



## **Beyond pleasant lunches – How independent research and new ideas played a role in ending the Cold War**

A retrospective on the years 1987-1989

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### **1. Introductory Note**

When I began researching and writing about military policy reform in the second half of the 1980s, I was not naïve about how easy it would be to make change. I understood that the field I was entering was conservative and the norms of policy discussion were well-guarded and entrenched. Access to decision-makers was difficult, at best. It was far from certain that my efforts would have any material effect on state institutions, security systems, military interventions, and wars.

When yet another war broke out, as it often did, I had moments when I felt, “What’s the point of all this work?” I found that I could ease my doubts by chronicling and curating critical analytical reporting and analysis of the current war. This role came rather naturally to me as a former publisher.

In the case of the 2003 Iraq war, the work that my colleague Carl Conetta and I did before, during, and after that war had an effect. I am confident that the combination of our own analytical reports and the large online archives/libraries we built (consisting of critical assessments and just plain good information and reporting by others) contributed meaningfully to that war’s subsequent bad reputation. A “bad war” often dissuades national leaders from rashly starting another, at least for a while.

This retrospective tells a different story. It explores how the *independent development of new ideas* (“alternatives”) for effective national security played a role in events that would prove world-changing by ending the Cold War.

The distinction I intend in using the word “independent” is that the research and thinking are pursued in a context largely outside any large state or private institution that sets the parameters of investigation, and, equally importantly, the work is free from direction for a particular instrumental use defined by others. I note that it is not unusual for researchers and thinkers working in institutional settings to find the time and energy beyond their work obligations to engage in “independent thinking and research”.

This story focuses on the work of one researcher/thinker from West Germany. It follows the migration of his thinking and writing (and that of a network he organized) to Mikhail Gorbachev’s key foreign policy advisers. Once there, this work likely played a role in shaping the particulars of one of the Soviet leader’s most consequential policy decisions.

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## **2. Brookline, Massachusetts, USA**

I begin by situating myself adjacent to this story in 1987. That year, I became a research fellow at the Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies (IDDS), founded in 1980 and directed by Randall (Randy) Forsberg. She was well-known for articulating and advocating for a bilateral “freeze” of the nuclear forces of the USSR and the USA, sparking a popular movement. I was attracted to the bilateral freeze idea, and even more so to a related idea I had heard Randy speak about.

Randy argued that conventional military structures, especially those optimized for operational and strategic offensives, made escalation to nuclear use plausible, even likely, in the event of war. To counter this dynamic, she asserted that non-offensive restructuring and the reduction of

conventional forces were essential to progress toward eliminating the very real threat of nuclear war.



*Randall (Randy) Forsberg*

Randall Forsberg understood the role of unilateral initiatives in reducing the heightened perception of insecurity that was endemic during the Cold War. She also believed in a leading role for bilateral and multilateral negotiated arms reductions.

One example of Randy's efforts to advance conventional arms negotiations was her organizing an unofficial U.S. delegation of experts to travel to Moscow in September 1988 for several meetings with the Soviet experts at the USSR Academy of Sciences' Institute for World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), with follow-up meetings with "high-ranking advisers" to the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Foreign Ministry. The focus of these meetings was the upcoming Conventional Forces in Europe negotiations, which began in March 1989. The discussions in Moscow included frequent references on both sides to the roles of defensive restructuring and unilateral steps. [see Carl Conetta, rapporteur, "[Joint US-Soviet Seminar on Conventional Arms Reduction in Europe](#)", January 1989.]

When I arrived at IDDS, I joined the Institute's recently created project on Ground Forces Alternatives, focusing on reforming NATO's conventional forces. To further this program, Forsberg was making sustained contact

with the community of *alternative defense* theorists in Europe. Among these was [Lutz Unterseher](#), living in Bonn, the West German capital. I have found a note in my files, dated June 17, 1987, about a call to Lutz (in which I was a participant) during which we planned a fall trip to Washington by Lutz for a briefing of Congress members organized by the Institute.

In these early days of introduction to Lutz and his work, I remained far from the action in Europe. It would be another year before I felt ready to advocate for alternative defense ideas, and even then, I did so in general terms.



*Lutz, Carl & Charles in South Africa, 1996*

In this retrospective, I recount the story of the transmission of Lutz’s military reform ideas from West to East, eventually arriving, in some form (as selected and digested by intermediaries), to the attention of Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Several of the advisers to Gorbachev whom I cite below frequented the Kremlin “room(s) where it happened”. Meanwhile, in 1987, Lutz was working from his home in Bonn. He was largely institutionally independent, though he had organized an intellectual network in 1980 called Studiengruppe Alternative Sicherheitspolitik (SAS), or Study Group on Alternative Security Policy, in English. SAS members were active and retired military personnel, defense analysts, political and social scientists, economists, mathematicians, physicists, lawyers, parliamentarians, and trade unionists from nine countries: Austria, Britain, Denmark, Germany

(East and West), France, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United States.

Lutz Unterseher and SAS were not the only ones working on alternative military doctrines and postures at the time. In Western Europe, in particular, there were a variety of ideas and designs for what was variously known as defensive, non-provocative, or non-offensive defense (NOD). Lutz called his variation [confidence-building defense \(C-BD\)](#).

By the second half of the 1980s, Moscow *institutchiks* working on the foreign policy reforms were aware of many of these strains of thought. Indeed, by 1987, something of an East-West epistemic community (a network of experts sharing theories, knowledge, and practice) emerged regarding arms control and ways to demilitarize East-West relations.

I am not attempting an overall historical examination in this essay. I focus on Unterseher and SAS because of my personal familiarity and a preference for this approach. During the 1990s, I would become a collaborator with Lutz and come to count him as a very good friend. He also invited me to join SAS.

Regarding my preference for the Unterseher variety of NOD, I appraise the Unterseher/SAS work to be the most comprehensive, providing:

- *principles of confidence-building defense,*
- *schematics of the operational employment of forces,*
- *elucidating detailed illustrations of the force structure,*
- *composition of weaponry employed, and*
- *costs of acquisition, support, and maintenance of forces (including humans, arms, and operational supplies)*

These qualities would have been of particular interest to Soviet specialists tasked with creating a credible proposal for the transformation of the USSR's military posture toward "*reasonably sufficiency*" with "*a defensive orientation*", as Gorbachev had, in early 1986, announced to the Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. At the top of Gorbachev's many pressing concerns was the high percentage (15-25%) of Soviet GDP dedicated to the military sector.

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### 3. Bonn, Federal Republic of Germany

In a memoir essay written in 2018, [\*Pleasant Lunches: Western Track-Two Influence on Gorbachev's Conventional Forces Initiative of 1998\*](#), Lutz tells the story of how, in January 1987, a Soviet Embassy attaché, Vladimir Semyonov, invited him to lunch during which Semyonov requested copies of unpublished papers on structural reform of conventional forces, presumably to send back to Moscow. Lutz surmised that Semyonov likely had a dual identity as a KGB agent (which turned out to be true). Since Unterseher worked only from open sources and was intent on creating conditions for peace in Europe, he decided in favor of analysts in Moscow gaining access to his work, even if the courier was a KGB agent.

The *Pleasant Lunches* memoir does not tell us who, back in Moscow, was requesting these papers. I think it is likely that Lutz never asked the attaché, because he knew no useful response would be forthcoming.

If the specific ideas of Lutz Unterseher or other Western non-offensive defense thinking influenced Gorbachev's decisions, they would have worked their way up through several levels of the Moscow hierarchy.

Lutz also tells the story of a conference on "European Security and Non-offensive Defense" in Bulgaria he attended in October 1987. There, he worked with the East German mathematician Walter Romberg to prepare a paper that Romberg would then present on non-offensive defense ("in very concrete terms, down to the level of individual military formations, and how a process of reciprocal unilateral measures of restructuring and disarmament could be implemented"). Romberg's talk was published in 1988 as "*Towards non-offensive defense through unilateral, limited and reciprocated reductions: on a gradualistic approach to military crisis stability in Central Europe,*" in [European Security and Non-Offensive Defense](#), World Federation of Scientific Workers (ed.), Berlin (East). We can only speculate as to who might have read that article in Moscow.

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#### 4. Moscow, USSR



*Mikhail Gorbachev*

When Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in March 1985, his primary focus was a reform agenda to address the serious problems in the Soviet economy that had first become manifest in the 1970s. In a public speech in May of 1985, Gorbachev spoke of stagnation and declining living standards while drawing attention to excessively large military expenditures. He began looking for multiple ways to make the case to the Soviet public and to his government (including the overall CPSU hierarchy and, of course, the Defense Ministry) that defense cuts were necessary and reasonable.

Part of his subsequent program was to pull Soviet forces back from foreign military deployments and interventions. He began with Afghanistan and then moved on to the reduction of Soviet Forces in the Warsaw Pact countries, while simultaneously negotiating with NATO countries for reductions of conventional and nuclear forces.

In 1986, he persuaded the Politburo (the supreme council of the CPSU) and Defense Ministry to formally accept the strategic goal of “sufficiency of defense” as an encompassing, if imprecise, concept Gorbachev could use to justify large defense-sector cuts.

His task then was to persuade and organize the Soviet government apparatus to make the transformation real. This required ongoing attention to developing and detailing the particulars of changes in defense posture and foreign commitments that would eventually benefit the economy.

Fast forward to December 7, 1988, when Gorbachev made a world-changing [speech at the UN](#) in which he announced, to the astonishment of both NATO-country and WTO-country leaders, the withdrawal of 50,000 troops from the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, including the withdrawal and disbandment of six tank divisions and assault landing/crossing units – military units of particular relevance to large-scale offensive operations. He also committed the Soviet Union to restructure those Soviet forces that would remain in WTO countries into defensive formations.

In the context of 13 years of negotiations that had not yet led to agreement on conventional arms reductions in Europe, this unilateral step was a radical move intended to supercharge momentum toward disarmament and, by extension, much improved East-West relations (aka “an end to the Cold War”).

A CIA Intelligence Assessment, “[Gorbachev's September Housecleaning: An Early Evaluation](#),” dated six days before the UN speech, includes these passages:

“The West is likely to face greater Soviet foreign policy activism, including bold, possibly unilateral, moves designed to generate international support for Soviet positions.

“[T]he leadership changes that occurred in September have already begun to affect a number of policy areas...increasing the likelihood of new initiatives in foreign and national security policies. Operating from a position of new strength, Gorbachev is likely to be even less predictable than before. *This will pose a greater challenge for the West, as he seeks to keep the United States and NATO on the defensive with bold initiatives that are likely to have substantial propaganda value with Western publics.*”(italics mine)

It is striking that the CIA in 1988 assessed Gorbachev’s national security initiatives as a “greater challenge” for the U.S and NATO rather than an opportunity to end the Cold War.

The announcement of unilateral reductions and defensive restructuring of Soviet forces in Eastern Europe was also a radical change for the defense establishment in the Soviet Union, which remained skeptical about the strategic, operational, and tactical aspects of defensive restructuring and

was deeply troubled by losing its privileged position in the competition for state funding.

Gorbachev's domestic political problems were severe and growing in 1988. The records I have found do not make clear how many members of the Politburo had prior briefings on the specific provisions of the speech. We know [he ran the particulars past his closest allies on the Politburo, Yakovlev and Shevardnadze, and a few others.](#)

Stepping back a year and down a couple of rungs of the hierarchy, in 1987, Andrei Kokoshin was the deputy director of ISKAN (Institute of the USA and Canada of the USSR Academy of Sciences). ISKAN was the main advisory body to the Soviet government on policy regarding the United States and Canada. Kokoshin and his frequent collaborator, Major General Valentin Larionov of the General Staff Academy, were supplying analyses and researched policy options to Gorbachev and other members of the Politburo.



*Andrei Kokoshin (left) & Valentin Larionov (right)*

Unterseher cites Cornell historian Matthew Evangelista's book Unarmed Forces, which includes the paragraph (p. 191):

"[Andrei] Kokoshin was probably the Soviet scholar most attracted to and involved in transnational discussions of non-offensive defense. He was an active participant in [Anders] Boserup's Pugwash group on conventional forces and followed the European debates closely. His views were particularly influenced by Unterseher's work." [Evangelista's source: interview with Andrei Kokoshin in Moscow, November 1990.]

In 1988, Kokoshin and Larionov co-authored an article, "Confrontation of Conventional Forces in the Context of Ensuring Strategic Stability", which includes this endnote:

"A number of prominent West European (including West German) specialists believe that under conditions of the balance achieved between Warsaw Pact and NATO forces and the palpable relaxation of tensions in the international situation, *the West could allow itself to take major unilateral steps toward changing over to exclusively defensive strategic alternatives in hope that they would evoke similar reciprocal steps from the Warsaw Pact.*" [italics mine]

Notable in the above quote is the idea of *reciprocal unilateral steps*, an aspect of the Unterseher approach that was relatively rare in Western circles. The historical irony was that it was the Soviet Union rather than NATO that was preparing to take the first unilateral steps.

Kokoshin's immediate superior was Giorgii Arbatov, director of ISKAN.



Giorgii Arbatov

While Kokoshin and/or Larionov may have personally briefed Gorbachev (I have found no clear evidence of such), it was probably Arbatov who had the greatest opportunity to present the findings of Kokoshin and Larionov's research to Gorbachev. Arbatov may have provided similar briefings to other reform-minded Politburo members such as Aleksandr Yakovlev (Central Committee Secretary for Ideology) and Eduard Shevardnadze (Foreign Minister). Arbatov's job also involved occasional briefings of Dmitry Yazov (Defense Minister and future participant in the August 1991 coup), as well as briefings for the Committee of State Security (KGB).

In these sorts of briefings, I can imagine Arbatov using some of Unterseher's more detailed military-technical work (for instance, on the defense-efficient use of overlapping fields of fire from dispersed artillery emplacements) to reassure conservative military men that Mr. Gorbachev was serious about providing good military defenses for the Soviet Union. If this ever happened, such ideas would have likely been dressed up in a Russian uniform (so to speak).

During this period, Larionov and Kokoshin collaborated to resurface the ideas of General Aleksandr A. Svechin, who in the 1920s and 1930s had argued for defensive military strategies and operations as a viable option for Soviet forces. This was a smart political move by Kokoshin and Larionov in the context of Soviet nationalist culture, which strongly preferred Russian sources of discovery and ideas. No doubt, they also recognized that advancing German ideas on structuring forces and strategy would provoke emotion-laden skepticism among Soviet officers, many of whom were veterans of the Great War against Germany.

Another possible source of the request to Lutz Unterseher for his papers is Lev Mendelevich, Soviet Ambassador to Denmark beginning in 1984. In 1986, he returned to Moscow and became director of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Evaluation and Planning Directorate. At the ministry, Mendelevich's boss was Eduard Shevardnadze.



Lev Mendelevich (left) and Eduard Shevardnadze & Gorbachev (right)

While Ambassador to Denmark, Mendelevich pursued an interest in Western thinking on non-offensive defense, ordering his staff to collect literature, especially from Denmark and Germany. (Evangelista, pg. 189)

I have been unable to determine whether Kokoshin or Mendelevich arranged the Soviet attaché lunches with Unterseher in Bonn. Still, there is little doubt it was one or both. Here is a plausible scenario involving both Kokoshin and Mendelevich:

Kokoshin is well acquainted with Danish peace researcher Anders Boserup, having attended Pugwash conferences together. Boserup mentions Mendelevich's interest in non-offensive defense to Kokoshin, who then contacts Mendelevich. Mendelevich offers to use his Foreign Ministry channels to collect unpublished papers from Unterseher. The pleasant lunches follow, and the Unterseher/SAS unpublished papers head east to Moscow in diplomatic pouches, to the attention of both Kokoshin and Mendelevich.

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## 5. My reflections on this story

In 1994, an article by Thomas Risse-Kappen appeared in *International Organization* entitled "[Ideas do not float freely: transnational coalitions, domestic structures, and the end of the Cold War](#)".

I quote here several paragraphs from the article that are particularly relevant to this story:

"[S]ome of the ideas that informed the reconceptualization of Soviet security interests and centered around notions of "common security" and "reasonable sufficiency" originated in the...community comprising arms control supporters in the United States as well as peace researchers and left-of-center political parties in Western Europe... [forming] transnational networks with "new thinkers" in the foreign policy institutes... Mikhail Gorbachev, as a domestic reformer and uncommitted thinker in foreign policy, was **open to these ideas because they satisfied his needs for coherent and consistent policy concepts**. As a result, **the new ideas became causally consequential for the turnaround in Soviet foreign policy** [emphasis mine].

"[N]onoffensive defense was alien to traditional Soviet military thinking. In fact, the **initial reaction of even civilian experts in the Soviet**

**Union to the alternative defense debate in Western Europe had been quite hostile and turned more sympathetic in their publications only after Gorbachev had come into power [emphasis mine]."**

So, what does it take for "new ideas to become causally consequential"?

Risse-Kappen argues that the impact of ideas on international politics depends on the **domestic structures** and **coalition-building processes** within states. He posits that **ideas require institutional "channels" and the support of powerful political actors to influence policy, rather than simply spreading on their own merit.**

I agree with Risse-Kappen's take regarding the field of international politics. Nation-states conduct international politics in a highly focused and hierarchical manner. "Great Powers", in particular, have large, complex bureaucracies that often employ thousands to advance "state interests". In terms of broad citizen participation, these institutions are minimally democratic, if at all. Their operations and procedures are carefully guarded and often performed in secrecy. Furthermore, the construction of "state interests" involves the preferences of a minuscule portion of the nation's citizens. In the case of foreign and military policies, it makes little difference whether the state system is deemed democratic or authoritarian.

The Unterseher/SAS set of ideas was a particularly good fit with what Gorbachev needed. Gorbachev had already decided he needed to cut Soviet defense spending, in part by withdrawing a significant number of troops from Eastern Europe. He would rationalize this withdrawal by pointing out that offensive strategies require very costly combinations of force elements. Changing the Soviet war-fighting strategy from an emphasis on strategic and operational offensives to a "defense sufficiency" strategy would yield substantial resource savings for the Soviet Union. Unterseher had detailed this sort of defense structure and explained how it reduces resource demands, so there was a close fit to his "new thinking" and what Gorbachev needed.

Additionally, Gorbachev was in a hurry. The Soviet economic crisis worsened in the second half of the 1980s, at a time when Gorbachev needed

to demonstrate success with his perestroika reform program. Even before Gorbachev came to power, the Soviets had been open to negotiations for “mutual and balanced” reductions in conventional forces in Europe. However, negotiations had dragged on for many years without resolution. Lutz Unterseher was one of the few Western security thinkers who believed unilateral reductions should be a tool to move significant disarmament and arms control forward, both through reciprocal measures and through negotiated treaties.

I conclude from this retrospective that for a national leader to look beyond well-known, well-understood ideas to new ones requires the leader’s assessment that the ideas already on hand are insufficient. The leader may then decide to look beyond their established foreign and military policy institutions, even seeking ideas abroad. This happens infrequently, but it does happen.

Why then do national leaders (and leaders of other large institutions) infrequently take up new ideas and use their power to operationalize them? The answer, I believe, is that such leaders have dozens of pressing matters on their agenda and that their experience has taught them that relentless pragmatism is the best stance in such a situation. Pragmatism then biases leaders toward a conservative attitude toward the new, particularly that which is outside the norm of their particular institution. Consequently, if they judge that they can “get by” with the status quo, they will often opt to ignore the new or radical.

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## **6. What I learned in researching and writing this retrospective**

Like a child born into a large family, *the birth, development, and “useful life” of new ideas are complicated.*

For ideas to move from their peripheral invention and development to the “room(s) where it happens”, one must develop them well beyond theories and general principles. One must invest time in constructing convincing illustrations of how to apply the ideas in real-world situations, in

calculating and assembling descriptions of the required resources, and in detailing the steps needed to operationalize the ideas.

Such “idea packages” or “idea complexes” will benefit from seeking constructive criticism from others and then taking time to refine the package. In this regard, the Studiengruppe Alternative Sicherheitspolitik was particularly valuable in the development of confidence-building defense ideas.

Because an idea finds use in one situation doesn't mean it will prove useful in others, at least, not on the timeline one might wish for. The idea may still turn out to be part of what unfolds over time.

The ego may whine and protest, but it is not a tragedy if an idea “is before its time.” The vast majority of useful ideas are built on foundations laid by others. If a creation doesn't find takers now, it may well become part of a new idea package that finds its way into the “room(s) where it happens” in the decades to come. An amazing societal change may result, although in the present it can only be faintly imagined.

If one finds inspiration in the fantasy that some powerful leader, institution, or political movement will take up the idea and make history, it is best not to allow such dreams become an essential part of one's commitment to the work.

It is advisable to work ideas because their creation and refinement nourish one's soul and bring pleasure. If one can get paid along the way, all the better.

Meanwhile, enjoy the good work!

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