

## The Cold War: A View from Russia

Vladimir O. Pechatnov

Moscow State Institute of International Relations  
Moscow, Russia

It's a pleasure and honor to speak before this distinguished audience. I am thankful to the Diplomatic Academy for this invitation and I am glad that there is such an institution in your country because you really need to train good professional diplomats for your very active foreign policy. We at our school – MGIMO also try to help you in this task having each year quite a number of students from your country. Actually, one of my best students in American studies these days is Mustafa Kuramve. We are also proud to have a connection with your President who worked at our university in his younger days.

My assignment is to give you a Russian perspective on the Cold War origins and development. But it is a very broad subject so I want to concentrate on three key questions relevant for today:

- 1) what the CW was about?
- 2) why did it end the way it did?
- 3) what lessons have we learned from it?

Back in the Soviet times the title of my presentation would have been: The Russian View. But those days are long gone and now there are many views in Russia on the Cold War and its origins. Main interpretations are the following:

- 1) an ideological school which sees the Cold War primarily as a clash of ideologies, of the two opposite models of social development, or two giant projects of social progress, if you wish. According to the logic of this argument, the Cold War started in 1917 with the October revolution in Russia and ended up with Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking", which for all practical purposes did away with Marxism-Leninism as a guide to action. (Professor Djavanshir Nadjafov in Moscow and professor Richard Pipes in the U.S.).
- 2) A Realpolitik school which describes the Cold War as a peculiar – bi-polar phase of great power competition driven mostly by conflicting geopolitical

interests of the two rivals. This competition had started long before 1917 and will continue in the future, albeit in a different milder form. (Let's call it Henry Kissinger's school).

3) A Cultural Determinism school that sees the Cold War as a chapter in the long struggle of civilizations between Orthodox authoritarian collectivist Russia and liberal individualistic catholic/protestant West. It sounds like Samuel Huntington but it is also a continuation of an old Russian mode of thinking best represented by 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian philosopher Nickolay Danilevsky ("Russia and Europe???) who now has many followers in Russia.

You may pick up any of these three separate explanations, but in my view the Cold War was about all of the above - a messy mixture of ideology, geopolitics and culture which mutually reinforced each other. In general, most of complex phenomena in history are messy multifactor developments that can't be reduced to a single explanation.

Yes, Realpolitik and geopolitics were very essential, especially in the wake of World War II which left only two great powers and many power vacuums between them in strategically important areas of Central and Eastern Europe, Far East, Northern Asia, Near and Middle East. As soon as the cementing threat from the common enemy (i.e. axis powers) disappeared, the competition for influence over those areas began in earnest destroying the Big Three alliance from within. For American and British planners the Soviet Union with its hostile ideology and huge military capability became the next logical candidate after Nazi Germany for the role of Eurasian hegemonic power an emergence of which the U.S. and its allies tried to prevent in two world wars. For the Soviet Union the American-led western bloc was aimed at depriving it of well- deserved fruits of great victory and ultimately – at its destruction. The Soviet geopolitical aims in the wake of WWII included a buffer zone of pro-Soviet states on the western borders as they were in 1941, enfeebled Germany and Japan, regaining Tsarist possessions in the Far East, acquiring controlling influence over the Black sea straits and strongholds in the Mediterranean via trusteeship over former Italian colonies. Stalin also planned to create Soviet enclave in Northern Iran to cover its vulnerable southern flank where most of Soviet oil deposits were located. Soviet efforts of 1945-1946 to implement most parts of this program met with stubborn Western resistance and that led to the serious tension between former allies.

But without the ideological factor this geopolitical rivalry would have assumed more traditional and restrained forms. The Cold War was not just about geopolitics, it was also a struggle of the two worlds "for the soul of mankind" (to borrow a line from our American colleague Melvyn Leffler's recent book). That's why ideology

made the Cold War more intense, global and dangerous. More global – because both sides believed in the universal nature of their principles and wanted to spread them to the whole world. More intense – because each side believed it had a monopoly on truth and was determined to win. More dangerous - because ideological hostility led to exaggerated suspicions and fears, which in turn pushed both sides to overkill in providing for its security.

The cultural dimension was also a complicating factor. In cultural-civilization terms Russia has always been a lonely country torn between East and West and never truly belonging to either. Ever since 13<sup>th</sup> century its relationship with the West had been particularly difficult. For Russia a more prosperous, modern, and technologically advanced West was a cultural and security challenge, a source of many invasions through indefensible western frontiers. For the West the heart of “the Russian problem” – especially beginning from the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a combination of huge natural and manpower resources with an alien authoritarian regime capable to use those resources freely against western interests. Even the founders of Marxism – Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels shared this view. Bolshevism served to widen this gap between Russia and the West, to increase Russia’s isolation and to make her traditional task of defending its vulnerable Eurasian landmass against real and potential enemies even more difficult. The Soviet system aggravated brutality of Russian culture (in which human life was always a kopeck, according to the Russian proverb) while democracy’s advance in the West enhanced human rights and individual dignity. Bolshevism was also a daring attempt to “catch up with and overtake” the capitalist West in technological development by means of central planning, nationalized economy and one-party state.

To sum up, the Cold War was a confrontation between the two social systems (and power blocs headed by the Soviet Union and the United States) which had geopolitical, ideological and cultural dimensions, was global in scale and was conducted by all means short of big hot war between the two antagonists. Given all these serious reasons, the Cold War in my view was largely inevitable – to the extent there is an inevitability in history. But this inescapable conflict could have taken a different form. It could have been slightly better and – more likely – much worse. It may have been less confrontational if both sides were more ready to negotiate and compromise. And just the opposite – it may have been more catastrophic if either American or Soviet leaders behaved more irresponsibly, especially during critical Cold War crises when there was a real danger of a nuclear war.

This rather surprising absence of the big war during that conflict was made possible in part by the lethal nature of nuclear weapons. They made arms race more costly, but at the same time because of their ultimate destructive power a full-scale war became too suicidal to resort to. Fortunately, leaders on both sides were responsible enough to realize that early on (with a little help provided by several crises, especially the one over Cuba in 1962).

In general, bipolar world proved to be fairly stable providing the basis for the postwar world order which some historians even called “the long peace”. There were ups and downs in this competition, caused by internal and external factors; periods of high tension were followed by short-live *détente*’s, “the correlation of forces” shifted from one side to the other, but the basic structure remained more or less the same. The Cold War was immensely costly - arms race, wars by proxies, imposition of the Soviet system, superpower interventions in the third world (there is now a new very good book about these interventions by our Norwegian colleague Arne Westad called “Global Cold War”). But this competition also had its benefits which we may call “positive side effects”. And this is understandable, because very few things in life (and indeed very few people) are entirely bad or entirely good.

The effect of competition. This rivalry forced each side to mobilize resources, to enhance its attractiveness and competitiveness in order to overtake the main rival and gain new allies. In retrospect it is hard to imagine that just a half-century ago the Soviet model not only seemed competitive in the third world, but was also perceived as a serious scientific and technological challenge to the US. This challenge reached its peak in late 1950s-early 1960s when the post-Stalinist Soviet Union was going through its most dynamic phase of development. For the highly competitive American nation this challenge became an additional powerful incentive to domestic reforms. The emergence of modern federal support for higher education and sciences, creation of NASA and space exploration programs, and even some social reforms of 1960-s were all connected with the Cold War competition. The Soviet Union, to use Arnold Toynbee’s words, “became a functional equivalent of the Devil that forced us into doing what we should have done anyway”. On the other hand, a disappearance of this competition and a resultant triumph of American liberal democratic model (“end of history”) contributed to American complacency and arrogance which created a fitting context for the current financial and economic crisis.

The same mobilizing effect also applied to the Soviet side. It was to the Cold War that the Soviet Union owed its greatest technological achievements of those years –

launching sputnik and the first man into space, reaching nuclear strategic parity with the United States.

In the framework of competition between the two blocs the U.S had to be more accommodating and generous vis-à-vis its allies in contrast to the coercive “Soviet empire”. Without the unifying “Soviet threat” it would be hardly possible to have Marshall Plan, unprecedented American efforts to rehabilitate its former mortal enemies Germany and Japan, or to promote economic and political integration of Western Europe. It was this transatlantic cooperation that helped to produce historic rapprochement between Germany and the rest of Europe, the European economic miracle and knitting the fabric of Atlantic community. While the Soviet-American confrontation led to economic and military-political integration on both sides of the iron curtain, the more viable West European integration survived the end of the Cold War and the East European one (i.e. Comecon) didn't. In other words, here too the Soviet Union played the same role of “functional equivalent of the Devil” that forced the US to pursue more farsighted and long term interests rather than purely selfish and short term ones.

The effect of deterrence. Deterrence based on the danger of escalation of local conflicts into global nuclear war worked in both ways playing the checks and balances role on the global scale. It forced both sides to act with greater restraint and responsibility keeping emotions and ideological instincts on leash. It isn't hard to imagine how far the adventurous Khrushchev might have gone during Berlin and Cuban crises (or even the more cautious Stalin in Iran and Turkey of 1946-47) without US deterrence. On the other hand, in the absence of the Soviet countervailing power the US might have resorted to the use of nuclear weapons in Korea or Vietnam, or to the escalation of other regional conflicts. The U.S. traumatic experience in Iraq is another example of the risks that unchecked American supremacy is fraught with.

With these two cheers for the Cold War we might say as in a famous song: “Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end”. And indeed, very few people even in mid 1980-s thought that the Cold War was about to end. I remember a famous American Cold War historian and my old friend John Gaddis writing an article in “Atlantic monthly” called “How the Cold War Might End” (1987) ... he didn't get it right, but at least asked the right question.. (Scowcroft's comment – “very American – naïve and utopian”, yet very soon he as a policy maker had to deal with this utopia becoming a reality). Here we come to our next question – why did the Cold War end the way it did – that is, by the Soviet collapse which was quick, fairly peaceful and looked like an act of self-liquidation?

It is only in retrospect that the answer seems to be pretty clear. First, the West had a better model. Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, once said that the struggle between socialism and capitalism would be ultimately decided not on the battlefield, but by the level of productivity each side is able to achieve. And he was right in the essence, if not in picking a winning side. Capitalism, i.e. markets and democracy, in the long run proved to be more productive both in guns, but especially in butter (consumer goods), than the Soviet type of socialism. The latter couldn't adapt to the post-industrial economy and instead of catching up was more and more lagging behind the Western world. This backwardness discredited the Soviet system not only in the outside world, but in the eyes of its own people who by then could see enough through the iron curtain and compare their quality of life with that of the "rotten" West. ("The West is rotten, of course, but it smells so good").

In political terms the Soviet alliance model was also inferior to the American-led Western alliance. (Gaddis's tale of two empires in his "We Now Know" is very instructive - ...one based on consent, mutual interests and accommodation and the other based on coercion and dictate). No wonder that the more viable "American empire" survived the end of the Cold War while the Soviet one didn't.

Second (related to the first), the West had much greater resources at its disposal than the Soviet bloc, especially after the exit of China from the Soviet orbit. Even in terms of hard power where the Soviet Union was more competitive and by the early 1970-s reached a rough strategic parity with the US, the Western bloc was predominant on the blue seas, in global military base infrastructure and power projection capabilities. Economically, the Soviet bloc was never a match for western economic powerhouse, and its soft power resources were modest at best. In short, the SU was largely a one-dimensional military power confronting a multi-dimensional western bloc.

Third, this western preponderance of power also had an important intellectual dimension – the US possessed a better Cold War strategy than its main rival. Many Soviet records still remain closed, but there is enough evidence already available to reveal a complete absence of a consistent and coordinated long-term strategy to wage the Cold War against the West. Many foreign and Russian historians (including myself) have searched various archives in vain for something even remotely similar to NSC-68, NIE, or serious policy planning papers. The paradox is that in the centrally planned Soviet state foreign policy making was much more chaotic, personalized and improvised than in the pluralist West. There was little interagency coordination, no policy planning mechanism, little serious discussions at the Politburo level; most decisions were made personally by a Party leader or

designed to please him. Among those only Stalin was a grand strategist, but he too had serious blunders. Khrushchev was basically a gambler, Brezhnev – a cautious bureaucrat and Gorbachev – a well-meaning idealist. Ideology and the nature of Soviet political regime made things even worse. Ideology distorted reality perception and fed leaders' infallibility complex. Dictatorship meant an exclusion of alternative options and an absence of accountability. Combined, they opened the gates for arbitrary action ("voluntarism") from the top, impeded learning from mistakes, and left no room for long term planning or expert analysis. In short, the reality of Soviet foreign policy making had little in common with the image of monolithic and focused Kremlin armed with a grand strategy of world domination.

If there was a grand design and a grand Cold War strategy it was in Washington rather than Moscow. The strategy of containment in its various incarnations from Truman to Reagan was an effective way of employing wide range of means to achieve long term strategic aims. Consistent in its basic thrust, it was also flexible enough to adjust to changing situations. And most importantly – it worked.

Moscow wasn't totally without some strategic guidelines. It had its own rough version of containment rooted in the general ideological vision of hostile capitalist world, aggressive but inherently unstable, doomed to repeated circles of depression, war, and revolution. In this framework the basic Soviet strategy was to hold the line against the West and gather strength for a new showdown under a favorable correlation of forces. But this vision was deeply flawed, distorted by the ideological wishful thinking: it drastically underestimated the vitality of the capitalist world, grossly overestimated anti-Western potential of the third world and the strength of the so-called "inter-imperialist contradictions" for the Kremlin to play upon.

Given these three basic handicaps (in model, resources and strategy), it is clear that overall correlation of forces (to use a favorite Bolshevik term again) always favored the West and the Soviet Union never had a real chance to win the Cold War. Indeed, the notion of western preponderance was a key presumption of containment strategy. The Soviet bloc was seen as a weaker side burdened with deep systemic vulnerabilities. All the West had to do was 1) to maintain its own strength and vitality, 2) to contain Soviet expansion 3) to facilitate its demise by maintaining pressure through overt and covert means. At best - with a big chunk of luck and mismanagement by the West – the Soviet Union could have hoped for a draw which seemed to be the case with the détente of early 1970-s, but soon evaporated in the new round of Cold War competition and Soviet decline. Yet while the ultimate outcome of that great conflict was more or less pre-determined

(to the extent there is a determination in history), a specific form of that final stage or its time framework was not.

The so-called stagnation of the late Brezhnev years could have continued at a slow rate (after all, Byzantium was stagnating for a thousand years). The overextension of Soviet empire could have been handled by a careful retrenchment, and incremental market reforms could have been introduced more effectively a la Deng Xiaoping Pin's China. But here accidents of history and human factor intervened to provide for a quick and relatively peaceful dissolution of Soviet power. Gorbachev was no Deng: he first unleashed the forces of change, then lost control over them but preferred to live with the dissolution of Soviet power rather than trying to stop it by force. (the inept puch of August 199 was no Tiagn An Ming square massacre).The Soviet intelligentsia craved freedom and democracy almost at any price. And people of the Baltic states, Eastern Europe and East Germany didn't want to wait patiently for an incremental disovetisation of their countries or for reforming the Warsaw Pact. So, it happened all at once in a velvet revolution way. More than 60 years ago George Kennan – the main architect of containment - in his famous X article prophesized that in 10-15 years the Soviet system would either “mellow” or “break up”. Well, it took much longer and was more messy than that: first mellowing and then break up, but in general Kennan proved to be right.

He was also right in foreseeing the dynamics of a future Soviet collapse. Kennan always thought that the Kremlin masters, whose rule was based on iron discipline and total obedience rather than compromise and mutual accommodation, were so alienated from their own people that in case of a grave legitimacy crisis the system would have very few defenders. Hence instead of a civil war there would likely be a swift and bloodless collapse of the Soviet regime. But in the wake of that collapse, as Kennan clearly saw, there would be no political force capable of running the country more or less effectively because communist rule had destroyed civil-society and all capacity for self-organization. So, if Communist Party is incapacitated, the Soviet Russia, I quote, “would almost overnight turn from one of the mightiest into one of the weakest and miserable nations of the world...”). Had Gorbachev read Kennan and realized this causal connection (as Deng and his colleagues most definitely had), he might have thought twice before abruptly terminating the Communist monopoly on power. Even more remarkably, Kennan foresaw a chain reaction between internal and external dissolution of the Soviet empire. He always considered Eastern Europe to be the most vulnerable part of that empire ready to run away should the Moscow control seriously weaken. But that loss, as he predicted, would deal such a blow to Kremlin's legitimacy and self-confidence that it would “unleash an avalanche downfall of Soviet influence and prestige which would go beyond satellites countries and reach the heart of the

Soviet Union itself". In short, the US analysis of the prospects for Soviet-American competition was much superior to the Kremlin's one.

The final question is where are we now, after the end of the Cold War? What lessons have we in Russia learned from the Cold War experience and what has changed in Russian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War and what has not?

The changes have been quite dramatic and obvious. First of all, Russian policymakers now operate from a much narrow resource base than during the Cold War. The loss of the empire and of the strategic military presence in the heart of Europe, a sharp decrease in a number of allies and pro-Soviet parties in the outside world, the dissolution of the SU and the resultant shrinkage of Russian territory and population, downgrading of the military-industrial base – these are well known and very stubborn facts (as Stalin used to say). It is only recently that the economic downturn has been reversed, but that doesn't yet change the basic power asymmetry between, say, Russia and the US. And this change is not entirely negative because it has forced our leadership and public at large to realize that we have to be more modest and realistic in our ambitions, that our foreign policy should be solvent and help in modernizing our country instead of ruining its economy by the arms race and foreign assistance.

Second, there has been a radical de-ideologization of Russian foreign policy. Gone are messianic pretensions and global aspirations of the Soviet times; also gone is the old ideological vision of the world that we have talked about. The Cold War value gap has greatly diminished (if not entirely disappeared) and Russia now proscribes to similar ideals of markets and democracy. Our country has rejected confrontation with the West, destroyed the iron curtain and has taken the course of integration into the world economy. Our political and diplomatic leaders are proud to call themselves pragmatists; economy, trade and finance are sitting firmly in the saddle of Russian foreign policy.

Third, Russia has radically downscaled its military and security requirements. It doesn't aspire anymore to have a military capability equal to all of its real and potential enemies. To avoid militarization of economy and confrontation with West it doesn't get involved into a full-scale arms race, and it has given away most of its military installations overseas. The current agenda of Russian foreign and security policies is rather modest and limited. Its primary task is to secure the new borders and to have stable friendly or neutral governments in the neighboring countries. While encouraging economic and security cooperation with its neighbors, Russia doesn't want to recreate the Soviet Union (as Vladimir Putin said once, those who do not miss the USSR have no hearts, and those who want to re-create it have no

brains). Russia pursues a so-called multi-vector foreign policy developing mutually beneficial ties with all major power centers without regard to the nature of their political systems.

Yet on a deeper geopolitical and cultural level there are also some continuities with the past. Great power mentality, vulnerability complex, a zealous defense of Russian sovereignty and identity, mixed attitude toward the West – all these elements of the national foreign policy tradition are re-emerging. And this is happening not simply because of historic inertia, but also as a reaction to the Western (especially American) policies. NATO expansion to the East and the advance of its infrastructure all the way to the Russian borders, a forceful regime change policy in the former Yugoslavia, active resistance to Russia-led integration of the post-Soviet space and cultivation of anti-Russian forces there, – all these developments have caused a growing Russian concern. They have demonstrated that for the U.S. and its allies Russia's legitimate security interests are less important than expanding their own influence and locking the Cold War geopolitical gains. For the Russian policy makers it has become clear that the end of the Cold War and of the ideological divide hasn't done away with interstate rivalry and with old Western syndromes – an apprehension about a strong Russia and its image as a country alien and even hostile to Western culture and values.

So, here we are now. We are not living in the ideal world of perpetual peace and universal harmony, but it is still a big improvement over the Cold War. There are and will be conflicts and occasionally even small wars, but nothing like the real Cold War. And perhaps it is not so bad, since in the ideal world of perpetual peace and eternal harmony diplomats would be out of work.

## **Summary**

### **The Cold War: A View from Russia**

**Vladimir O. Pechatnov**

Moscow State Institute of International Relations,  
Moscow, Russia

The article deals with the questions of origins and the end of the Cold War, as well as its legacy for today. The author contends that 1) the Cold War was caused by a combination of geopolitical, ideological and cultural cleavages between the Soviet Union and the West, 2) the latter had a better system, greater resources and a better Cold War strategy than the USSR, and 3) given this preponderance of Western multidimensional power, the Soviet Union didn't have a real chance to prevail in this conflict. Although this final outcome was more or less predictable, its particular shape could have been different depending on political leadership and other variables. In conclusion, the author depicts change and continuities in both Russian and American post-Cold War policies pointing out that Russian foreign policy has changed a great deal while the American one has retained its basic thrust.