

New Cold War?

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On 8 October 2015, shortly after the Russian air force started bombing in Syria, the US Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter, made an extraordinary statement: the airstrikes would ‘have consequences for Russia itself, which is rightly fearful of attacks. In coming days, the Russians will begin to suffer from casualties.’

It was as though the Pentagon’s boss was actively hoping Russia would soon be hit by revenge killings. This, he implied, would be well-deserved punishment for Russia’s intervention. Little did he know that, within days, a bomb on board a Russian airliner flying from Sharm el-Sheikh would kill 224 civilians.

How have we come to this? How is it possible that when a major power takes a controversial foreign policy decision, the reaction of Western governments is so hostile, petty and vindictive?

Or take the European Union’s response to the Russian intervention in Syria. On 12 October 2015, EU foreign ministers came out with a statement just as astonishing as Ashton Carter’s. ‘The recent Russian military attacks in Syria ... are of deep concern and must cease immediately,’ they thundered.

‘Must cease immediately.’ Didn’t even one of the 28 foreign ministers stop to think of the hypocrisy of their position? The United States had been bombing targets in Syria for over a year. France started doing the same two months ago. The British government was eager to follow suit. How was it legitimate for Western governments to bomb Syria but not for Russia to do it? Couldn’t the EU ministers have seen there were incredible double standards here? Did

none of them reflect that the Syrian government invited Vladimir Putin to intervene, which means Russia's actions conform to international law, whereas the US and French interventions had no legal basis anywhere near as strong? The EU statement as well as Ashton Carter's demonstrated a kind of blindness.

Just because Russia does something unexpected, the West resorts to knee-jerk opposition. Don't bother to pause and analyse what Russia's motives are, or whether there might not be a chance of working with Russia in the Syrian crisis through a convergence of interest. Whatever Putin does, it must be condemned. This is not sophisticated international relations. It's juvenile, playground stuff.

The grim fact is that, a quarter of a century after the Cold War came to an end, we are on the threshold of a new Cold War. It may be more dangerous than the one which lasted from 1945 to 1989. That may sound harsh, but let me explain why. The New Cold War differs from the old one in several ways. It is not deeply embedded in a system of opposing military alliances with a clearly defined frontier along the borders of various nation-states, what used to be called the Iron Curtain. Nor is it a confrontation between two ideological systems in which each side plans and hopes to replace the other.

Under Boris Yeltsin as well as Vladimir Putin Russia has a capitalist economy and a government committed to security of property rights, freedom of markets, a thriving stock exchange, and an open door to foreign investment.

So the New Cold War between Russia and the West is not about territory or ideological rivalry. It's about international power and influence. It's a struggle in which no rules have been established and the terrain of struggle is fluid. This makes it less predictable and more volatile, and hence more risky than the old Cold War.

We also have a climate of hysteria and demonisation which never existed in the first Cold War. In the 1960s and 1970s Western governments never treated Leonid Brezhnev, who served as Soviet leader for 18 years, to the kind of public insults and crude stereotypes with which Putin is attacked today. There has been an almost total collapse of diplomatic courtesy and of the sense that you have to do business with powerful foreign leaders however much you dislike their system of government. This creates a climate in which it is much easier to justify war.

Finally, we have a generation of politicians who do not have the experience of living with the overarching danger of nuclear weapons. During the original Cold War, politicians on both sides of the East-West

divide were well aware that the slightest miscalculation could lead to a nuclear exchange. This acted as a kind of restraining factor on everyone. It was a form of self-deterrence. That has now gone.

I am, of course, well aware that the world came close to a nuclear exchange during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. It was a deeply scary time. But the crisis had one beneficial effect. It reminded leaders in both camps that they had to be super responsible, and for the next quarter of a century nothing similar to the Cuban crisis recurred.

Now we are in different times. Thirty years have passed since Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Kremlin and the confrontation between East and West gave way to an era of dialogue and compromise. Although the Cold War did not end until four years later, Gorbachev's arrival essentially lifted the risk of nuclear catastrophe. That was thirty years ago. Today, neither in Moscow nor in any of the NATO capitals do we have leaders who have spent most of their political careers in a world of potential nuclear catastrophe. They do not have the psychological self-deterrence that I just mentioned. That is why the New Cold War is more dangerous than the old one.

What are the origins of this New Cold War? How did it begin? The primary reason is that the old Cold War ended in an asymmetrical, that is to say, an unbalanced way. The Western élite and the Russian élite viewed the event from radically different perspectives. Russians saw the end of the Cold War as a shared victory, a win-win situation in which both sides benefited. Russia would no longer have to spend crippling amounts of its budget on defence and security. Its citizens would have the freedom to travel and the benefits of a gradual evolution of their political system away from authoritarianism towards democratic pluralism. The West would gain by having a friendly neighbour. This would give it, too, the chance to reduce its military arsenal. In place of the Iron Curtain dividing East from West, Gorbachev said the nations of the continent would share a 'common European home'.

At times, Western leaders seemed to accept that. President Bush the Elder, George Herbert Bush, talked of Europe being 'whole and free'. But there was also a powerful strain of triumphalism in the Western reaction to the end of the Cold War. Western leaders and their supporters among Western commentators saw Russia as a defeated power. The Soviet Union's collapse had liberated the United States from any need for restraint. It could fulfil its manifest destiny as an imperial power expanding its economic and military influence around the world, unchallenged. As President Bush put it in January 1992: 'by the grace of

God, America won the Cold War. ... [The] world ... now recognises one sole and pre-eminent power, the United States of America'.

The first consequence of the new imbalance in Europe was the contrast which developed over what should be done about the two Cold War alliances. The Soviet-led Warsaw Pact disbanded in 1991 but, instead of doing the same, NATO remained firmly in place. As long ago as 1949, NATO's first secretary-general, Lord Ismay, had said the alliance's purpose was 'to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans down'. Forty years later, nothing had changed. With the unification of Germany in 1990, which particularly worried Margaret Thatcher and the French president François Mitterrand, the third of NATO's original objectives, that of keeping Germany down, stayed intact. As for the first goal, that of keeping the Americans in Europe, this was a phony issue. There was never a credible likelihood that the Americans would withdraw from Europe, just as there was no likelihood of the United States withdrawing from Japan and South Korea. NATO was not needed as a hedge against something which was never going to happen. But NATO was useful to Washington as a tool in furthering US global ambitions.

The issue in 1991 was what to do with NATO's second goal, that of keeping the Russians out. Communism had collapsed, so the question should have been how to bring Russia in from the cold.

Regrettably, few Western leaders or analysts thought seriously about the issue. Most remained stuck in Cold War thinking and, in the early 1990s, the US decided not only not to abolish NATO, but also to expand it by taking in states which had once been Moscow's allies. Russia was not invited to join.

Many Russians consider that the expansion of NATO was a betrayal of Western promises. Gorbachev himself has said so. So has Putin. What does the historical record tell us? In 1990, the two German states and the four Second World War allies, the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union, held talks on the unification of Germany. They were known as the 2 plus 4 mechanism. The Russians were given assurances about NATO's future that seemed clear at the time. For example, James Baker, US Secretary of State, said on 9 February 1990: 'we consider that the consultations and discussions in the framework of the 2+4 mechanism should give a guarantee that the reunification of Germany will not lead to the enlargement of NATO's military organisation to the East'. The following day, Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor, said 'we consider that NATO should not enlarge its sphere of activity'.

The difficulty for opponents of NATO expansion is that the context

suggests that Baker and Kohl were only talking about the issue of NATO's role in the territory of what had been East Germany. Indeed, the agreement on German unification that was signed later that year made that clear. It specifically said no NATO troops would move into East Germany for the next four years until all Soviet troops had withdrawn.

NATO's potential expansion beyond East Germany was not mentioned, nor at that stage was it a live issue. Things changed in 1991 after the Czechoslovak President, Václav Havel, made a speech in which he called for Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland to be brought into NATO. The Kremlin was alarmed. In response, John Major, the British Prime Minister, and Douglas Hurd, the Foreign Secretary, visited Moscow and told the Russians to relax. We know from the minutes of their meetings, as recorded by British diplomats, that Major told the Soviet Defence Minister, Dmitry Yazov, in February 1991 that he 'did not foresee circumstances now or in the future where East European countries would become members of NATO'. Douglas Hurd, Britain's Foreign Secretary, told his counterpart in March 1991 'there were no plans in NATO to include the countries of Eastern and Central Europe in NATO in one form or another'.

That remained the position until Bill Clinton became US president in January 1993. NATO's future became a major policy issue for the new president. A majority of his key advisers supported Václav Havel's line and strongly favoured NATO's expansion, and so it went ahead. Reactions in the Kremlin were calm. Boris Yeltsin, who had succeeded Gorbachev in the Kremlin, expressed mild dissent but no serious opposition. He was desperately in need of loans from the West, as well as political support in the post-Soviet chaos of Russia's headlong switch to market capitalism. Indeed, throughout his period in power up to December 1999, Yeltsin never challenged Western policy, except briefly over Kosovo in early 1999. Even Clinton found Yeltsin's weakness embarrassing. Strobe Talbott, Clinton's main adviser on relations with Moscow, recorded in his memoirs, that on one occasion when he and Clinton were talking together, Clinton characterised Washington's relations with Moscow as a series of humiliating instructions which the Kremlin meekly accepted. In Clinton's words, 'we keep telling Ol' Boris [President Yeltsin], "Okay, now here's what you've got to do next – here's some more shit for your face".'

In the year 2000, Yeltsin gave way to Putin. It's commonly thought that things changed immediately. Here was a hard and relatively young man taking over from an elderly buffoon. Not true. In his first four-year term, Putin continued Yeltsin's policy of friendly relations with Washington.

Putin was the first foreign leader to express solidarity with George W. Bush after al Qaeda hijackers flew airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. He closed down the bases which the Soviet Union had built up in Cuba and Vietnam. He cut Russia's military budget. He showed strong support for the American intervention in Afghanistan by allowing US military transport planes to fly to Afghanistan through Russian airspace. He even made little public criticism, and certainly no active opposition, when NATO expanded to the Baltics and, for the first time, gave membership to former Soviet republics in 2004.

The message was that Russia remained a consistent and reliable partner of the West in spite of everything the US was doing.

Putin was certainly not happy with several of Washington's actions. In 2002, Bush withdrew the US from the thirty-year-old anti-ballistic missile treaty. This was a serious blow to Russia. It was followed by a US programme to install anti-missile radar systems in several European states. Ostensibly designed to protect Europe from missiles launched by Iran and North Korea, they were seen in the Kremlin as directed against Russia.

US policy in Georgia at the time of the first so-called colour revolution in 2003, when street crowds toppled the Georgian president, also angered Moscow. A similar scenario developed in 2004 in Ukraine. As Putin saw it, Washington was fomenting regime change in former Soviet republics, replacing Kremlin-friendly leaders with ones who were openly critical.

Nevertheless, Putin accepted all this without serious resistance. It was not until the last half of his second four-year term that his simmering anger boiled over. In February 2007, at a security conference in Munich which was attended by defence and foreign ministers from most Western states, he finally spoke his mind. Putin described NATO's expansion as a provocation and criticised the unilateralism of George Bush's policies. As he put it forcefully:

'We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. One state, and that is first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?'

You may think that what Putin said was pretty mild, if not blindingly obvious. But to Western leaders it came as a shock. Russia was challenging American hegemony. It was criticising the basic article of belief, shared by Republican neocons as well as Democratic Party liberal interventionists, that the United States had a right to global leadership.

Putin's comments riled Washington but, in response, the Bush Administration only stepped up its provocations. At a NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, the alliance declared that Georgia and Ukraine would become members. The statement had disastrous consequences. Assuming he had NATO backing, Georgia's ferociously anti-Russian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, launched an armed attack on the breakaway region of South Ossetia, sparking a three-week war and killing several Russian peace-keepers who had been in the territory under international agreement for over a decade. Moscow was bound to retaliate.

The war ended relatively quickly, but what was particularly ominous was the way the Western media behaved while the fighting was underway. Almost without exception reporters took the Georgian side and painted the Russians as aggressors. This was the moment when demonisation of Putin really began in earnest, a trend which has only gathered intensity in the seven years since. The New Cold War had begun. It was to be a war in which propaganda and disinformation would play a major role.

When the Georgian fighting subsided, the EU set up an independent commission of inquiry under a Swiss diplomat, Heidi Tagliavini. I don't suppose many people will have heard her name before. You are in good company. She and her team examined official documents and took hours of evidence from witnesses, but when her report came out ten months later, its findings were not to the liking of Western governments or the reporters who had covered the war. So it was ignored and suppressed by most mainstream Western media. During the war the media had portrayed Georgia as the luckless victim of Russian aggression, but Tagliavini said she had found unequivocal proof that Georgia had launched the first attacks. She concluded that 'none of the explanations given by the Georgian authorities in order to provide some form of legal justification for the attack' were valid. 'In particular, there was no massive Russian military invasion under way, which had to be stopped by Georgian military forces,' she added.

A report with conclusions like that obviously had to be suppressed and it duly was. So Heidi Tagliavini, to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude, was quickly consigned to obscurity. No wonder most people don't know her name.

In spite of these first hints of a New Cold War, there were no further clashes for several more years. Putin ended his second term and became Prime Minister in 2008, handing the Russian presidency to Dmitri Medvedev, a young lawyer. Medvedev tried to follow up on Putin's famous Munich speech attacking unilateralism by proposing that the

United States and all the European states, including Russia, should sign a new collective security treaty. Each state would agree to respect each other's security interests and refrain from any moves that would undermine or threaten them. The idea was to put flesh on Gorbachev's original idea of creating a 'common European home'. Alas, the treaty idea was never taken up by Western governments as a fruitful initiative. They considered it a Russian effort to halt the further expansion of NATO and put it in the bin.

In spite of all this, there was still no total breakdown in Western relations with Russia. Russia continued to help the Americans in Afghanistan. At the United Nations Security Council they voted to tighten sanctions on Iran in the dispute over its nuclear programme. In 2011, they even decided not to oppose a Security Council resolution which imposed a no-fly zone to protect civilians in Libya from the forces of Colonel Gaddafi. NATO promptly used the resolution to bomb targets throughout Libya in support of the opposition to Gaddafi.

The big flashpoint came in Ukraine in 2014. I don't want to rehearse the events in Ukraine in detail because they happened very recently and you are probably well aware of the sequence of events. All I want to emphasise is that NATO's appetite for new members continued unabated after the Georgian war, even though it should have been obvious that Ukraine has deep historical, cultural, linguistic, economic and political ties with Moscow and any effort to pull it into an anti-Russian alliance would be playing with fire. It would also ignore the fact that, in 2010, the Ukrainian parliament had voted to make non-alignment or neutrality the cornerstone of its security. Every opinion poll in Ukraine showed a majority against joining NATO.

Instead of accepting the opinions of the majority of Ukrainians, the United States maintained a well-funded public relations campaign to persuade Ukrainians to change their minds. They claimed Ukrainians needed to make a choice between being linked to Russia or to Europe, the implication being that Russia was not part of Europe. The EU went along with this, telling Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich that Ukraine could not be a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and also sign an association agreement with the European Union simultaneously. When Yanukovich hesitated and decided not to sign the association agreement with the EU, protest demonstrations started in Kiev. US and EU politicians came to Kiev to show solidarity with the protesters. It was an extraordinary piece of interference in another country's politics.

The sequence of events after that is well known. A coup in Kiev,

Yanukovich fleeing into exile, the parliament in Kiev passing a resolution to remove Russian as an official language, protests in eastern Ukraine, statements from leading Ukrainian politicians about terminating Russia's lease on the Black Sea port of Sevastopol, Putin's decision to reincorporate Crimea into Russia and hold a referendum there, armed clashes in Donetsk and Lugansk, and finally a serious military escalation, and Western sanctions on Russia.

Some of the tension of 2014 abated last year thanks to negotiations on Ukraine known as the Minsk process. A ceasefire is being broadly maintained and heavy weapons are being withdrawn by both sides.

Now the New Cold War is in a strange kind of holding phase. Western governments no longer look on Russia as a friend, ally or even a partner. But they don't yet define it as an adversary or an enemy. If there is a single word to describe how they view Russia, then probably the word which fits best is as a 'threat'. Western strategy is containment, just as it was in the first Cold War. Russia has to be contained, as though it is inherently dangerous and violent. For its part, the Kremlin says all that it wants is what any other sovereign state aspires to: recognition, respect and international influence.

The trouble is that the New Cold War benefits the élites on both sides of the divide. In the West the tension with Russia has given NATO a new lease of life, and made it easier for the arms manufacturers to sell their goods. Every NATO member is being urged to commit two per cent of gross domestic product to defence spending. The clash with Russia is also being used by Washington to demonstrate US strength and resolve after the failure of its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. US foreign policy is in a state of flux, if not of crisis. The alliance between the neocons and the humanitarian interventionists, which has dominated Washington's strategy for the last two decades, has not achieved any real successes. Going back to an old formula – confrontation with Russia – provides some comfort and reassurance to US élites who see their country's influence on the decline in the Middle East and East Asia.

It also helps to keep Europe in line, forcing Europeans to accept US hegemony. The US élite was shocked, in 2003, when France and Germany joined Russia in opposing the invasion of Iraq. Here were two of the largest NATO members allying with the Kremlin. That nightmare is over now, thanks to the Ukraine crisis and the Syrian civil war. France and Germany are in broad agreement with Washington again.

The United States' more realistic politicians realise that China offers a much greater challenge to US supremacy than Russia does. China is

becoming a military superpower. It is already an economic one in a way that Russia, with its over-reliance on oil and gas, is not. But in the absence of a clear consensus on how to handle China, the policy of containing Russia and putting sanctions on it can also be used as a warning to China, a signal to Beijing that if it steps out of line it, too, may be put under sanctions and other forms of pressure.

Putin and the Russian élite share the blame for the deterioration in relations. They have started to demonise the West just as badly as the West is demonising Russia. The tone of the Russian media is far more negative and hostile to the United States and the European Union than it has been for a decade. Just as the New Cold War benefits Western arms companies, it also benefits Russian ones. Russia has been increasing its military spending, particularly on high-tech systems. The New Cold War also has the short-term benefit for the Kremlin of diverting attention from the need for Russia to undergo serious economic reform. It helps Putin personally. The reincorporation of Crimea into Russia, and most recently the use of Russian war-planes in Syria, have given a huge boost to his poll ratings.

So, in conclusion, should we panic? Could we be moving towards a complete breakdown in relations between the West and Russia, or even a hot war? I don't think so. I've already mentioned the lifting of tension over Ukraine. In Syria now, in spite of the initial reaction to the Russian bombing campaign, there is dialogue between Washington and Moscow. But we are in a period of danger, and it will require steady nerves and cool heads for us all to get through it. Public opinion counts, and the more that we protest and demonstrate against demonisation and in favour of diplomacy and mutual respect between Western leaders and Russia, the safer we shall be. In short, this is no time to relax.