

U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS: RECONFIGURING A POLITICAL PAST IN THE PRESENT

Paradigm changes or radical historical breaks do not have to involve complete changes of content but rather the reconfigurations of pre-existing elements. Subordinated characteristics of an earlier period can, thus, become dominant and features that had been preponderant can assume a secondary role. The continuities in U.S.-Soviet interactions—from the period of détente in the 1970s to that of confrontational politics in the first half of the 1980s—are a case in point. They did not overshadow the resumption of East-West hostilities or lead to the end of the Cold War. Yet, there were influential actors who continued to pursue pro-détente policies in a confrontational geopolitical climate. What is more, as historian Ludmilla Jordanova has stressed, the inheritance of elements from periods, such as the Cold War, brings with it a conceptual, discursive, and epistemological baggage. This baggage is not only of an historical nature but is also geared towards the present, containing uncritical “naturalized” assumptions and interpretations of both.¹ Thus, a radical revaluation of the past is often needed to break up outdated interpretative frameworks.

Diverse past Cold War narratives are still influencing current geopolitical realities.² While separated in time, they contain historical traces that are intrinsically linked to the present. The U.S.-Russia relationship is characterized by

¹ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), p. 106.

² On the end of the Cold War, see John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Irene L. Gendzier, “Evidence and Interpretation: Against Historical Triumphalism,” *Global Dialogue*, 3, 4 (2001), 33–44; Frédéric Bozo and Marie-Pierre Rey (eds.), *Visions of the End of the Cold War in Europe, 1945–1990* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996); Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jack Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004); Silvio Pons and Federico Romero (eds.), *Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War: Issues, Reinterpretations, Periodizations* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005); James Graham Wilson, *James Graham, The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1994); Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1993); Geir Lundestad, “‘Imperial Overstretch,’ Mikhail Gorbachev, and End of the Cold War,” *Cold War History*, 1, 1 (2000), 1–20; Mark Kramer, “The Demise of the Soviet Bloc,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 83, 4 (2011), 788–854.

such temporal ambiguity, where factors are in flux and can pull in both directions. Following the Ukrainian crisis, Cold War metaphors were revived and dressed up in a “friend/foe” dichotomy, to use Carl Schmitt’s term.³ On the rhetorical level, historical anti-Western and anti-Russian discourses were reformulated and recycled in various forms. It is true that the ideological rift, which opened up, was not about communism or capitalism. It was rather a throwback to clashes over values, pitting, among other things, Russian nationalism, social conservatism, or Eurasian identity projections against Western democratic liberalism and multiculturalism. At the same time, political identities were being tested in the West with the rise of populism and ultra-nationalist politics of exclusion. What also undermined trust were different perceptions of power relationships with Cold War resonances. On the one hand, the United States continued to be bent on preserving its predominating global role. On the other, Russia reverted to its Cold War aim of achieving strategic equality and parity with the United States, even if it could only be reached by disproportional political and military means. In short, images of a confrontational past were conjured up to signal the reemergence of the political.⁴ Thus, the post-Cold War “grand bargain” did not hold for long.⁵ Apart from general cultural and political differences, other issues led to growing estrangement, such as NATO’s eastward expansion, the military interventions in the former Yugoslavia, the Iraq War, the Georgian conflict, and the wars in Libya, the Ukraine, and Syria. Indeed, what took place in Syria was a return to a Cold War-style proxy war with the United States and Russia supporting opposing sides, while agreeing on the need to fight ISIS. Another familiar Cold War instrument, economic warfare, with sanctions and counter-sanctions, has been reclaimed. Moreover, the crisis in the Ukraine has resulted in a growing confrontation and military build-up in Eastern Europe, with potentially destabilizing regional consequences. And the UN Security Council has become as dysfunctional in

³ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1932]).

⁴ See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 26–27.

⁵ Michael Cox, “Learning from history? From Soviet collapse to the new *Cold War*,” *Cold War History*, 14, 4 (2014), 461–485; Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

certain areas as it used to be for long periods of time during the Cold War, as its paralysis in the Syrian War shows.

Yet, to paraphrase Bakhtin, the geopolitical conflict never fully merged in a grand narrative or became fully subordinated to the main protagonists.⁶ Despite the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations, there was no structural breakdown and cooperative frameworks were maintained in areas of mutual interests. The power transition in the United States has led some to believe in a second, more successful, “reset” in U.S.-Russia relations, even if Donald Trump’s pro-Russian political rhetoric is not shared by many of his Republican friends or his Democratic foes. Efforts to normalize U.S.-Russian relations will depend on goodwill of both sides since they will undoubtedly face resistance. Yet, this does not mean that cooperative practices cannot exist alongside—or in opposition to—confrontational orthodoxies in ways reminiscent of the Cold War. The battle against ISIS or terrorism are obvious choices for U.S.-Russian cooperation. Disarmament can also be addressed as a way of reintroducing trust in the bilateral relationship. Indeed, the ritual of portraying the Cold War as an epic global struggle—expressed through U.S.-Soviet bipolarity—inevitably downplays its cooperative and multilateral features.

This raises the question of whether a backward-looking glance can offer some clues on how to interpret the possibilities embedded in the present geopolitical condition. Although U.S.-Soviet summits in the 1980s are associated with the last phase of the Cold War, they did much to pave the way for superpower rapprochement following a period of intense tensions. As a form of diplomatic engagement, summitry was certainly a positive thing. It changed a political discourse dominated by demonizing slogans about an “evil Soviet empire” or “U.S. nuclear warmongering.” What is more, it opened up new channels of U.S.-Soviet communications in other spheres, notably, cultural and scientific ones. For the first time, Soviet and American commentators regularly appeared on television

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 6–7.

programs in both countries. It was a far cry from the dark early days of the Cold War when there was no high-level interaction between the world's two most powerful states. It is sometimes forgotten that from 1947 to 1955 no meetings took place between the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union.⁷

And while talks at the highest level can lead to spectacular failures, such as the Paris Summit after the U-2 affair in 1960, they can also be politically transformative like U.S. President Nixon's trip to China in 1971 or used for exploring revolutionary ideas, as was the case in Reykjavik in 1986 or for concluding tangible agreements, such as the INF arms control deal in Washington in 1987.⁸ The 1986 Reykjavik summit supposedly ended in colossal failure, but it provided a venue for discussing revolutionary ideas, such as the abolition of nuclear weapons. Whether there was any chance to realize such a vision is, of course, another matter. All kinds of factual and counter-factual questions have lingered on: How does one account for the contradictions in Ronald Reagan's attitude toward nuclear weapons? Having presided over the largest nuclear military build-up in peacetime during his first term, he began to embrace an arms control agenda in his second term. To what degree was Mikhail Gorbachev's arms control agenda dictated by a need to save a crisis-ridden system from within? What if nuclear abolition would have materialized? What kind of world would we be facing today? Back in those days, there were skeptics to be sure. They were not only among the hawks in the U.S. and Soviet governments but also among U.S. allies who were offended by not being even consulted about the wisdom of the radical ideas discussed at the summit. France had, at least, no more intention in

⁷ Anders Stephanson believes that the reason was that the United States did not accept the Soviet Union as a legitimate adversary in international politics. It is true that there was no will on the part of the Truman and the early Eisenhower Administrations to meet with the Soviet leadership. But there were also reciprocal factors at work here, such as the imposition of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe. See Anders Stephanson, "The Cold War considered as an American Project," in Silvio Pons and Federico Romero (eds.), *Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War: Issues, Reinterpretations, Periodizations* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 52–67.

⁸ See Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas S. Blanton (eds.), *The Last Superpower Summits: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Bush. Conversations that Ended the Cold War* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2016); George P. Schultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993). Jack F. Matlock Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004); Ken Adelman, *Reagan at Reykjavik: Forty-Eight Hours that Ended the Cold War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014); Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision – A Memoir* (with Ann M. Smith and Steven L. Rearden) (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989).

1986 than today of giving up its nuclear deterrent—the Force de Frappe. To British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, it was impossible to “disinvent” something—like nuclear weapons—that had been invented. She welcomed the summit’s failure and true to her anti-revisionist fervor or, depending on one’s position, to her penchant for rewriting history, managed to skip it almost completely in her bulky memoirs.⁹

Others would, in contrast, hail the forward-looking spirit of the U.S.-Soviet relationship and the transformative ideas discussed 30 years ago. Yet, one should refrain from looking nostalgically to the late 1980s. While political history can be used to illuminate the present, it does not automatically translate into normative prescriptions or problem-solving. The Reagan-Gorbachev meetings were manifestations of another era. While arms control agreements established trust between the two sides, the Soviet non-intervention in Eastern Europe following the political revolutions in 1989 was arguably far more important in ending the Cold War. Nuclear proliferation is, of course, no light matter. It all-but vanished from the global political agenda during a period associated with the so-called “peace dividend” following the end of the Cold War and later subsumed under the questionable—in light of the Iraq fiasco—catch-all phrase weapons of “mass destruction.” Yet, the term resurfaced in its own right, as the rows over the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs shows. Even if the United States and Russia are not engaged in an all-out Cold War anymore, they are still under the spell of nuclear deterrence. It is a strategy based on theories developed by “wizards of Armageddon,” as one scholar dubbed its architects in the 1940s and 1950s, who have spent decades rationalizing the maintenance of nuclear arsenals.¹⁰

Thus, a return to summitry is no panacea, even if it could lead to new possibilities. Backward-looking projects cannot be used to establish temporal equivalences. The mistrust between the United States and Russia in the present is not going to be overcome by evoking a reified past. Thus, it is important not to

⁹ Margaret Thatcher: *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993).

¹⁰ Fred Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1983).

create misperceptions; for one thing, one should be careful to counter interpretations that would aim at resurrecting outdated notions of “super-bipolarity” in a far more multipolar world than was the case during the Cold War. Any such moves would be resented by other established or aspiring global players, including China. One of the most pregnant political metaphors of our times—the war in Syria—cannot be dealt with by Russia or the United States alone; other domestic and regional stakeholders have to be involved and the UN as a world body needs to play a central role in mediating the conflict.

Yet, more direct contacts between U.S. and Russian leaders could help restore trust and perhaps lead to a less distorted and one-sided public perceptions. While they do not have to lead to a grand bargain, they could counter the institutionalization of anti-American and anti-Russian sentiments within government structures and the media. The use of “soft power” could also be used to facilitate the creation of cultural and scientific exchange programs—and people-to-people exchanges—as a way of contributing to a dialogue and understanding, as they did during the second part of the 1980s.¹¹ One of the reasons for the anti-Western turn in Russian foreign policy in recent years was the perception that Russia was not shown enough respect as a Great Power and that its global political role was being deliberately subverted. Conversely, the view that Russia is pursuing a policy of “revanchism” based on strategic competition rather than cooperation influenced Western responses to its foreign and security policies. In such a confrontational atmosphere, worn Cold War phrases, such as the need to “negotiate from strength” were revived to frame the relationship in terms of rivalry.

While the Syrian War put bilateral relations to a severe test, both sides have shown that they can work together when it suits their interests. Despite Western boycotts of such events as the Sochi Olympics or the imposition of a sanction regime against Russia, Moscow has not shown signs of withdrawing from

¹¹ See Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Guilio Gallarotti, *The Power Curse: Influence and Illusion in World Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2010); Felix Berenkoetter and M.J. Williams (eds.), *Power in World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2007) .

multilateral structures where it engages regularly with the West.¹² Russia's abandonment of the treaty on the disposal of plutonium last year does not have to be seen as a major policy reversal. Moreover, Russian and American leaders usually get together when they take part in multilateral gatherings. The Trump Administration will find it difficult to project a coherent U.S. policy toward Russia because of anti-Russian sentiments within the U.S. government, Congress, and the media and because of a need to show loyalty to alliances forged by the United States decades ago. Yet, there seems to be a political will to interact. Hence, there are grounds for refraining from portraying current realities in too stark binary terms when there are grounds for engagement—no matter how ambiguous—and where there is still space to maneuver and a chance to cooperate. A rather surprising, if liberalizing moment, in a Cold War past—summit breakthroughs in the 1980s—cannot be instrumentalized to confront current problems in the U.S.-Russia relationship. Yet, such historical instruments of conflict prevention are as relevant as they were three decades ago because they suggest forward-looking possibilities, not entrenchment or atrophy.

¹² See Fyodor Liyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs*, 95 (May/June 2016), 30–37.