



AN ATTEMPT TO EXPLORE THE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE IN RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC SYSTEM AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY: LESSONS ON THE COLD WAR END

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The Cold War is not an event, it seems, but a process that continues nowadays, too. In this scholarly article, we defend the thesis that the asymmetric end of the Cold War left a lasting memory on Russia's foreign policy. In developing this thesis, we proceed as follows: firstly, we will outline the realist counterargument to our thesis which suggests that no lessons can be learned from the ending of the Cold War because the bipolar struggle itself and the period after were continuations of the constant struggle for power between states in which historical narratives and ideas have no part to play. Secondly, building on the existing constructivist perspective, we will show that understanding the different ideational frameworks that developed in Washington and Moscow are paramount to understanding the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West in the past decade. Thirdly, we will show how the narratives that developed within Russia about the ending of the Cold War and Russia's place in the world are critical to understanding the potential for change in the domestic system.

Keywords: Cold War; foreign policy; geopolitics; Russia; USSR; USA; NATO; Ukraine.

Introduction

The ending of the Cold War was the most significant geopolitical development in Europe since the defeat of Nazi Germany. The division of the old continent between communist East and capitalist West was no longer the primary principle of organizing international relations. Since the implementation of the Truman doctrine in 1947 which dictated that the USA has a global responsibility to contain and resist communism until the *perestroika* reforms that foreshadowed the demise of the USSR, concerns over the bipolar struggle between East and West dominated domestic and foreign policy in Moscow.

For 45 years, Kremlin's *raison d'être* was to advance the global communist revolution with varying degrees of success. In just two short years, between 1989 and 1991, it all came to an abrupt end – a new global order was upon humanity as it reached the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992).

The idealistic vision of the new world order after 1989 proclaimed by liberal *historicists* failed

to materialize. Relations between the West and Russia, the USSR's successor state which inherited both its seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC) and nuclear arsenal, have deteriorated significantly in the 21st century (Stent 2015).

For proponents of *realpolitik*, the ending of the Cold War and subsequent antagonism between Russia and the West is a normal part of the perpetual Hobbesian war of all against all which the international system imposes upon states (Mearsheimer 2012). There are no lessons to be drawn from any historical moment in this everlasting struggle because there is no escape from the desire of the strong to dominate the weak. The post-Cold War era is just another episode of the eternal struggle for power.

Yet, the ending of the Cold War was different from other international settlements because it was not an event that happened at a specific date, but a process that unfolded over time. Unlike the reshaping of the international system at other intervals of history such as the Napoleonic Wars or the First World War, there was no treaty to define the parameters of post-Cold War international relations. There was no Congress of Vienna or Treaty of Versailles because the Soviet Union had not lost the Cold War, it had reformed and ended the struggle peacefully, not through violent conflict.

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Without a settlement, Russia and the West were left to freely reconstitute their relationship; a relationship which was underpinned by radically different interpretations about the ending of the Cold War.

Realist counterargument: no lessons can be learned from the ending of the Cold War

Realists link the genesis and demise of the Cold War to the perpetual struggle for power in the international system. As such, no lessons can be deducted from the ending of the Cold War for Russia because all states are rational actors which respond to the balance of power within the international system in the same way.

Realists zoom in on the historical continuities in Russian foreign policy. As Donaldson, Nadkarni and Noguee conclude in their work on the enduring themes in the Kremlin's foreign policy establishment: "the foreign policy of Russia – whether in its tsarist, its Soviet, or its democratic form – is an expression in some measure of certain relatively fixed geopolitical realities" (Donaldson, Nadkarni and Noguee 2014, 17).

The Cold War, and by extension any contingent historical episode of this eternal struggle for dominance, cannot be used to develop lessons for the foreign policy of any particular state, because each state responds to the power imbalances imposed on it in the same way as other rational actors would. In turn, domestic politics is a function of the high politics in the international arena which takes primacy – states cannot worry about progressive reforms at home ahead of existential threats abroad. In a Russian context, this mirrors the statist school described by Andrey Tsygankov which emphasizes the states' ability to maintain social order as a vital precondition for maintaining security (Tsygankov 2019).

Through the latter half of the 20th century, the existential threat for the USSR came from the United States. After the Yalta conference when Moscow and Washington divided the spoils of the Second World War and set the diplomatic tone for the new international order, it quickly became apparent that the two ideological rivals could be set on a collision course against one another. A war between the two superpowers never materialized but they were involved in a continuous process of balancing in this "cold" conflict.

Realists account for this by looking at the balance of power in the international system. Given there is no world *Leviathan*, the international system is based on anarchy (Waltz 1979). This does not mean that war is a *conditio sine qua non* of international relations, but the possibility of war is always lurking in the background. The tragedy of international politics is that the steps a given state takes to enhance its security are immediately interpreted by its rivals as antagonistic (Mearsheimer 2012). Such actions give the signal to other states that they must also seek to balance the state in question leading to an ongoing security dilemma (Tang 2009). This process reached its pinnacle with the arrival of nuclear weapons in Moscow which brought a sense of equilibrium to the bipolar struggle. While the cost of conflict rose exponentially, that was not the whole picture. The necessity to sustain competition with the United States with the faltering economic foundations of state-led communism was unsustainable in the long run.

According to William Wohlforth, Mikhail Gorbachev and his apparatchiks realized that their country was "in a systemic decline" (Wohlforth 1994, 100). In turn, the logic of *realpolitik* presented the Kremlin with three grand strategic choices:

- "**Lash out**" to reverse the ongoing decline with a preventive war;
- "**Hold fast**" and maintain the *status quo* as long as possible; or
- "**Appease and retrench**" to allow for domestic reforms which would revitalize the USSR.

The Cold War bipolar system was heavily skewed towards the capitalist US and as such, from a realist perspective, the rational response to a relative decline was appeasement towards the stronger superpower. Gorbachev approved the strategic choice.

The *perestroika* reforms that followed were the result of Soviet decline and consistent with realist thinking – all changes to state behavior are the consequence of relative power adaptation. Managing decline meant de-escalating the Cold War.

From here onward, the post-Cold War era picture which realists paint is one of US hegemony and Russian subordination. Despite inheriting its



nuclear arsenal, huge landmass and substantial natural resources, the successor state of the USSR was forced to adapt to the unipolar world. The systemic decline could not be reversed overnight.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia was stifled by the transition from state communism. This relative weakness enabled the West to rewrite European security architecture in its favor, with two expansions North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) performed, encompassing territories in the Baltics that were previously part of the USSR and thus bringing the organizations' borders intimately closer to Moscow.

After the turbulence in the 1990s, as Russia recovered its power in the Putin era, it became a *revisionist power*. The 2000s commodities boom allowed Russia to have a greater say in international relations. The late 2010s saw Russia become an opposition force to the West.

Once President Vladimir Putin was able to establish order domestically and build back the Russian state capabilities, a shift occurred – Russia was able to react and balance Western influence. For realists such as Stephen Walt, “relations with Russia deteriorated largely because the United States repeatedly ignored Russian warnings and threatened Moscow’s vital interests” (Walt 2018, 25).

This account of post-1989 Russian foreign policy is solely based on crude power politics. There is no space for lessons from the Cold War because international politics follows a logic divorced from ideas – it is the states material capabilities that are paramount. As the Soviet Union declined, it had to adjust. Its successor state continued this adaptation until it reached a position of relative power from which it could revise the international order the West had been trying to impose upon it.

However, treating the ending of the Cold War as merely a balancing act from the Soviet Union underplays the significance of the ideas which developed in Moscow and Washington about the meaning of this monumental transition. The asymmetric ending of the Cold War imprinted a lasting memory on the Russian collective psyche which is pivotal to understanding its foreign and domestic policy. This provides lessons in understanding both Russian relations with the external world and the potential for systemic

change domestically. Without taking into account the meaning of the end of the Cold War, it is impossible to understand why Russia’s relations with the West have degraded and to make sense of Vladimir Putin’s personalistic autocracy.

The transition from the Cold War was not violent, it was an opportunity to create a *new world order*, but that opportunity was surrendered to the divergent narratives about the meaning of this colossal change. Russia, the successor state of the USSR was not defeated like Napoleonic France or Nazi Germany, but the failure to create a post-Cold war settlement, more than three decades later, meant that the liberal *historicist* dream of ending history remains a distant utopia.

Cold War ending for the Russian Foreign Policy- lessons from the past

The break from USSR meant that Russia had to define a new foreign policy for itself, as a the successor state. Realists assume that this foreign policy is naturally deduced from the state’s material capabilities, but to cite Alexander Wendt, “material capabilities as such explain nothing; their effects presuppose structures of shared knowledge, which vary and which are not reducible to capabilities” (Wendt 1995, 95). This is where constructivism proves its utility by showing that no state possesses a stable identity derived from material power alone.

All states are marked by inherent tensions and identities which dominate at different historical intervals. Russia is no exception to this rule. Andrey Tsygankov has suggested that “there are three historic ways of defining Russia’s relations with the external world and all three were available as strategies for the newly created state in 1991” (Tsygankov 2019).

Firstly, the *Statist school* mirrors the realist approach described previously. It suggests that Russia’s foreign policy has responded to geopolitical realities by emphasizing economic and military power, not values. It is aptly summarized by Joseph Stalin’s remark that the “history of Russia was a continual beating she suffered because of her backwardness” through which he justified the power politics necessary to protect USSR and Russia (Ibid., 31).

Secondly, the *Western school* is a tradition that can be traced back to Peter the Great who viewed



Russia as part of the European family of nations. This school of foreign policy thinking, therefore, stresses Russia's similarity to the West, the latter perceived as the most progressive civilization in the world. Identifying with the Enlightenment values of liberty and equality means that Russia's actions in the international sphere should be driven by a desire to emulate the West (Ibid., 52).

Lastly, the *Civilizational school* suggests that Russian values have always been different from those of the West. The disciples of this school act in the international space with a desire to challenge the West's system of values by insisting on Russia's cultural superiority. The school sets itself as the antithesis to the West and as such, it explains Russia's foreign policy as a counterweight that has historically sought to project its alternative worldview (Ibid., 70).

Each of these schools of thought provides a template for Russian leaders to follow. During the Cold War, the communist ideology masked crude *realpolitik* equivalent to the statist school. The discrediting of the communist revolution meant that, by 1991, *Marxist-Leninism* had a limited impact on Russian foreign policy (Donaldson, Nadkarni and Noguee 2014, 55). Each of the three historic schools described by Tsygankov could have formed the basis of Russia's foreign policy.

Realists assume that Gorbachev's reforms were a function of Soviet decline but a more nuanced way of interpreting this change is to place Gorbachev firmly in the Western tradition. This explains why it was Gorbachev rather than his predecessor Yuri Andropov who decided to reform the USSR. Gorbachev justified *perestroika* as a means for Russia to return to the "common European home" (Gorbachev 1989).

Gorbachev fits within the Western ideal type identified by Tsygankov. The ending of the Cold War was a monumental event from which liberalism and democracy were set to conquer the Russian *corpus politicum*. Yet, in the present day, Russia seems to be far away from the idealistic common European home which Gorbachev aspired to.

Later studies (White and Feklyunina 2014) of the popular identities that political elites use to anchor foreign policy empirically confirm the existence of these broad identities. In their view, the discourses articulated by the political elite situates Russia in three distinct ways against Europe, which

they describe as:

- "*Russia as Europe*";
- "*Russia as part of Greater Europe*"; and
- "*Russia as an Alternative Europe*".

The first discourse mirrors Westernizers, the second suggests that Russia is merely a large, pragmatic European state which must act according to *realpolitik* and the third imagines Russian history as an alternative to the West.

How do we explain why the Western idea of Russian foreign policy did not prevail? The answer lies in the Cold War asymmetric ending when Gorbachev's successor in the new Russian state was Boris Yeltsin, also a pro-Westerner. Initially, Russia displayed an eagerness to be integrated into institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the G-7 countries (Stoner 2021, 240). The search for a new identity pulled Russia towards integration with the West but this vision failed to materialize.

The cause of this can be found in the divergent narratives about the Cold War ending. NATO's assertiveness in the Balkans in the 1990s is the paramount casing point. As the Yugoslav state collapsed in 1991, Yeltsin was placed in a difficult position. Croatia and Bosnia's assertion for independence led to fightings between Croats, Serbs and Muslims, the most intense episodes of which occurred in Bosnia. Russia and the West temporarily found themselves on opposing sides in this struggle. Russia was supporting Cold War and the Slavic ally Serbia, while the West sided with the ethnic conflict victims. Initially, Yeltsin cooperated with the West and authorized sanctions and limited NATO airstrikes in 1995, through the UN Security Council, giving evidence for the Western school gravitational pull in those years. As the conflict escalated, in 1999, NATO took the unilateral decision to intervene in Kosovo to protect the ethnic Albanians. This time there was no UNSC approval. As Vincent Pouliot argues "if NATO aggression looked like mere propaganda inherited from the Cold War, the intervention in Yugoslavia became a manifestation of its validity" (Pouliot 2010).

The issue for Russia was not with the intervention itself, but the legitimacy of the institutions which facilitated it. Russia favored a stronger role for the UNSC and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE),



not NATO. Historically, NATO was a military alliance created to prevent Soviet expansion into Europe – to keep the Germans down, Americans in and the Russians out (Thies 2012, 92). Its existential foe had given up arms and sought to redefine the security architecture for a new global era. From the Kremlin's perspective, NATO was being utilized as a tool for American power in similar ways to the Cold War. Russia's relationship with the West could not be reconstituted inclusively because of NATO's actions. The Yeltsin presidency cemented the view that Russia will not be treated as an equal partner in the post-1989 era, because the West acted as the winner of the Cold War.

Russia was thus treated as the defeated power in the Cold War at a time when its leaders were attempting to align it with the West. This meant that the reset of relations was conducted on an unequal footing. Pouliot has argued that these unequal terms became "habitualised", meaning that they informed what was seen as new normality, after 1991. Kosovo's key effect was to "turn Russia into a subordinate player in the post-Cold War rules of the game" (Pouliot 2010, 89).

The Cold War legacy was to imprint this unequal dynamic in Russia's relations with the West. This was manifested by using NATO as the premier post-Cold War security institution in Europe. Times of crisis in Europe's periphery required fast response and, as Celeste Wallender argued, NATO had "general assets" for the coordination of military actions which were not specific to the bipolar struggle (Wallender 2000), yet this explanation falls short when we consider that NATO expanded in 1997 and 2003.

The first wave of expansion extended membership to former Warsaw Pact states – Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The second wave included the former Soviet states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania together with Cold War allies – Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria.

It is important to acknowledge the of post-communist states agency and agency not treat them as passive actors. The ultimate expansion did not fit the public narrative of a defensive alliance. Thus, the bigger and more critical questions to ask are:

- *Why NATO expansion was a policy choice?*; and

- *Why was there no inclusive security institution in which Russia could participate*

without the legacy of the Cold War hanging over it, by 1999, eight years after the initial troubles in the Balkans?

These two questions about the post-1989 world order cannot be answered without reference to the asymmetrical ending of the Cold War. The *hubris* of the 1990s started isolating the newly created Russian state. The former did not perceive itself as a defeated power, but as an essential partner in de-escalating the bipolar struggle through peaceful means.

Therefore, the failure to create an inclusive post-1989 settlement lies in the Cold War meaning ideas. The Yeltsin presidency was a wasted opportunity for Russia's relations with the West that stemmed from the triumphalist ideas development about the Cold War in the West. Russia was not treated with dignity and respect but as a defeated power which meant that the post-1989 international system was not rebuilt through a culture of cooperation but with one of antagonism in which the security of the West came at the expense of Russia security.

The *zero-sum game* pursued by the West was driven by the ideas which surrounded the ending of the Cold War. The lesson for Russian foreign policy is that the unequal footing which stemmed from the divergent narratives about the meaning of this transition created an unstable foundation for the post-Cold War era. This meant that the Western school could not be triumphant internationally with Russian foreign policy, but it also meant that the Western idea on Russia did not succeed domestically. This is our next section topic

Systemic change within Russia

Russia's precarious position within the European geography has a long history (Neumann 2016). Europe, and "West", so called after 1945, have been shaped by mutual othering to a large degree (Neumann 1998). Without Russia's existence we would be discussing European civilization or, in the era of *Pax Americana*, the Euro-Atlantic civilization. Russia is a critical, but different part of Europe and by extension, the West.

Viatcheslav Morozov has argued that Russia has found itself in an inferior position in the Western-dominated normative order (Morozov 2015). At the heart of this argument lays the



universalization of a particular normative order. As a latecomer, Russia failed to internalize the norms of the existing international system because it could not fully identify with them. When the post-1945 system was created, the USSR was on the opposing side of the bipolar struggle. Once the Cold War had ended, the successor state to the Soviet Union could not simply slot into existing institutions.

The critical difference with other international settlements such as those at the end of the First or Second World Wars was that the Cold War was only lost *ideationally*. As such, at the end of the bipolar struggle, Russia found it difficult to submit to a normative world order which it had opposed for over 70 years. By contrast, for the West, the Cold War was won *ideationally* and materially as the capitalist model triumphed. There was no reset of the international system because the Soviet Union had lost the ideological struggle.

When other states, like China, attempt to challenge the Eurocentric, Western international order, they can produce independent ideas about global politics. Their identities were not constituted through a historic belonging to Europe. Russia's ambiguous relationship with the West, which the communist experience problematized further, meant that it could display such independence.

Post-communist states other than Russia have also found it much easier to invoke the idea of returning to Europe, and the West, by developing new identities in opposition to their authoritarian past.

The divergent narratives about the ending of the Cold War left Russian identity, which historically has been defined through mutual othering with the West, in a precarious position. Russia could no longer oppose the West because the Cold War had ended. At the same time, the asymmetric ending of the bipolar struggle meant that the West did not feel the need to reimagine the international system and Russia essentially became a dependent part.

The model of liberal democracy which *the end of history* supposedly brought to Moscow could not simply be consumed like another product from the Western ideals menu. The menacing authoritarian past that other post-communist states used to justify reforms was not a natural option because the successor state to the USSR could not be liberated

from its authoritarian past in the same manner.

The "return to Europe" which opens membership to institutions like NATO and the EU was not a real possibility for Russia. Those institutions had to be reimagined in a way that gave Russia a voice, but they were not because of the West's triumphalist interpretation of the post-Cold War settlement which warranted no concessions to Russia.

This made Russia's democratic transition different to other defeated powers. While the conditions under which democracies fail or flourish are complex, there is a wide consensus that the two most successful democratic transitions in history are Germany and Japan who, both ideologically and materially, were defeated powers after the Second World War. Those states developed new strong national ideals which aligned with the Western liberal capitalist world order. In 1989, Russia was not in the same position because its *corpus politicum* did not perceive itself as defeated. At the same time, the West was not able to foster the Western ideal in the Russian society, as it did in Japan and Germany, precisely because it developed a triumphalist narrative about the bipolar struggle.

The Cold War asymmetric ending did not inevitably and directly lead to the "gold standard of contemporary autocracies" (Fish 2018, 343), but rather it sufficiently stained Russia's Western idea and provided Vladimir Putin with the discursive tools to conflate Russian national interests with the need to maintain his rule. The blurring of the lines between domestic and foreign policy is exemplified by Russia's annexation of Crimea¹.

Richard Sakwa's Frontline Ukraine central thesis is that the "Ukraine crisis escalated because of the multiplicity of power centers, contested narratives and divergent understandings of the nature of the post-Cold War world order" (Sakwa 2016, 4). Michael McFaul has further added nuances to this explanation by suggesting that Crimea's annexation can be rooted in Vladimir

¹ This essay has provided a condensed version of the last thirty years of relations and has omitted important episodes like Georgia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria in which the divergent visions about the post-Cold War order, particularly around intervention and democracy-promotion, clashed. The Georgia links with NATO are also extremely important for understanding the Ukraine crisis but the Crimean annexation was prioritized due to the word limitations and as the most vivid manifestation of our argument about the lessons of the Cold War.



Putin's "erratic adventurism" (McFaul 2014, 169). The annexation allowed Putin to portray himself as the defender of Russian interests, as his prolonged semi-democratic rule increasingly morphed into a personalistic autocracy. This is reinforced by research into the state-controlled media's manipulation of the narrative around the Crimea's annexation which points to Putin's pragmatism, particularly in amplifying stories on the status of ethnic Russians (Lankina and Watanabe 2017). Such sinister media management was increasingly necessary as he returned for his third term as president after the "tandemocracy" (Monaghan 2011) orchestrated with Dmitry Medvedev.

We are not arguing that the Cold War asymmetric ending put Russia on a collision course with the West, that culminated in Crimea's annexation. This crude argument will not be consistent with international relations reality of the post-Soviet space, for the last thirty years. There have been numerous opportunities for cooperation between the West and Russia since then (Stent 2015, 150). The most substantive realignment yet came during the second Obama administration, in 2009, when, the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton presented Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov with a "reset" button as a symbolic signal to the world (Reuters 2009).

This *détente* was ended by the annexation of Crimea, but we cannot directly point to the end of the Cold War to explain the escalation of the conflict. There was a plethora of policy options available to Russia to deescalate the tensions, just like there were other options to better accommodate Russia into the international system in the 1990s.

The point we are making here is subtle. The asymmetric ending of the Cold War tainted the Western idea of Russia. Internationally, Russia could not become a legitimate member of the of

Western nation-states family because it was treated like a defeated power. This rejection trickled down domestically, creating a climate conducive to the discrediting democracy and the idea of alignment with the West. It pushed Russia away from the West and fed into Putin's initial political pragmatism which over time moved Russia further away from liberalism and democracy and closer to conservative nationalism and autocracy.

Conclusion

Baruch de Spinoza famously wrote that "peace is not an absence of war", but a virtue which must be cultivated. In the 1990s, there was no cultivation of the "cold" peace. The asymmetric ending of the Cold War did not pre-determine the souring of relations in the 21st century but rather the failure to reset relations in 1991, spawned by the different narratives of the winners of the Cold War. In conclusion, Russia's "Western" idea could not prevail, neither domestically, nor internationally in its foreign policy.

Without a post-1989 settlement like the ones in Vienna or Versailles, Russia and the West were left to freely reconstitute their relationship; a relationship which was underpinned by radically different interpretations about the ending of the Cold War. This was a function of the "cold" conflict and its peaceful demise nature.

In the early months of 2022, Russia and the West are again at odds with each other over Ukraine, reinforcing the argument made in the introduction of this article, that the end of the Cold War was not an event, but a process that continues today. Without the 1990s, lessons it is impossible to understand how the West lost Russia as an international ally and how this divergence subsequently created fertile ground for Vladimir Putin's rise.

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