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Avoiding a New Cold War: Managing US-Russian Relations

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What we are analyzing today is whether relations between the United States and Russia could deteriorate to such a degree to where they were when the United States and the Soviet Union confronted each other during a period of conflict, tension and competition known as the Cold War. It was a war characterized by rivalry between two major superpowers competing on many levels – vis-à-vis military coalitions (NATO and the Warsaw Pact), competing ideologies (capitalism vs Communism), through espionage, proxy wars, costly defense spending on a massive conventional and nuclear arms race, and ultimately developing into a space race. While the Cold War spread out of Europe nearly to every region of the globe, each side forged alliances. As the U.S. sought to contain communism crises emerged – in Berlin, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. It was not until Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev launched perestroika and glasnost that reforms were made which eventually led to the cessation of Soviet control over Eastern Europe, ending with the dissolution of the Soviet Union under Yeltsin.

In recent years, given the withdrawal of the United States from arms control treaties and its proclivity to “go it alone” in the world or in advancing its interests and forging new alliances in areas which were traditionally Russian spheres of influence, the United States is finding a new Russia, buoyed by its new found strength as an energy giant, with a new leadership willing to contest the way that the United States is conducting itself in the international arena. Russian President Putin spoke bluntly at the Munich Conference on Security Policy when he insinuated that the United States was trying to conduct a unipolar foreign policy and that it had “overstepped its natural borders in every way.” He described U.S. diplomacy as using an “almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, a force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.”

Today, Russian strategic analyst Alexei Arbatov describes the current U.S.-Russian relations as more of “Cold Wave” than a “Cold War.” When one reflects back on relations during Clinton-Yeltsin years, they are often characterized as years where Russia acquiesced to U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Russia, dependent on the West for economic assistance and investment, sought to collaborate with the West on a whole array of issues including being an equal partner in the space program. Yet one easily forgets, that there were marked differences between Russia and the United States, particularly with respect to the war in Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo, and Russia’s war in Chechnya. Russia’s rhetoric today is much stronger against what it perceives as an aggressive U.S. policy which is encircling Russia by seeking to expand NATO eastward to its very borders. In Munich, Putin expressed Russia’s concern when he warned about the “so-called flexible frontline American bases with up to five thousand men in each. It turns out that NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders...” The issue of building an ABM radar in the Czech Republic in Brdy, southwest of Prague, and 10 ABM interceptors in Poland has also struck a sensitive nerve in Russia, as they are perceived being directed against Russia’s strategic nuclear deterrent. The U.S. contends that this effort is to protect against missiles from the Middle East, particularly Iran. The U.S. for its part criticizes Russia for its rollback on democratic freedoms. This June, in Prague, President George W. Bush noted that, “In Russia, reforms that once promised to empower citizens have been derailed, with troubling implications for democratic development.”

Can this new Cold Wave turn into much broader “Cold War?” Let us look at the major components of the Cold War, and analyze if such a development is possible. The Cold War initially began as a rivalry between two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union as well as the alliances they formed and the proxies they supported. Today, the United States is primarily focusing its resources on the “War Against Terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq and it has even gotten NATO involved in this war, outside of NATO’s traditional boundaries. Today with the rise of China and India as economic and nuclear powers, it is doubtful the world can return to the rivalry of this bipolar world, in many respects we see a collaboration of interests to solve problems with respect to North Korea and Iran between the United States and Russia. The problem of how to deal with the rise of Islamic terrorism is another dramatic development which binds Russia and the United States together. So while there are currently elements for division, new developments requiring collaboration outweigh the benefits for returning to a “Cold War.”

The Cold War was characterized by an unbridled arms race which was ultimately mortal drag on the Soviet economy. Given the current drain on resources and spending, it is doubtful that the United States or for that matter Russia could sustain a vast arms race of conventional weapons and nuclear weapons as it did under the “Cold War.” Arbatov had noted in his new article “Is a new Cold War Imminent?” that during the peak years of the Cold War each superpower commissioned on average one intercontinental missile per day, one strategic missile submarine per month, as well as thousands of nuclear warheads per year. US-Russian strategic arsenals will have been reduced by nearly 80 percent when the SORT Treaty is observed on December 31, 2012. Russia commissioned 6 ICBMs in 2006. The Natural Resources Defense Council has estimated that the Russian strategic arsenal is currently 5,670 operational nuclear warheads of which 3,340 are strategic warheads. Russia has an additional 9,300 warheads in reserve or awaiting dismantlement.

In the next 15 years, NRDC predicts a 48 percent decrease in the overall warhead level. This would be a 86 percent reduction in its ICBM force unless it decided to MIRV its new Topol-M missile. By 2020, Russia would have 1,726 nuclear weapons.

The U.S. has plans to remodernize its strategic arsenal by the year 2030 and its weapons complex. It has decreased its nuclear stockpile from 18,290 to 12,500 nuclear weapons in the last ten years. According to NRDC, of the more than 70,000 warheads produced during the Cold War, 60,000 have been disassembled. They estimate that 5047 U.S. warheads will be left in 2012, of which 2192 will be counted as operationally deployed under the SORT Treaty. So the US warheads will be reduced overall by 60 percent. In addition, the United States has withdrawn nearly 1/3 of its nuclear arsenals from abroad and has cancelled many of its nuclear missions.

Trends point to the fact that there are restraints on the possibility of a new Cold War. The Russian economy has enjoyed the benefits of reduced military spending. The Soviet military of 4.1 million men has been reduced to the Russian army today of nearly one million and many Russians agree that there is no need for such a large force. In fact Russia plans to reduce its army by 180,000 soldiers, its air force by 40,000 service members and its navy by 50,000 sailors. Today it maintains a force roughly the size of the U.S. military but does not have its global responsibilities. Moscow is trying to modernize its force through reform and downsizing, even Putin has acknowledged, "To maintain such a cumbersome and at times ineffective military organization is extravagant. In our situation it's simply impermissible." The U.S. 2007 military budget has increased some 28 percent over 2006 and is reflective of the cost of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, today's military budget amounts to 3.9% of the GNP whereas it was 11.7% during the Korean War, 8.9% in Vietnam, and 6% during the Cold War buildup of the 1980s. The Afghanistan and Iraqi conflicts are consuming one fifth of the total US military budget of 439 billion dollars for 2007. This diversion of resources, of men and material, restrains the U.S. from planning to start a New Cold War.

Another essential component of the Cold War that is missing is the clash of ideologies. Russia has embraced capitalism, is seeking to enter the World Trade Organization, and dominate the energy sector in Eurasia, competing with the Gulf States. Recently the Putin administration has struggled to come up with political concepts which embody the new Russia: managed democracy and sovereign democracy are just some of the terms to describe the new political compact that the Putin government is willing to offer the Russian people. The U.S. does not perceive these new political concepts as an ideological threat to the West, more as a drawback in democratic development.

However, the West has noted with increasing alarm the energy monopoly and influence that Russia can bring to bear when it confronts Ukraine or Belarus for a rearrangement of terms for the price of energy sold to these nations, and how such actions affect Europe. So, we may say when we look at the fourth component of the Cold War, the interest to dominate and carry out a global strategy, we do not see that effort moving forward on Russia's part. The efforts to sell weapons to Venezuela and other countries are more of a political drama and to support Russian arms manufacturers than being a sinister plot of

some New Cold War. So we see other actors, such as China joining with Russia and Central Asian nations to perhaps blunt U.S. inroads in Eurasia, but still no strident rhetoric which would mirror the Cold War.

What Americans and Russians must now ask themselves is the fact that even without the arms race, a clash of interests, and the hard ideological divide, a devastating nuclear war is still a possibility from accidental launch, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, or the engagement from one nuclear submarine. So, there is a great common interest for the United States and Russia to work closer together than in the past to prevent such possibilities. A major problem in the past is that the Bush administration had as a priority the abrogation of the ABM treaty and the introduction of ABM interceptors in Alaska and now in Central Europe. Resolving the nuclear issue with North Korea or Iran was a protracted process for the Bush Administration because it gave the *raison d'être* for placing such systems in Alaska and Central Europe. So on this point, we will continue to see continued friction between the United States and Russia, unless a new administration in either country decides to compromise and perhaps seek to work together in developing a new security structure that can address U.S.-European and Russian concerns. A particular point of concern now is that Russia is now being surrounded by NATO and by new nuclear powers with medium-range missile capabilities. If Russia chooses to abrogate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty, this could be a further set back for U.S.-Russian relations. With the failure to renew the SALT I Treaty, due to expire in December 2009, both sides could re-MIRV their nuclear warheads, tripling their warheads without any way to verify or keep such a breakout in check. So it is in the best interest of both powers to continue the SALT Treaty to maintain verification capacity.

To determine where US-Russian relations are heading is to try to map out the possibilities of how they would be modified in terms of changes in leadership in the United States and Russia based on the presidential elections in both countries. It is likely that the current Russian perspective will continue to develop, a renewed assertiveness in foreign affairs and a demand for respect over its traditional spheres of influence *vis-à-vis* the United States and Europe. A change in US administrations could bring about a greater collaboration with Russia, not to the extent of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission which has had a tarnished reputation, but one with a new beginning where both countries can bring their differences to the table and work to resolve issues before they become a major impediment to world peace. It is this recognition, by the current administrations and beyond to devote more energy in seeking to cooperate on a whole range of issues that are mutually beneficial rather than emphasizing those which are controversial and could create turmoil in the most important foreign policy relationship of our times.