Are We in a Cold War or Not? 1989, 1991, and Great Power Dissatisfaction

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At the annual Munich Security Conference earlier in February, where the world's political and military leaders gathered to discuss the world's most pressing security issues, Dmitri Medvedev, Prime Minister of Russia and one-time President, directly acknowledged the elephant in the room:

"Speaking bluntly, we are rapidly rolling into a period of a new cold war. Russia has been presented as well-nigh the biggest threat to NATO, or to Europe, America and other countries. They show frightening films about Russians starting a nuclear war. I am sometimes confused: is this 2016 or 1962?"

Even though Mr. Medvedev was careful to note that the world was not yet in a cold war, merely referencing the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the specter of nuclear war raised troubling concerns. The remarks implied that the stakes of today's struggle between Russia and its adversaries may not be mere disagreements over specific issues such as conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, but confrontation of two systems akin to the Cold War.

The Cold War was recognized from its inception as one of the most dangerous periods in human history. From 1947 to 1989, systemic confrontation produced a geopolitical contest across the globe (Westad 2005) and the threat of nuclear Armageddon (Hoffman 2009). At the Malta Summit that brought the Cold War to an end, the prevailing sense of relief emanated from Mikhail S. Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush, with the former asserting,

"I assured the President of the United States that I will never start a hot war against the USA. The world is leaving one epoch and entering another. We are at the beginning of a long road to a lasting, peaceful era. The threat of force, mistrust, psychological and ideological struggle should all be things of the past."

President Bush replied, "We can realize a lasting peace and transform the East-West relationship to one of enduring co-operation. That is the future that Chairman Gorbachev and I began right here in Malta."

If the first iteration nearly brought nuclear holocaust, how could a cold war as a state of international affairs possibly come back? Why didn't the end of the Cold War provide a foundation for inclusive security architecture between Russia and its erstwhile rivals?

The answers to those questions emerge first from the nature of "Cold War" itself: the systemic struggle over the *institutions* of international political and economic interaction, that is, what Douglass North famously defined as "the rules of the game" (North 1990).

Second, the systemic struggle over the international political order has risen from the consequences of the unclear overlap between the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991; and which in combination has produced a bilateral failure to accommodate security concerns. On the one side, the West failedto integrate Russia into the existing political, economic, and security institutions, especially the European Union and NATO, where real decisions are made. On the other, Russia's failure to reconcile with its neighbors or fundamentally alter its security preferences propagated regional mistrust of its intentions and created the conditions for revolution

and war in Ukraine.

Finally, what are the policy choices now available to Western and Russian leaders? The nature of systemic confrontation and the choices already taken by leaders imply a very limited set of policy alternatives for both sides, particularly as stakeholders for non-cooperation can take advantage of heightened tensions. I conclude by reviewing and evaluating the types of policy decisions Western and Russian leaders might take.

What is "Cold War"? Defining Systemic Struggle Then and Now

In his forthcoming book, Robert Legvold argues that the Cold War as a historical event can be defined most broadly as several fundamental disagreements that could not be resolved, but which individually did not merit transforming into a full-blown (nuclear) conflict. More specifically, Legvold holds that five characteristics defined the Cold War beyond mere great power rivalry:

1. Each side assumed that the confrontation was the fault of the other side, and specifically the 'essence' (the values and behavior of a state that make it fundamentally attractive or not) of the other side caused the conflict;
2. Not simply conflict of interests but conflict of purpose;
3. The contest would not end until the other side collapsed or changed fundamentally;
4. Deals regarding specific issues would be, at most, transactional and not cumulative;
5. Conflicts that occurred did not remain compartmentalized but would metastasize such that all issues were linked or linkable.

The all-encompassing ideological, developmental, and security rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union thus becomes simpler to understand. The Soviet Union and the United States advocated compelling yet vastly different ideological and developmental visions. For the former, a world in which the "cruelty" of free market capitalism would be ameliorated through common ownership of the means of production, alleviating the deprivation experienced by workers in industrialized countries and native populations in colonized areas; versus a world defined by the freedoms individuals possessed to choose their political and religious beliefs, occupations, as well as persons and organizations with whom they wished to interact. Opposition by either side could be characterized as preventing liberation and progression towards higher levels of social organization, or freedom from submission to the will of a tiny, terroristic elite.

The relationship between Russia and the West may be at its worst since the end of the Cold War, given the two proxy conflicts in Ukraine and Syria; but the world is not entering Cold War II for three basic reasons. First, the current confrontation simply does not possess the all-encompassing and global ideological and developmental components of 1947-1989. The ideological and developmental model offered by contemporary Russia – bolstering the state against the triple challenges of revolutionary regime change, political liberalization leading to empowerment of individuals, and economic liberalization represented by globalization and market penetration – may appeal to illiberal elites and leaders, but not to oppressed and dispossessed individuals across the world. Second, the security challenges in Europe and the Middle East do not threaten peace in other parts of the globe. Third, Russia itself is far more integrated with the outside world than the Soviet Union ever was.

The Origins of the New (Mini) Cold War – Bilateral Failures to Accommodate

Yet Mr. Medvedev is not entirely wrong**.** The world is in a state of "mini-cold war" due to the unclear resolution of the main Cold War – the Cold War's conclusion in 1989 led to the related and distinct end of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Cold War effectively ended when the Soviet Union allowed the formerly socialist states of the Warsaw Pact to choose their own political systems by relinquishing the threat of intervention to save socialist leaders in those countries (Gerasimov 1989). Even without a band of subordinate allies, the Soviet Union's size and nuclear arsenal signified a critical, albeit reduced, role in European and international politics.

In a counterfactual world in which the Soviet Union had not collapsed, we might expect that the West (particularly the

United States) and the decidedly less imperial Soviet Union might have worked out a reasonable balance of power in Europe that left the Soviet Union intact, while it attempted to undergo transition to a market economy. While space constraints limit the ability to evaluate a full counterfactual scenario, the then President Bush's attempts to support Gorbachev and specifically his speech in August 1991, warning the Ukrainian parliament (in light of a disintegrating Yugoslavia) not to expect support if they seek "independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism" or "promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred", implies what might have become U.S. policy, had the Soviet Union survived (Goldgeier and McFaul 2003).

Yet the Soviet Union did not survive to see 1992 and the political decisions by the Soviet Union, the United States, and its major allies in 1990 to allow the two Germanys to unify and then integrate the unified Germany into ready-made Western structures proved far more significant. The precedent of a socialist state sloughing off one political system and adopting ready-made political, economic, social, and security institutions provided a template for the European Union's rise and eventual enlargement, NATO's renewal of purpose and eventual enlargement (Sarotte 2010) and an international environment defined by the expansion of political and economic liberalism – democratization and free market capitalism (Fukuyama 1989, Huntington 1991, Frieden 2007).

During the same time, Russia's own integration efforts with the West failed to succeed (Stent 2014); and critically, the chance to achieve historic reconciliation with new regional neighbors also passed, leaving both Russia and its neighbors as insecure as before without a collectively bargained security space and with Russia in a temporarily much weakened state (Mankoff 2009).

The attractiveness of the West and traditional security interests emanating from the East incentivized Central European states to join Western institutions as quickly as possible to protect themselves against a future Russia, potentially bent on projecting its power once again. As European and NATO integration deepened and broadened, Putin could only complain, first gently and then fiercely, that rival blocs were coming closer and closer to its borders only to be told that it had nothing to fear (Putin 2007, 2014, 2016). Following the logic of the security dilemma, the West created an "integration dilemma" by taking in former Warsaw Pact members and increasing the insecurity of those left outside (Charap and Troitsky 2013).

The Rubber Hits the Road in Ukraine

The significance of Ukraine to the ongoing mini-Cold War is that eastward European expansion and westward Eurasian expansion turned the country into an object of international rivalry – a zero-sum battle to pluck the juiciest fruit left on the vine. The European Union and Russia failed to use Ukraine as a bridge, and they jointly and unwittingly revealed the limits to Eurasian integration and the underlying systemic confrontation that had been developing over the previous generation.

Whereas the West was able to transform the rest of Europe by using its favorable post-war power position to create a durable order that attracted regional states fairly quickly and efficiently (Dinan 1999, Goldgeier 1999), existing in parallel were Russia's own attempts at regional integration.

The first significant Russian attempt at regional integration during the 1990s was through leadership of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which failed to gain traction as an international institution as member states ratified only about 10 percent of thousands of resolutions passed at the interstate level. In a time of staggering internal challenges, Russia failed to solve transnational coordination problems, provide public goods, or increase soft power by pursuing historic reconciliation (Krickovic and Weber 2015).

The second, and more successful, attempt at regional integration took place through more explicitly "Eurasian" structures encompassing political, economic and security institutions. In this instance, Russia deepened bilateral relations and engendered smaller multilateral groupings to create a more concentrated and much stronger "Eurasia" with itself at the head. The chief structures included the Eurasian Customs Union that eliminated customs and tariffs; the Collective Security Treaty Organization that boasted rapid response functions and prohibited members from alternative security alliance membership; and then the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to supersede the Customs

Union through additional institutional harmonization, a free trade zone, and a crisis fund to serve as an alternative lender of last resort instead of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The significance of why conflict emerged over Ukraine becomes easier to understand: the expansion of the Western order directly contested the expansion of the Eurasian order, and Ukraine itself was central to the success of the Eurasian Economic Union. Its industrial base was still heavily integrated into the Russian economy and it posed heretofore no security threat to Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia's attempts to create "Eurasia", a transnational bloc able to compete at the regional level with other blocs such as the EU, NAFTA, ASEAN, and so forth, would reach their zenith and decline thereafter; and its ability to revise the post-1991 international order as the leader of Eurasia would be effectively curtailed.

As the events of the Euromaidan unfolded, that's exactly what happened. The violence and the loss of public order forced the government led by Viktor Yanukovych out of power and the erstwhile Ukrainian president fled first Kiev and then Ukraine altogether. For President Putin, any subsequent government would be pro-Western at best and anti-Russian at worst, but the transition itself meant that Eurasia had reached its zenith and other blocs would increase their relative economic power over Eurasia.

The fall of Yanukovych and the loss of Ukraine as a subordinate ally posed a classic commitment problem: as others would grow more powerful, any promises not to exploit those advantages in the future would not be deemed credible by Putin. This negative shift in future bargaining power provided an incentive for a declining state to fight now before it actually became weak (Fearon 1995, Powell 2006). To forestall relative weakening and signal intent to revise the international political order while still able to do so, Russia then annexed Crimea to secure military assets and maintain power projection capabilities into the Eastern Mediterranean; withstood sanctions; sponsored and increased support to separatists fighting civilwar against the central government; and has now entered the Syrian civil conflict more substantially to protect a client leader.

Is this Mini-Cold War Reconcilable?

Russia's dissatisfaction with this international order is that as a great power, it seeks to conduct an independent foreign policy that includes the ability to set the rules of international political and economic interaction – or to carve out exceptions for itself. Its prestige as a traditional great power and leading nuclear state was not matched by actual abilities to influence international politics for a full generation; and where prestige does not match benefits in international politics, a state can be motivated to revise the international order (Gilpin 1981). The consequences of this dissatisfaction are what we are observing in Ukraine and Syria today: challenging the ability of the Euro-Atlantic alliance to settle conflicts without acceding to Russia's political aims. The cumulative effect is the challenge between two systems – the Euro-Atlantic's post-WWII liberal order versus Russia's promotion of regional blocs – and the threat of larger systemic war.

The logic of cold war set out by Legvold and the structural conditions of the post-Cold War, post-Soviet period, do not point towards peaceful resolution of the systemic confrontation or specific conflict areas in play today. Russians view this confrontation as the result of the hypocritical West exploiting its temporary weakness; the West looks at Russia as a perennial aggressor that finally stopped pretending to pursue cooperation. Ongoing diplomatic effortsin Syria and Ukraine look less like the U.S., Russia, and regional powers settling specific issues but maneuvering to alter power positions in connection to other conflicts. Images of Russia and the West as antagonists create bureaucratic stakeholders, who benefit from non-cooperation.

For the United States, the policy options look limited, and for Russia even more so. The three main American policy options are to challenge Russia and increase the lethal assistance to those fighting Russian proxies; to accommodate Russia and withdraw assistance to those fighting Russian proxies; or to pursue a neo-containment policy by neither fighting nor acquiescing. The first option increases the chances of war; the second is politically unfeasible and invites further challenges by Russia; and so the third has been selected with an eye towards negotiating with Russia at a later point (Weber 2015).

For Russia, the brinksmanship pursued to maintain its ability to influence politics in its near abroad has helped it achieve the seat at the table that it was pursuing for years, but paradoxically made it even more difficult to address inequalities in the global order. The commitment problem rears its ugly head once more: if challenging Western interests and the United States directly produces results, how could an American president trust that any particular agreement would hold? On the other hand, unilateral concessions on foreign policy issues could bring unwelcome comparisons for Putin to Gorbachev, nationalist backlash, and extreme popular dissatisfaction among a population, so far willing to tolerate economic difficulties in exchange for respect abroad. After all, Gorbachev brought the Cold War to an end to focus on internal reforms, and that metastasized into the end of the country itself.

The end of the Cold War and the end of the Soviet Union served as a critical juncture from which Western institutional structures spread across Europe without meaningful Russian input. Russian revival and dissatisfaction with the global order led to assertion of its security interests abroad that challenges the Euro-Atlantic alliance. American neo-containment in return has limited areas of cooperation. With the prize of maintaining or revising the international political order to the side that blinks second in this systemic confrontation, the mini-Cold War looks set to continue for a while.

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