
Brinkmanship between Great Powers: US and Russia

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The Cold War (1947-1991) included an air of antagonism and mutual distrust between the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) (1922-1991). Spies betrayed their countries, and millions died in proxy wars. The struggle for dominance prompted massive propaganda campaigns, psychological warfare, nuclear, and technological competitions. This study first examines how the 1980's nuclear tension between the US and the USSR reached its zenith. It then identifies how the USSR reacted to President Ronald Reagan's (1981-1989) strategy of preparation for a preemptive attack, and further outlines the international implications of this brinkmanship. Suspicion and mistrust between the US and the successor state of the USSR, the Russian Federation, subsequently referred to as Russia, over their strategic intentions are increasingly threatening Western stability, international order, and the balance of power. It is evident that current tensions between the US and Russia closely parallel the circumstances of the Cold War era during the 1980s.

US-Russian Wargames

During the Cold War, the US and the USSR used the brink of nuclear confrontation to exert control. After World War II (WWII) (1939-1945), the growing expansion of the USSR pushed the US to adopt a new strategy aimed at stopping possible aggression. Initially, both sides, under the auspices of self-defense, used deterrence, coupled with the possibility of mutual destruction, as the only valid strategy to protect their interests. During the next decades, this strategy escalated. Before the 1980s, the US considered Soviet influence as an inevitable process in world affairs, but in January 1981, President Reagan switched to a more confrontational policy against the USSR. President Reagan wanted to contain Soviet influence in many regions. The Reagan administration implemented a series of clandestine wargame and psychological warfare operations, codenamed *Able Archer*, which inadvertently contributed to an increased hair-trigger tension with the USSR.

The intent behind President Reagan's strategy was to demonstrate the strength and efficiency of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to

Soviet Bloc aggression and prove how close NATO, led by the US, could approach Eastern Bloc countries, and by extension attack USSR critical areas, if necessary. Concurrently, the purpose of this program was to evoke a reaction and to keep the USSR guessing what might come next. The idea was not so much to signal US intentions to the Soviets as to probe for gaps and vulnerabilities in the USSR's early warning intelligence system.¹ By monitoring the Soviet response to an emergency, the US would gather invaluable information that included electronic communications, locations, units, and movements, among others.

According to Gen. Jack Chain, a former Strategic Air Command commander, sometimes the US would send bombers over the North Pole and USSR radars would click on. Other times fighter-bombers would probe their Asian or European periphery. During peak times, the operation would include several maneuvers in a week. They would come at irregular intervals to make the effect even more unsettling. Then, as quickly as the unannounced flights began, they would stop, only to begin again a few weeks later.²

Soon after the US implemented President Reagan's strategy, the USSR was convinced that the US was secretly preparing a preemptive attack in the form of a nuclear strike against the USSR. To combat this threat, in May 1981, the USSR ordered the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* (KGB) (1954-1991), and the *Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye* (GRU) (1918-1992), often considered by Western intelligence agencies as two of the most effective intelligence-gathering organizations in the world,³ to implement Operation *Raketno-Yadernoye Napadenie*, (RYaN). Aimed at preventing the possible sudden outbreak of war by the enemy, Operation RYaN was possibly the largest peacetime intelligence-gathering operation in history.⁴

To preempt the US, the USSR used agents and recruited sources abroad to monitor early warning indications of US war planning and preparations. The USSR instructed East Germany's *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung* (HVA) to help the GRU and the KGB with Operation RYaN. The HVA was a subdivision of the State Security Service, commonly known as the Stasi, and considered by German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, "as one of the most effective and repressive intelligence and secret police agencies in the world."⁵ West German counterintelligence authorities documented at least fifteen hundred recruitment attempts. The HVA asked those pitched for recruitment to report on weapons developments, troop strengths, mobilization plans, and alert procedures.⁶

One of the most valuable information sources of USSR's Operation RYaN was a US service member, Jeffrey Carney. In 1983, Carney worked in a top-secret Air Force-National Security Agency operation, eavesdropping on communications of Eastern Bloc countries at a covered facility disguised as part of Tempelhof Central Airport in West Berlin. US-NATO exercises amazed the HVA-recruited Carney, who thought President Reagan's strategy was an intentional, aggressive provocation of the USSR in a very sensitive area. "The resulting unintended consequences from *Able Archer* caused a colossal uptick in tension that frightened many, including Carney."⁷ On the other hand, the USSR's heightened alert caused high stress to US and NATO leaders. There was panic.

President Reagan, unaware of Operation RYaN, directed US-NATO *Able Archer 83*, possibly the best known of these exercises, which simulated a Defense Condition 1 scenario in which tensions escalated to a coordinated nuclear attack. "Declassified NATO and US Air Force documents have shown that *Able Archer 83* included significant new provocative features, which could have been misperceived by the Soviets as preparations for an actual strike."⁸ Concurrently, the US pursued a clandestine electronic warfare operation for an across-the-board assault on the USSR's command centers and military installations. "The project's starting point was the alleged discovery by U.S. intelligence of a vulnerability—not further identified—in the Soviet Union's high-frequency command-and-control communications that could be exploited to shut down (Aussschaltung) orders from the high command to its strategic missile forces, submarine fleet, and air forces."⁹

The project, codenamed *CANOPY WING*, was a highly-classified plan involving US personnel and equipment designed to disable USSR communication in the event of an attack. It was a fail-safe or contingency plan. "They characterize it as a US plan to launch a war of aggression that would make nuclear war winnable by rendering the Soviet Union incapable of launching a retaliatory strike."¹⁰ However, Carney provided detailed information to the HVA, that added credibility to *CANOPY WING*; therefore, the USSR knew about the US fail-safe secret strategy. Klaus Eichner, a former HVA intelligence officer, said that when the document reached his office, "we got goose bumps."¹¹

The USSR reacted to *Able Archer 83* and other exercises as an early indication of an attack, and moved their armed forces to an unprecedented level of alert, just as US-NATO predicted. On the other hand, the US-NATO exercises operated under the illusion that *CANOPY WING* was safe and that the USSR had no knowledge of their plans. The US did not realize that the USSR had gained knowledge of *CANOPY WING* until 1986 when the US government conducted a damage assessment after Carney's disappearance. Consequently, the US collected

inaccurate intelligence, which affected decision-making and courses of actions. President Reagan's aggressive strategy overlooked the possibility of an insider threat and the potential consequences of pushing the rules to the limit.

The attraction for both sides in employing covert actions was that it permitted them to apply a varying degree of pressure against the other. For both sides, influence activities, such as psychological warfare operations, disinformation, propaganda, and deception, allowed them to instigate and diminish the opposing entity's influence and reshape the global attitude towards their opponent. Both parties believed that fear and intimidation were necessary strategies for containment. These strategies pushed dangerous situations to the brink of military confrontation. Recent actions have reintroduced gamesmanship into US-Russia relations.

After WWII, differences in security interests between the US and the USSR set the stage for the Cold War. During this period, a form of political warfare characterized the USSR's strategy. "With roots in Leninist thinking, over generations the Soviets mastered a range of techniques known as *aktivnyye meropriyatiya*, or 'active measures,' ranging from simple propaganda and forgery to assassination, terrorism and everything in between. In the West, these politics by other means were simply referred to as 'dirty tricks'."¹² To counter this, the US immediately adopted similar strategies, and dirty tricks rapidly became covert operations and one of the most influential tools in foreign policy.

By the 1980s, both sides interpreted all defensive actions as offensive actions against the other. In short, during this period, both the US and the USSR employed manipulative and deceptive techniques to defend and advance their interests. As such, during this period, US newspaper reports described the Soviet superiority in the European theater as unstoppable, but in reality, food shortages hampered the communist-allied units.¹³ Conversely, the USSR promoted anti-US sentiment. Several of the false stories of the Cold War era continued to circulate with some credibility in certain parts of the world. For example, the Soviets claimed that a US government laboratory created Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome.¹⁴

In the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, the international community struggled to make sense of a system that was increasingly multipolar, opaque, and unpredictable. Consequently, Russia's active measures decreased, but not for long. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Russian government began to show signs of discontent against their status in the international arena. Russia began to adopt those strategies employed during the Cold War.

Russia moved to reclaim the position that the USSR previously held as a

geopolitical power during the Cold War. As such, the Russian government began using its military power and reinvigorated presence in the international arena to protect its strategic interests in post-Cold War regional areas. Today's modern incarnations of active measures have greater range and speed. Enabled by technology and adapted for a globalized world, Russia uses information warfare as a new influential tool to further their objectives. "The Russian Federation is currently waging 'the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg . . . in history of information warfare,' pursuing a revanchist foreign policy considered by senior diplomatic and military leaders to be a tremendous security threat for both Europe and America."¹⁵

The Conduct of War: Gamesmanship over Syria

The first introduction to modern Russian propaganda and political action directed against the US took place during the Syrian Civil War (2011). In 2012, President Barack Obama made a statement that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons constituted a "red line." For a moment, there was a global impression that the US was on the brink of military intervention in Syria. One year later, various sources confirmed that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons against civilians and rebel opposition, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries. However, Russia wanted to exert their influence to cause the US to overthink its position. Consequently, Russia voiced their opinion against US-NATO intervention in Syria, rejecting US alleged evidence, and accusing the US of escalating the Syrian Civil War to remove President al-Assad.

Eventually, Russia stated, "No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria. But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists."¹⁶ President Obama's "red line" statement provoked Russia to stand and react on behalf of President al-Assad's regime. Subsequently, Russia's reaction provoked and pushed the Obama administration to reevaluate its strategy; "Instead of ordering strikes immediately, the president wanted to pump the brakes and first go to Congress to ask for its authorization."¹⁷

As in the past, both sides wanted to defend their interests and gain an advantage over the other. While it is beneficial for each side if the other yields, the best course of action depends on what the other is doing or willing to do. In the end, the increased tensions and the credible threat of hostile action instigated collaboration reduced the potential for direct intervention, and prevented an

escalation of the conflict to more extreme levels between the US and Russia. Without a bomb dropped, the threat of force achieved an outcome far greater than military power itself: however, it developed the stage for further gamesmanship.

Russia could pressure President al-Assad to admit to having used chemical weapons. However, Russia's actions in Syria did not completely resolve the situation. President Obama agreed to use a diplomatic approach and vocalized his disapproval over President al-Assad's future. In the meantime, Russia gained confidence, remained adamant, and continued to support President al-Assad's regime, claiming that Syria's civil unrest was part of a western plot and a pattern to justify another regime change and control post-Soviet states. Subsequently, Russia vetoed the United Nations Security Council resolution that would have referred the conflict in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

As in the Cold War, the Syrian Civil War turned into an all-out proxy war between US and Russia, just like the Korean War (1950-1953), the Vietnam War (1955-1975), and the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989). Russia claimed that the US provided weapons and support to Al-Qaeda fighters and extremists of all stripes fighting with the opposition. "Insurgent commanders say that since Russia began air attacks in support of the Syrian government, they are receiving for the first-time bountiful supplies of powerful American-made anti-tank missiles."¹⁸ This type of indirect support was one of the defining aspects of global conflict during the Cold War, rendering proxy wars a safer way of exercising hostilities. The last decade reveals an authentic, but similar affinity between these periods. In November 2015, a Russian propaganda lyrical song came out:

Syria, my sister, your Russian brother will save you! details interviews with Syrians about the brutality of the Western-backed "extremists." It promotes the message that everyone in Syria fighting Assad is a monster who tortures and kills in most horrific ways. Images of innocent people, especially children, being blown up show blood and gore, and reinforce the message that there are no other alternatives to Assad—who himself is the only source of order and peace.¹⁹

In the past, preparing for war and competition led countries closer to the state at which war happens, increasing animosities, and by extension, the adoption of dangerous courses of actions and postures. Both the US and Russia felt threatened by each other's military power. Consequently, both sides responded aggressively to perceived efforts by the other to strengthen their position. However,

these interactions are only the tip of the iceberg of a much broader system of manipulation and influence activities. Russia's decision to protect Syria undermined US efforts to install a more favorable government and reintroduced absorption as a strategic option in gamesmanship.

Russian Absorption: Ukraine

Ukraine occupies a strategic geographic location in Eurasia. Government corruption has been prevalent, and Russia has historically dominated it. Before the events of late February 2014 in Ukraine, there was a general concern about Russia's recent actions toward the country, specifically after Ukraine in 1994 expressed interest to join NATO. Western policy—particularly the decision to support Kosovo's independence and the assurance given to Ukraine and Georgia that they would one day become NATO members—contributed to Russia's decision to protect their borders and by extension counter any neighboring threats, especially NATO.²⁰

More than a decade at war in Afghanistan distracted the US. Once again, Russia tested the waters. President Vladimir Putin believes, "There can be no superpower where weakness and poverty reign."²¹ Ukraine imports nearly eighty percent of its natural gas from Russia. Russia used this dependency as a tool to leverage and intimidate Ukraine. In more general terms, gas exports have led to substantial economic gains for Russia. The latter provoked global concerns when Russia cut off the supply of gas to Ukraine in 2005. Nevertheless, pipelines supplying Europe with Russian gas cut through Ukraine. The government of Ukraine countered Russia's actions by exploiting this vulnerability.

To counter this, Russia wished to level the terrain again to their advantage and cut a deal with Germany to install a series of pipelines that would connect to Europe through Germany and bypass Ukraine. In 2002, the US and the European Union (EU) immediately implemented a plan to diversify energy, called the Nabucco pipeline, designed to carry Azerbaijani gas. Eventually, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, but the available evidence clearly suggests that the Russians had planned the invasion well in advance.²² Then in 2011, Russia made a stance against the US intentions to invade Syria. Subsequently, in 2014, Russia violated Ukrainian sovereignty by sending troops to Crimea.

As in the Cold War, Russia pushed dangerous security strategies that often involved forcing a situation until a disaster was imminent. These strategies become successful when the opponent is compelled to compromise and make concessions. On September 2014, the Organization for Security and Co-Operation

in Europe facilitated an agreement between Ukraine, Russia, and the Donetsk People's Republic, as a self-proclaimed state supported by Russia. The intent of the agreement was to create a 40-km buffer zone. Once all parties signed the agreement and agreed to abide by the truce, Ukrainian forces proceeded to withdraw from their 20-km buffer portion. Immediately afterward, Russian separatists simply occupied the abandoned territory instead of withdrawing from their 20-km buffer.

Russia challenged the international community through its actions in Syria and Ukraine. Russia's self-confidence and assertiveness increased, as well as their financial stability and military capabilities. Russia defended and protected strategic and geopolitical spaces of interest by using the nature of the international system and maintaining an imposing and stabilizing presence on Russia's border to prevent further Western inclusion.

International Arena

In international relations, there is no common international interest, but rather interactions between states motivated by their own self-interest. Realism, as it applies to international relations, explains that self-interest and self-preservation motivate individuals. Furthermore, by superimposing this pessimistic view of human nature, one can explain the conduct and behaviors of a state. The theory characterizes the international political system as anarchic, and neither authority nor rules exist. The primary interest of a state is survival, and for many states and their governments, the greatest threat to survival comes from a lack of security. Therefore, each state seeks to enhance their military capabilities, to protect and preserve their interest. The conundrum that emerges from this theory is that an increase in power can easily alarm and drive another state to enhance their security. This, in turn, creates a "security dilemma" making tensions, hostilities, conflicts, and wars inevitable. This suggests a nation's pro forma agenda will always consist of imposing their will on others.

On the other hand, the liberal school of thought gives shape to the notion of community among completely different states, all working together for a common goal of security and stability. Human nature often requires calamity to muster support for change, collaboration, and major new initiatives.²³ Contrary to the realist perspective, liberalism posits that anarchy is not inevitable, because, rules, laws, treaties, and agreements are possible under the idea of collectivity. Customs and laws can stimulate cooperation between states. For this reason, states will do what is best for their collective interest, and self-interest is secondary.

These two theories establish the international arena playground. From this perspective, international security becomes a source of manipulation, deception, negotiation, mediation, and consequently influential tools of international politics.

Agreements arise when the parties agree to a mutual objective. However, an agreement does not necessarily ensure security or prevent different parties from circumventing their obligations. Because naked self-interest lies behind cooperation,²⁴ each nation's strategic attention is based on extending their own power wherever possible. As such, in the past, the US and the USSR formed alliances of convenience. Prior to WWII, US-USSR relations were controversial due to the USSR's neutrality towards Nazi Germany (1933-1945). However, everything changed once Nazi Germany decided to expand their sphere of influence into the USSR. Two competing nations, the US and the USSR, came to an agreement to face a common enemy. Cooperation could be a source for self-preservation but is just a means to an end, not the primary objective.

In 1961, the US and USSR signed the Antarctic Treaty. A year later they were embroiled in the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) and the subsequent nuclear arms race. This worsened US-USSR relations. Mark Twain declared, "History does not repeat itself, but it does occasionally rhyme."²⁵ In 2014, the US and Russia agreed on an official number for intercontinental ballistic missiles launched in 2014, and the intent to continue to exchange telemetric information. A year later, everything changed.

President Putin said on 15 June 2015 that he plans to put 40 new intercontinental ballistic missiles into service this year. This followed a Pentagon announcement that it was 'poised' to deploy 5,000 NATO troops in Eastern European countries willing to deter Russian aggression. The US defense secretary has since confirmed that the US will 'temporarily station' heavy weaponry in the region. NATO has already staged military exercises in the Baltic States to signal military readiness, and reportedly plans more over the summer.²⁶

The difficulty of the international arena cannot be avoided. Governments tend to assume that states should not trust other states.²⁷ "As a result they try to take out insurance against real or possible threats, such as by arming themselves or entering into alliances."²⁸ However, the efforts to be safe can make others feel less safe, increasing tensions and the possibility of confrontation. Consequently, the

insecurity of a potential war keeps governments from cooperating sufficiently with each other. In the recent past, the US and Russia have agreed to defend against common terrorist threats. However, as in the Cold War, “any game that involves heavily armed proxies in an area of high international tension is fraught with risk.”²⁹ This is mainly because the tendency of opposite sides to defend their interests can instigate further hostilities, and result in an inability to neutralize real potential threats.

Soviet Ego

During the 1980s, the nuclear tension between the US and the USSR reached its zenith. Technological advantages became synonymous with security. The US commenced utilizing their sphere of influence to engage indirectly against the USSR, and vice versa. Both sides wanted to create a counterweight against the other. During the Cold War, Soviet bloc regions served as buffer states for USSR’s security. However, after the collapse of the USSR, with no Soviet power in the region, the EU grew stronger and expanded its unique ideals beyond the Berlin Wall (1961-1989). Post-Soviet states became eager to step out of the USSR’s shadow; they wanted autonomy and to be able to survive alone. The integration of these countries into Western ideology was intolerable to Russia; however, the country was weak and needed to regain the old Soviet ego.

The US was now in the center of the international structural system, and Russia was in the periphery. However, Russia intended to integrate itself back into the new world order, and it was widely assumed that democratic politics would quickly set Russia back on the road. For a period, Russia’s priorities included a total inclusion into the existing international system. “Even the issue of NATO membership for Russia was discussed with Western politicians, although it seems not to have been taken seriously.”³⁰ Shortly after that, Russia discovered that participating in this new world order did not guarantee their interests.

Following the collapse of the USSR, the US emerged as the single unipolar leader. Fearing that another great power would begin to act independently, as the USSR did after WWII; the international community became accustomed to the idea of the US as the main facilitator to democracy. “Without vigorous American participation, it is unlikely that the credibility and feasibility of international reactions to potential and actual outbreaks of fighting can continue to grow.”³¹ Consequently, in the 1990s, the concept of humanitarian intervention was first introduced, and by the end of the decade, this was employed as justification to enter a war against Iraq (1991) and later Yugoslavia (1998-1999). “A surge in

interventions took place after the Cold War ended, and then the inevitable morning-after reaction emerged against having overdone it, only to be followed by a renewed rise in interventions under the auspices of international organizations.”³²

In the past, USSR’s main objective was to weaken the US and sow discord among allies, especially NATO, and thus prepare the ground in case of a direct confrontation. It had the resources and capabilities for persuasion. However, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia only could object to Western policies, such as NATO enlargement and US-NATO humanitarian intervention in Kosovo. Russia was powerless to combat the US in the international arena. “The predominant Western assumption was that with time Russia would ‘come around’ and see the advantage of closer cooperation with the West.”³³ Concurrently, Russia observed that not everyone in the international community agreed with US policy toward Iraq, including France and Germany. Regardless, under the pretext of preemption, the US acted unilaterally, without the approval of the United Nations Security Council. After numerous unsuccessful attempts, Russia’s priorities changed from total inclusion into the existing international system, to a revanchist policy. A wish for greater security overcame its desire for international recognition. “Security is like oxygen—you tend not to notice it until you begin to lose it, but once that occurs there is nothing else that you will think about.”³⁴

Russia’s behavior was the combination of five factors. First, NATO enlarged its presence in post-Soviet controlled areas. NATO outlived its usefulness to counter the USSR’s expansion; however, after the collapse of the USSR, NATO strategy did not change or include Russia. Russia realized it became a second-class player in the international arena. Consequently, the Putin administration (2000-2007) redrew Russia’s government structure to strengthen Soviet power to effectively control Russia’s border.

Second, US interventionist foreign policy antagonized Russia. As such, Russia accused the US of intentionally removing Libyan president Muhamar Gaddafi in 2011. Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and other high-level Russian officials have often cited how they believed that the US overstepped the United Nations’s “no-fly zone” over Libya to overthrow the government of Libya.³⁵ Unilateral actions and military interventionism taken by US policy makers increased Russian frustration towards the inefficiency of the international system to resolve disputes collectively in a fair and peaceful manner.

According to Putin, 2013, US force has proved ineffective and pointless. Afghanistan is reeling, and no one can say what will happen after international forces withdraw. Libya is divided into

tribes and clans. In Iraq, the civil war continues, with dozens killed each day. In the United States, many draw an analogy between Iraq and Syria, and ask why their government would want to repeat recent mistakes.³⁶

Third, Russia realized that the collective interest of security is often manipulated into submission by the standard acceptable behavior of the stronger. As such, US interventionist foreign policy antagonized Russia's interests. On top of that, after thirty years, the US decided to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, and deployed a missile Defense system close to Russia's borders. The situation resembled the tension created by the Strategic Defense Initiative program (1983) during the Reagan administration. The USSR viewed it as an imminent threat. For Russia, this move reflected poorly on the validity of US intentions and the legitimacy of international laws and customs. Consequently, Russia broke away from the liberal idea of collectivity.

Fourth, Russia wished for greater security after the collapse of the USSR. In the international arena, security means preventing someone from attacking you by putting up a strong defense. The objective is to project political credibility. If you failed to defend your interests, other states could come to believe that there is a weakness. Therefore, other states need to believe that one is strongly motivated to defend its position through harm. If a state can project enough political credibility, it can probably get what it wants without confrontation. "Even for the most powerful governments, security has been a central preoccupation in their foreign policies, imposing great expense and often either serious harm or a real risk of it."³⁷

Lastly, the presence of the Soviet ego directed its actions. During the 1990s, the US grew stronger, and Russia's political power was weakened, not broken. The international community granted Russia privileged treatment mainly because of its realistic nuclear capabilities. However, Russia recognized the US could exploit its relative weakness. War is an instrument of power used by those involved in international politics. The ability to impose a will free of external authority represents autonomy. "Autonomy offers perhaps the ultimate appeal of power."³⁸ Consequently, Russia embarked on a wide series of reforms to promote a new and energized sphere of influence.

Modern Russia regained strength, and as during the Cold War, Russia became willing to engage and antagonize the US. They used Soviet-style active measures, including deception, economic and information warfare, power politics, and fear, as an element of modern Russian political warfare.³⁹ Russia pursued inherently dangerous strategies to secure their interests and exert control in post-

Soviet space to reduce the possibility for neighboring countries to join in an alliance with NATO. Economic interdependence became a reinvigorated powerful tool in power politics. They questioned US long-term interests and its use of military intervention.⁴⁰ Conversely, under the pretext it was protecting Russian citizens in that country, in 2008 Russia intervened in Georgia. In the process, they discovered the inability of the US to stop the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea. This demonstrated toughened gamesmanship and the weakness of the international community.

The Need for Brinkmanship

Throughout history, states such as ancient Greece (twelfth to ninth centuries BC) and the Trapezuntine Empire (1204-1461), believed that the conquest of territory was a necessary and fundamental factor to stimulate their economy, and by extension, their security. This concept became the conventional wisdom for states and military strategists. Imperialistic expansionism produced the first wave of globalization in which strong military states effectively extracted economic benefits from occupation for the purposes of controlling and maintaining a certain sense of security. The creation of buffer zones became crucial for both land and sea powers. By the twentieth-century, technological advantages and the globalization of production altered the traditional economic benefits of conquest, as well as security rivals.

The atomic bomb became the sovereign remedy for all potential threats. The USSR rapidly developed their research and weapons capability, and in 1949 conducted their first nuclear weapons test. However, the Geneva Convention (1949) established the responsibility to protect civilians in wartime periods, restricting the use of this type of weapon. Consequently, during the Korean War (1950-1953), unable to use the atomic bomb, the US refrained from using similar total war tactics employed in WWII that could force the USSR to participate directly in the war and transform a conflict into a third world war. Consequently, NATO emerged to maintain stability in Europe and counter the communist threat and military power of the USSR. For the USSR, the Warsaw Pact (1955-1991) provided a buffer zone to counterweight Western influence. Concurrently, both sides conducted their version of covert action by providing support to paramilitary forces. These actions and counteractions continued for the duration of the Cold War.

After the collapse of the USSR, the international community left behind the bipolar stability of the Cold War and replaced it with a unipolar leader. The

USSR and the Warsaw Pact no longer existed, but NATO continued integrating other armed forces into the Alliance. For Russia, this new global regime led by the US was unstable, compared to the bipolar system of the Cold War era. Military strategist Christopher Layne observed, “During the Cold War, the bipolar nature of the US-Soviet rivalry in Europe stabilized the superpower relationship by demarcating the continent into US and Soviet spheres of influence that delineated the vital interests of both superpowers. Each knew it courted disaster if it challenged the other’s sphere.”⁴¹ Therefore, the dynamic of international order needed to change back to the previous era of tension between the US and Russia. The insecurity of war is a dangerous tool, but a useful tool nonetheless.⁴²

States cannot operate as they did in the past, but they can still challenge the nature of the international system to develop their individual interests further. As in the Cold War, Russia demonstrated that under the pretext of security, preparing for war makes it more likely that war will occur. Subsequently, Russia’s behavior, securing the Crimean Peninsula and navy port, the recent increase in military spending, and frequent military exercises along the Russian-NATO borders—just as the US did during the 1980s—can be interpreted as acts of self-defense. Russian leaders wished to preserve their interests and reclaim their position as an influential power in world politics, which explains its behavior in the international arena.

Putin blamed himself for letting Gaddafi go, for not playing a strong role behind the scenes’ at the UN when the Western coalition was lobbying to be allowed to undertake the airstrikes that destroyed the regime. Putin believed that unless he got engaged Bashar would suffer the same fate—mutilated—and he’d see the destruction of his allies in Syria.⁴³

During the past decade, there has not been a conflict between two or more great powers, but an increase of small internal wars in which the US and Russia found each other on opposite sides. The Cold War and the collapse of the USSR changed the international system but did not create as much tension as Russian reintegration into the international arena. Russia believes they must now contain a megalomaniacal and arrogant US-NATO to prevent the spread of chaos. It appears that other states also fear US domination in the international arena. China and Russia consistently use their veto power and instigate disagreements. “Without the perception of benign intent, a unipolar leader’s intervention in regions beyond its own, especially those with substantial economic value, is likely to produce

incentives among the world's other major powers to balance against it.”⁴⁴

Russia, as any other strong nation, adheres to the global rule of law only when it suits its interests. The common denominator between liberalism and realism is that the notion of security is the product of the implementation of certain protective measures. Covert actions, war, and brinkmanship generate fear responses which can be used to influence the conduct of interactions in power politics. Consequently, security, stability and the insecurity of war become the primary instruments to provoke and influence change. But in the end, a nation will do what it deems necessary to protect its national security interests. Therefore, there is no doubt about the similarities between Cold War activities meant to degrade and deceive adversaries and today's events in Syria and Ukraine. This illustrates that Russian courses of action in the post-Cold War regional areas and the international arena have the potential to instigate further hostilities, animosities, and brinkmanship.

Notes

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