

## **How Hot the New Cold War? Russia, Ukraine and Eastern Europe**

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It's tempting to be nostalgic about the Cold War. The Cuban Missile Crisis, after all, ended peacefully. From this distance, the edgy security of "mutually assured destruction" seems oddly comforting, reflected in the "what-me-worry?" attitude of Mad Magazine. Through the haze of history, the Cold War looks more attractive than the incessant headlines of ISIS terror, hostage beheadings, Ebola fears, the rise of China, the perceived decline of the US, and the multipolar chaos of the world today.

Before we get too nostalgic, let's look at some hard facts about the potential new Cold War in Russia, Ukraine and Eastern Europe that make the situation today less stable than the old times of US-Soviet confrontation.

First, there's the energy factor. Thanks to a huge recently discovered energy supply, Putin's Russia looks like the Soviet Union on steroids. In contrast to the days of containment, Russia today is a major player in world energy markets. Europe is dependent on Russian energy, and Russia has more international economic leverage than it ever had during Soviet times.

Second, there's the new Russian nationalism. Putin has created a narrative of Russian pride and xenophobia that's far more appealing and unifying for his political base than the shopworn communist ideology of the geriatric Soviet leadership during the Cold War. Resurgent Russian nationalism is the engine of Putin's aggressive designs on Ukraine, and the basis for his support of the "near abroad" ethnic Russians.

Third, there's the problem of a divided and weakened West. The EU is facing internal strains from its continuing economic woes and its dependence on Russian energy exports. The US is weary with the world after a decade of disastrous overseas adventures, and is preoccupied with its domestic problems.

Two events in the first half of 2014 were wakeup calls for Europe and the US about the prospect of new Cold War. The Russian takeover of Crimea in March signaled that Putin was prepared to defy international law to advance his new brand of Russian nationalism, and confront militarily the movement for democracy that had produced a new government in Kiev. Putin's violation of Ukraine's international border was met in the West by mild sanctions and handwringing. This emboldened Putin to take the next big step of arming separatists and sending Russian trainers and paramilitary forces across the border to destabilize Eastern Ukraine.

The second wakeup call came in July when a Malaysian civilian airliner was shot down by a missile over Eastern Ukraine, killing its 298 passengers and crew from ten countries. This provoked a stronger international response and increased sanctions. But Europe remained divided, with some countries balking because of their dependence on Russian gas, and one country, Hungary, going the other way by closing a deal with Russia for a nuclear power plant to supply Hungarians with nuclear energy. As a result of these mixed signals, Putin stepped up his support for the Ukrainian rebels by sending Russian troops into Eastern Ukraine, which led to a full-scale war and loss of control by the Ukrainian government over its borders and its eastern region.

How hot will the new Cold War become? Relations with Russia will continue to heat up until the US and Europe respond more effectively than they have so far.

The current situation stems from the end of the last Cold War. Relations between Russia and the West were basically one-sided through the 1990s because Russia was weak. During these years NATO expanded to countries bordering the old Soviet Union, including Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, and the EU began to incorporate new member states from across Eastern Europe.

Russia's first post-Cold War President, Boris Yeltsin, presided over a collapsed behemoth that had little capacity to stand up for itself. Three fateful decisions were made by the Yeltsin government. The most important was to dissolve the USSR into 15 separate states with the same borders as before. This was Yeltsin's triumph: peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union was a sharp contrast to the violent and bloody breakup of Yugoslavia that was going on at the same time. But Yeltsin's second decision was disastrous: the state and its assets were allowed to be plundered and to fall into the hands of an expanding group of oligarchs whose acquisitions were facilitated by the government. Yeltsin's third major decision was his most fateful. He hand-picked Vladimir Putin to succeed him. Convinced that a

KGB operative would protect him from his enemies, Yeltsin gave the keys to his dismantled empire to a practitioner of the dark arts.

Who is Putin? A disciplined proponent of the agency that produced him. No ideologue, Putin is an opportunist trained to use all necessary means to protect and advance the Russian state. Early in his career a KGB supervisor expressed reservations about the young agent's aggressive style, writing a personnel assessment that in retrospect looks like a warning: he has "a lowered sense of danger."

A decade and a half after his elevation by Yeltsin, Putin has twice been elected President of the Russian Federation, and has twice served as Prime Minister. His critics assert, with plenty of evidence, that he has used these positions to undermine Russia's fledgling democratic institutions. He has consolidated his power by repressing human rights, stimulating a new nationalism and rebuilding Russia into an authoritarian state. He is now reclaiming Russia's position on the world stage by confronting Europe and the US over Ukraine.

The new Cold War is symbolized by competing narratives. The Russian narrative is that the US and Europe humiliated Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Over the objections of a weakened Russia, NATO and the EU expanded to the old Soviet borders and began to pose a direct threat to Russia's sovereignty. This threat was exemplified by Western support of democracy movements in Ukraine, Georgia and Russia itself.

The opposing narrative is that the West "won" the Cold War. Promoting a market economy and democracy is the best way to help countries from the former Soviet sphere recover from the legacy of communism. Because Russia had been a recent aggressor in Eastern Europe (e.g. 1956 in Hungary, 1968 in Czechoslovakia), NATO was expanded to guarantee the security of these countries, and the EU was expanded to foster their market economies.

Putin has promoted the Russian narrative by emphasizing to his domestic audience the threat to Russia from NATO and the EU. He has shaped his narrative by taking over the Russian media, cracking down on civil society, demonizing foreign funding and influence, reasserting control over privatized state assets, and persuading Russians that the Soviet Union collapsed because of weak leadership. He is banking on a new Cold War to help him bolster this new brand of authoritarian nationalism.

Ukraine may not be Putin's only target. He aims to regain Russia's sway over independent states of the disintegrated Soviet empire. His goal in Ukraine is to destabilize and divide the country to prevent it from moving closer to Europe. He does not want to annex it because that would place a heavy political and economic burden on Russia. Beyond Ukraine, Putin wants to weaken the European Union to keep it from interfering with his foreign policy. He is trying to do this by using Russia's economic leverage as Europe's energy supplier, and its political leverage as a supporter of Euroskeptics inside the EU like the current government of Hungary. Putin has benefitted from the anti-EU sentiment across Europe that was reflected in the 2014 EU parliamentary elections, in which one-fifth of the seats went to EU opponents.

The stakes for Europe and the US are high. Stability and democracy in the Baltic countries and Eastern Europe may be threatened by a nationalist and irredentist Russia whose leadership is seeking to revive Russia's regional preeminence. The Putin model will be a challenge to the EU if it succeeds in attracting European nationalists like Viktor Orban in Hungary. The increasing insecurity of Russian nuclear weapons, and Russia's growing role as a geopolitical spoiler have added to the urgency of developing an effective response to this mounting crisis.

There are three ways to do this, using policy instruments that defused the old Cold War: confront, contain and engage.

Putin can be confronted with increasing US and EU sanctions. Sanctions are beginning to have an effect on the Russian economy, particularly in restricting Russia's access to international financial markets. Putin may not care about sanctions so long as they do not threaten his leadership, but unless he is confronted he is likely to continue his unorthodox aggression in Ukraine and beyond.

The US and other NATO members must support the Ukrainian military with defensive weapons so that Ukraine can protect itself. NATO must also reassure the Baltic countries where there are large Russian-speaking minorities that the common security responsibilities of the alliance will be fulfilled.

Putin's designs on Ukraine and Europe can be contained by an EU "Marshall Plan" to bolster the Ukrainian economy. The US can develop a parallel US plan to open US energy reserves for sale to European countries threatened by the prospect that Russia will turn off their gas.

Finally, once the US and the EU have stiffened their collective spines to confront and contain Putin's threat, they must engage Russia and Ukraine in the negotiation of a permanent ceasefire. Ukraine's sovereignty could be guaranteed by Russia in exchange for increased local autonomy and protection of Russian minorities in Eastern Ukraine.

The new Cold War can be addressed by going back to the future. The themes today are strikingly similar to the Cold War themes of the past. There is the struggle to preserve democracy, which, as Winston Churchill famously proclaimed, is the worst form of government apart from all the others. There is the need to confront, contain and engage the enemies of democracy. And there is the urgent need to put our own house in order so that democracy is not just an empty word. During the Cold War America renewed itself through the Civil Rights Movement. Today we need a new democracy movement to stimulate participation in American democracy and repair its broken institutions.

Vaclav Havel was a hero of the great renewal that ended the Cold War a quarter century ago. I was privileged to know him when I was the US Ambassador to the Czech Republic a decade after the Velvet Revolution. Havel's words provide perspective on the ongoing struggle for democracy and human rights:

"I am not an optimist because I do not believe all ends well.  
I am not a pessimist because I do not believe all ends badly.  
I am a realist who carries hope,  
and hope is the belief that freedom has meaning,  
and is always worth the struggle."