalism in the 1990s, for preceding decades most views in the West, both political and academic, regarded the Soviet regime as essentially unshakeable, although opinion was divided on how much of a threat it was to continue to expand its sphere of influence. In 1980, during the Reagan/Carter presidential campaign, a prominent argument was that the United States had fallen behind militarily, and was in severe danger unless it made a massive effort to catch up. It was in this context that I decided to apply geopolitical principles to see what they predicted about the future power of the United States and the USSR. To my surprise, the combination of all GP principles predicted the increasing power of the West; and not only the decline of the Soviet empire, but the prospect of its sudden revolutionary collapse. The USSR and its allies were outweighed in resources by its enemies by a factor of 4.6 to 1 in GDP, and 3.5 to 1 in population. The USSR was able to keep up something nearer parity in active duty troops (lagging 1.7 to 1) and was about even in total troops including reserves (behind 1.1 to 1) (sources in Collins, 1980). The Soviets did so by devoting far more of its GDP to its military budget than its opponents;<sup>4</sup> and mobilizing a much larger fraction of its



population (3.84 per cent compared to 1.12 per cent of opponent's population). All-out mobilization would overwhelmingly favor Soviet enemies in an actual war, and the potential advantage was increasing over time. In addition, the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s suffered from logistical overextension and from its own advances on multiple fronts: its far-flung military frontiers ranging from China to the NATO front; exacerbated by the nuclear arms race on the ground, in the air and space; by its efforts to create an open sea naval force – even a project for submarine aircraft carriers; the final straw was the long strain of unsuccessful war in Afghanistan – logistically a proxy war for the West. Under cold war conditions of armed peace, the Soviet bloc already faced the potential for state breakdown; the strains of actual war, or a resumption of resistance in its ethnic satellite states, I reasoned, would cause the Soviet empire to rapidly unravel.

Geopolitical variables are huge and therefore tend to move slowly; from past trajectories of GP change, I estimated that shifts in GP resources bring about shifts in the patterns of interstate power, but within a range of indeterminacy of 30–50 years. That is to say, when GP resources shift, their effects upon state expansion or contraction will be felt over a 30–50 year period; but we cannot say exactly when within this period a war, a victory or defeat or a state breakdown will occur. Thus I was a bit surprised at how soon the Soviet empire and the USSR itself unraveled, after I wrote this article in 1980. But events of 1989–1991 were certainly within the scope of the prediction.

### **Territorial Fragmentation, Showdown War and Nuclear Weapons**

My summary above of GP theory covered only three principles. In my original prediction of the future of the Russian Empire, two more were included: fragmentation of the middle, and showdown war. The former of these is a corollary of the marchland advantage or multiple fronts disadvantage: interior states with enemies on several sides, tend not only to lose territory (or spheres of influence) to its expanding enemies, but to fragment into smaller pieces. Thus the breakup of the SU in the 1990s into a large number of independent states follows from GP theory as well. It may be overdetermined, insofar as ethnic nationalism is involved; although it should be noted that the strength of ethno-nationalist sentiments is not historically constant, but fluctuates with GP power prestige. Strong and expanding states generate widespread sentiments of pan-ethnicity; weak and collapsing states give rise to upsurges of ethnic particularism, fitting opportunities for separatist movements to take power.

The several GP principles feed back into each other. Over long periods of time, winning states become increasingly resource-rich, losing states more

resource-poor; marchland states grow at the expense of interior states. These cumulative feedbacks lead to periodic simplification (on a scale of several centuries) from multi-polar to bipolar fields. This leads to a situation of showdown war, where both sides exercise great resources in a mood of high confidence, emotional energy and cultural antagonism. Hence the fifth GP principle: showdown wars are fought at the highest level of ferociousness, whereas balance of power/multi-polar wars tend to be fought with restraint under ceremonial rules (historical examples of both are given in Collins, 1978).

In this perspective, the threat of nuclear Armageddon is not without precedent. A nuclear war, destroying massive civilian populations or crippling states on both sides, is the kind of thing that happens historically at the climax of two large states' parallel growth toward hegemony. GP does not hold that bipolar showdowns always lead to this result. Three main possibilities are: one side wins and establishes universal domination (within limits of logistical strains); or both sides exhaust each other's resources, either rapidly in a very destructive war, or gradually over time. In this last case (as in the prolonged struggle of Roman and Persian empires), the way becomes open for a third party to expand into the resulting power vacuum (in that case, the Islamic conquest). In the situation of the post-WWII century simplification of multipolarity into US-SU bipolar stalemate, the rise of China and conceivably of the EU fits this pattern.

Nuclear weapons have distinctive qualities, but these add to variables within the scope of GP theory, rather than displacing GP. Conscious recognition of the possibility of mutual destruction can lead to negotiation during conditions of stalemated bipolar showdown. Indeed, the extreme destructiveness of nuclear weapons is one of the main reasons the showdown became stalemated. Political actors in the 1980s acted in consciousness of these constraints.

## **Policy Implications**

The chief analytical lesson from the fall of the Soviet empire is to bolster our confidence in the combination of state breakdown theory of revolution, and geopolitical theory. It provides a tool for projecting the future of specific cases around the world: whether we are concerned about the future world power, and future domestic stability, of China; of North Korea; of India or Pakistan; of Saudi Arabia; of the surviving fragments of the USSR; of the European Union; or indeed of the United States in its current pattern of projecting power in a situation of logistical overstretch.

In the current international order, the tendency has been to discourage direct intervention to cause regime change; instead the doctrine is widely accepted that economic sanctions can force regime change. Sanctions against Castro's



Cuba were supposed to motivate a revolutionary overthrow; a similar policy was used against Saddam's Iraq; and it continues to be a favorite tactic against so-called rogue regimes. Pragmatically, many people have known that economic sanctions do not work. State breakdown theory spells out exactly why this is so. Diffuse economic sanctions that hit the economy in general may immiserate the people, but economic discontent has never been the prime mover of revolutions.

The logic of state breakdown theory combined with GP theory is that if you want to promote a revolution, the best way to do it is a military arms race that will force a resource-stressed enemy into bankruptcy. In effect, this is what the Reagan administration did in the 1980s. My application in 1980 of GP theory to the future of the USSR was motivated in part by my own misgivings about Reagan's nuclear weapons policy. My policy advice at the point was that nuclear arms escalation was unnecessary to bring about the decline of the USSR. Nevertheless, the policy of the Reagan administration, to put increasing pressure on the SU military budget, was in effect a correct application of GP and state breakdown theory, whatever its conscious motivation. This convergence across partisan lines gives hope for a genuinely objective science of IR transcending partisan commitment.

The second practical point can also be illustrated by way of the USSR in the 1980s. Gorbachev is a typical figure of the period when a regime undergoing fiscal strain and elite conflict begins to enter the period of state breakdown. He is like the financier Necker in charge of the French budget in 1788–1789, or for that matter, the altruistic reform-minded monarch Louis XVI; like Kerensky in Russia in 1917. These are liberals, not hard-line conservative authoritarians; they come to power because the deadlock is so advanced that the state elites are willing to try anything, including radical reform, to save the regime. They are not always lifetime liberals; Gorbachev came to power as a protégé of the KGB chief. But once in office, they are shaped by the logic of the situation. The last gasp of a regime is generally radical reform from within. This fails because it cannot resolve the deadlock of contending elites.<sup>5</sup> Political liberalization, and the mood of crisis itself, allows the mobilization of revolutionary movements from outside the state; this is the third and most dependent of the conditions leading to revolution; but it is what gives the revolution its radical character, sweeping all the prior elites from power, and finally resolving the deadlock. Sad to say, the liberals take it on the chin. Merely having good-hearted liberals in power does not mean the regime has safely turned the corner to reform. Within the context of a fiscal crisis and elite deadlock, liberals in power are more likely to be the last act before the revolution.

Is there any practical conclusion we can draw from this? Apply the principle that international power-prestige of a state is reflected in the prestige and legitimacy of its leader. A state that is winning wars, or in a peaceful era is

taking a leading part in directing the international order, puts a halo around its leader (this is more pronounced in time of war). Conversely, a state that is losing wars or being manipulated from outside has low power-prestige; hence its leaders are deprived of a major source of domestic respect; at the extreme, they become humiliated and delegitimated. To combine this point with the previous one: a liberal reformer, attempting to get out of the condition of state paralysis, is doomed if the geopolitical situation is unfavorable.

On the other hand, a liberal reformer just might make it if the geopolitical situation turns favorable. Thus it is no accident that the states that have successfully liberalized during the past two centuries (notably England and the United States; earlier, the Dutch Republic) have been those that enjoyed favorable geopolitical positions; the popularity of liberal reformers was kept up by a string of geopolitical victories.

There may not be much room for policy maneuver on this point. Nevertheless, we should ask ourselves: Would it be a good thing for democracy for Russia to fail militarily in the Caucasus, and to be humiliated by NATO expansion into its former possessions? Under the principle that geopolitical failure delegitimizes state institutions, we should be wishing Russia's electoral regime geopolitical successes, while it still exists. Or compare India and Pakistan: The one successful democracy in South Asia is India. The unstable democracies, those rent with civil wars or prone to lapse into dictatorships – Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal – are those that have enjoyed no geopolitical success. Only India has been an expanding power, extending its sphere of influence – and despite its pacifist ideology, parading its military might. Indian democracy is legitimated because India has been able to expand its power prestige in its external arena, its near abroad. Among the problems Pakistan faces, is that the power-prestige of the state is low, through a long series of military defeats. How to reverse this is a difficult puzzle; but we should be aware of the importance of the problem.

### **About the Author**

Randall Collins is the Dorthy Swaine Thomas Professor in Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the Advisory Editors Council of the *Social Evolution and History Journal*. Among his many publications and books are: *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (1998), *Macro-History: Essays in Sociology of the Long Run* (1999), *Violence: A Microsociological Theory* (2008). His current work includes macro patterns of violence such as contemporary high-tech war; comparative studies of organized crime; and future crises of capitalist economies.





## Notes

- Q5** 1 Here the relation is perhaps closest to the positions of Kennedy, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001; and Brooks and Wothforth, 2000/2001.
- 2 Under the term imperial overstretch, this is the primary geopolitical principle emphasized by Kennedy (1987).
- 3 Hobson (1997) and more recently Klusemann (2009) have shown that differences in the effective military/fiscal resources of Germany, Russia, England and Austria determined their performances in World War I, and especially their staying power later in the war.
- 4 This is now estimated at as much as 40 per cent of Soviet GDP, compared to 6 per cent of US GDP. Aslund (in this volume).
- 5 The details of Gorbachev's changeable behavior during the 1980s and early 1990s, and the surrounding context of elite deadlock, described by the papers in this volume, strongly support this structural parallel. As Kotkin (2001) emphasizes, the Soviet security apparatus remained strong; the breakdown came at the top, not by dissidence from below.

## References

- Brooks, S.G. and Wothforth, W.C. (2000/2001) Power, globalization and the end of the Cold War: Reevaluating a landmark case for ideas. *International Security* 25: 5–53.
- Centeno, M. (2003) *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-state in Latin America*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Collins, R. (1978) Long-term social change and the territorial power of states. In: L. Kriesberg (ed.) *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change*, Vol. 1. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp. 1–34.
- Collins, R. (1980) The future decline of the Russian empire: An application of geopolitical theory. Paper delivered at Yale University, March 1980; Columbia University, April 1980. Published in Collins, R. (1986) *Weberian Sociological Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, R. (1995) Prediction in macro-sociology: The case of the soviet collapse. *American Journal of Sociology* 100: 1552–1593.
- Collins, R. (ed.) (1999) Maturation of the state-centered theory of revolution and ideology. *Macro-history: Essays in Sociology of the Long Run*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Q6** Collins, R. (2004) *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton University Press.
- Goldstone, J.A. (1991) *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Q7** Hobson, J.M. (1997) *The Wealth of States*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kennedy, P. (1987) *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. New York: Random House.
- Klusemann, S. (2009) The German revolution of 1918 and contemporary theories of state breakdown. Unpublished paper, University of Pennsylvania; under revision for *American Journal of Sociology*.
- Kotkin, S. (2001) *Armageddon Averted. The Soviet Collapse 1970–2000*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mann, M. (1986, 1993) *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 1. *A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*. Vol. 2. *The Rise of Classes and Nation-states, 1760–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Q8** McAdam, D., Tarrow, S. and Tilly, C. (2000) *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.



Parker, G. (1988) *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Skocpol, T. (1979) *States and Social Revolutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tilly, C. (1991) *Coercion, Capital, and European States. AD 990–1990*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Tilly, C. (2008) *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge University Press.

Tocqueville, A. (1856/1955) *The Old Régime and the French Revolution*. New York: Doubleday.



UNCORRECTED PROOF