

[Article Review 464- "The Malta Summit and US-Soviet Relations: Testing the Waters Amidst Stormy Seas"](#)

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Reviewed by **Francis J. Gavin**, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

On one level, that a newly minted political scientist has produced a sophisticated, subtle historical analysis of a key event in U.S. foreign policy that is more convincing than those of several distinguished historians and participants might be interpreted as being a bit depressing. I choose to view it through a more optimistic lens: the extraordinary insights that can be generated by young scholars willing to exploit the best methodological tools, regardless of discipline, in order to ask and answer important questions that bear on the most important international policy issues of our time. Though Joshua R. Itzkowitz's "The Malta Summit and US-Soviet Relations: Testing the Waters Amidst Stormy Seas" is slight, within it lies a roadmap for the best kind of theoretically informed, historically rich scholarly work that political scientists and historians should both undertake, despite the often powerful and dysfunctional incentives not to.

Shifrinson's analysis centers upon the December 1989 summit between United States President George H.W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Malta. This was their first meeting since Bush had become President, and it took place after a year of tumult and transformation in Central Europe. Only weeks earlier, the Berlin Wall had fallen, followed by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's bold, controversial ten-point plan for German reunification. Malta was seen at the time, and interpreted later by scholars, as disappointing: it produced no dramatic agreements or important treaties, and has been seen by many scholars and participants as a missed opportunity and evidence of Bush's lack of vision. At best, some scholars have argued that the meeting served as an important trust-building exercise, allowing Bush and Gorbachev to develop a personal comfort level that made possible more successful statesmanship in the months that followed. Others have argued that Malta reflected the fact that countries *other than* the United States drove the profound geopolitical changes, like German reunification, that revolutionized Europe.

Shifrinson takes these interpretations head on. First, he does what any good historian would, and

locates and compares as many first-hand perspectives on the Malta meeting as possible. Until now, there were only two redacted versions of the meeting – one Russian, the other American – but through diligent archival research in the George H.W. Bush Presidential library, Shiffrinson has discovered a third, which is both more complete and allows him to fill in the holes left by the other two. He then undertakes a rigorous comparison and analysis of the Russian and American notes, to both expose prejudices and hidden assumptions on each side and get a better sense of what was actually said during the meetings.

Second, he tests the standard interpretations using international relations theory. Shiffrinson notes that realism would predict that both sides in the negotiation should have been very sensitive to shifts in the balance of power, which throughout 1989 appeared to be changing dramatically. IR theory would also predict that in an environment where the balance was changing, the declining power would have tried to lock in agreements while its position was still favorable, whereas the state with the upper hand would have moved far more cautiously. He points out that the question that previously drove interpretations – ‘why didn’t the U.S. offer Gorbachev a deal’ -- is the wrong one. Instead, viewed through the lens of shifting power balances, the right question is “why should the U.S. offer or accept a deal if it expected to get more in the future?” (6)

In this way of understanding Malta, the key goal of the Bush administration was to determine whether the Soviet Union fully understood the changed power realities and whether Gorbachev was willing to allow international political change without intervening militarily to reverse the situation. In other words, the primary objective of the U.S. side was not to strike a deal – far from it -- but to better understand what the Soviet Union was and was not willing to let happen, while also balancing deterrence and reassurance in its message to Moscow. Shiffrinson points out that this focus on structural factors did not negate the importance of statesmanship. Both leaders had to use their skills to “pursue the best bargain possible given their constraints” (7) In the end, however, this means that issues like trust or emotional bonds were far less important than using their diplomatic talents to “respond to the distribution of power and to pursue their changing objectives within these limits” (7)

By focusing on newspaper headlines and worrying about the often overplayed fanfare surrounding treaties, scholars and participants more senior than Shiffrinson may have missed the real story. Bush and his advisors came away from Malta convinced that Gorbachev was uninterested in a crackdown and having firmly conveyed their interest in the German question to the Soviets Union. In this light, Malta was neither a failure nor a “missed opportunity,” (7) nor was the United States a cautious, unsure player, unable to drive events. Instead, Malta was a turning point for the key players – the Soviet Union and especially the United States – that provided a better sense of how the key changes in European politics, especially German unification, might unfold without violence. This was not, Shiffrinson points out, a blank check to Kohl to proceed as he wanted. Instead, Malta saw the start of achieving the key U.S. goal of seeing a unified Germany safely bound within an American-dominated NATO.

One does not have to accept Shiffrinson’s interpretation – though I do – to appreciate this small piece as an exemplar of how international relations theory and international history can be combined to generate important insights about the past that bear on the present and the future. I hope we see more pieces by young scholars in this vein, that take on important, policy relevant questions by using the best practices from both the history and political science disciplines.

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