

September 2026

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Volume 6, Number 9

Thirty-Five Years Since the Fall of the Soviet Union: What Have We Learned?



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Thirty-Five Years Since the Fall of the Soviet Union: What Have We Learned?

Edited by

Michaela Dodge

National Institute Press®

Published by
National Institute Press®
12150 Monument Dr., Suite 125
Fairfax, Virginia 22033

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National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Occasional Paper* possible.

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

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Preface

This *Occasional Paper*, written 35 years after the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), discusses what the United States and allies have gotten right and wrong with regard to the implications of Russia's dissolution. The assessment is particularly relevant given Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia's inability to achieve a swift victory, generational casualties impacting each region of the country differently, and Ukraine's campaign against Russia's energy industry, will have long-lasting consequences. It is not difficult to imagine the government's fall and breakup of the territory in some fashion again.

The Cold War ended in a geopolitically favorable manner for the West—there was a relatively nonviolent breakup of the USSR and the United States emerged as the undisputed victor. Even under these conditions, the relative peace held for only a few years—less than a decade if one considers Russia's brutal wars in Chechnya, and less than a generation if one considers Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. America's optimism, epitomized by Francis Fukuyama's *End of History*,¹ and duly absorbed by the U.S. political class, left very little room to think strategically about what a resurgent Russia might mean for the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's military postures. To some, like the eminent strategist Colin Gray, it was soon clear that Russia will return as a geopolitical threat.² Yet, all too eager to pocket the "peace dividend," the acolytes of the

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992).

² Gray expected that Russia would return as a politico-military challenge to the West and that this "immediately would threaten independent Ukraine [and] the Baltics." See Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (London: Lynn Reiner Press, 1999), pp. 39-41.

“New World Order”³ dismantled the U.S. defense industrial base and the nuclear production complex. They substantially reduced U.S. regional nuclear forces, thus undermining extended deterrence in the long run. It is in this context that the United States and its allies face Russia’s resurgent imperialist expansionism, China’s desire to revise the international status quo to its favor, and the ambitions of nuclear-armed North Korea.

Gary L. Geipel, Visiting Professor in Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University’s School of Defense and Strategic Studies, draws parallels between the early 1990s and today, including the dominance of the United States facing financial challenges due to entitlement spending and divisions over domestic priorities and foreign policy. He argues that Vladimir Putin’s governance structures are unlikely to survive him and that, given the experience of the Soviet Union’s breakup and its costly descent to authoritarianism, Russia might yet attempt democratization in the future as a way to improve its position vis-à-vis China.

What lessons can be drawn from the experience of the fall of the Soviet Union and Russia’s resurgent hostility? Ambassador Robert Joseph and Franklin Miller, both of whom served for decades with distinction in senior government positions, make four valuable recommendations. First, we must recognize the true nature of our adversaries – that our policies must be based on who they are, not on who we want them to be, and that we do not share the same values or the same goals. Second, we must abandon the faulty concept that strategic missile

³ George H. W. Bush, Address to the Joint Session of Congress, reprinted in, “Bush ‘Out of These Troubled Times...A New World Order,’” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/09/12/bush-out-of-these-troubled-times-a-new-world-order/b93b5cf1-e389-4e6a-84b0-85f71bf4c946/>.

defenses are destabilizing and accept that such defenses are essential to strengthen deterrence and protect our country from the threat of nuclear attack or war. Third, we must be cognizant that Russia, like North Korea and Iran, has used arms control negotiations to gain unilateral advantages. Unlike the U.S. approach, our adversaries view arms control as a zero-sum game—a tool to advance their national security interests, not the common good. All have cheated on agreements when their leaders determined it was in their interest to do so. Fourth, we must recognize that U.S. allies are essential to protect the homeland and to project power and influence abroad.

Susan Koch, former Assistant Director for Strategic Programs in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, examines nonproliferation cooperation between the Soviet Union/Russia and the United States, an area which spurred very hopeful expectations following the incredible geopolitical changes of the early 1990s. Koch's perspective is that much more unique because she personally participated in many negotiations between the Soviet Union/Russia as well as countries that were born out of the Soviet Union's split. In many ways, Koch argues, this cooperation delivered with regard to reducing the risks of proliferation from these territories.

The future is bright for democracies given their structural advantages over authoritarian regimes, argues Matthew Kroenig, professor of government and foreign service at Georgetown University and a senior fellow in the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. Kroenig applies the lessons of the Cold War to rivalry with China. Considering U.S. structural strengths and China's vulnerabilities, he ends on an optimistic note: "Years from now I suspect I will be invited to write an essay on the dissolution of the Chinese Communist Party."

The *Occasional Paper* features two contributors from the United Kingdom. The first one is David J. Lonsdale,

Lecturer at Hull University, who examines the First Gulf War to illustrate the broader significance of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, including and repercussions beyond Europe. The First Gulf War marked what was by Western policymakers universally considered as the arrival of the U.S. unilateral moment, an era of unrivaled U.S. power enabled by Soviet economic and political challenges. These ultimately led to the Soviets abandoning their ally in Iraq. This was very difficult for Gorbachev to do domestically and on the case of Soviet policy in Iraq prior and during the First Gulf War, Lonsdale illustrates the interplay between domestic and international levels and complexity of foreign policy analysis. The second contributor from the United Kingdom, Kenton White, Lecturer in Strategic Studies and International Relations at the University of Reading, examines the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath from a British vantage point. "Britain," White argues, "found itself a spectator at the defining moments of the transition rather than a shaper of them." The failure to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union was universal across different fields, from defense economics to intellectual dogma to economic prescription and intelligence assessments. White points out that the similarly shared collective fallacies are responsible for the West's inability to anticipate Russia's resurgence and for squandering opportunities to prepare for it.

Mark Schneider, Senior Analyst with the National Institute for Public Policy, applies his extensive experience in arms control, nuclear weapons and missile defense policy, to his examination of the gradual decline of the U.S. industrial base which was enabled by U.S. optimism about the "end of history" after the fall of the Soviet Union; he contends that the growth of Marxism in American academia and politics has contributed to the worsening national security conditions since America's unipolar moment of the 1990s. Schneider observes that the hostile authoritarian

dictatorships in China, Russia, and North Korea continue to build up their nuclear weapons capability while the United States has so far been unable to effectively revitalize its own nuclear production complex. He warns that, “the objective of Putin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine was not just the conquest of Ukraine but rather the reestablishment of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe,” and reminds the reader that such is the geopolitical mindset that the United States and its allies must be prepared to counter.

Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, ponders the scenario of Russia’s collapse, however unlikely it seems to date. Yet, Tertrais points out, “As Russia shows signs of military and economic exhaustion – not to mention an extraordinarily high human toll – caused by its ill-fated, full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the scenario of an implosion or collapse of the country is one that deserves a fresh look.”

Bing West, former Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Reagan, discusses how the Reagan Administration’s policies contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union and then assesses structural factors that have shaped China’s rise. He emphasizes the importance of a continuing U.S. military presence abroad for the outcome of the rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

This *Occasional Paper* provides timely reflections on one of the most geopolitically important moments in modern history, considering its promises and disappointments. We hope you will find the articles worthwhile and stimulating.

Michaela Dodge
Editor

A Long Journey to Familiar Places: Russia and the United States 35 Years After the Soviet Union's Collapse

Gary L. Geipel

Russia reels from a long and costly military intervention in its near abroad that produced only stalemate. Its moribund economy has been shackled for years to the needs of the state and the dictates of a handful of power brokers rather than freed to create large-scale opportunity for the impoverished Russian people. Its political future is uncertain following decades of authoritarian rule and chaotic experiments with democracy. Grievances run strong among many Russians, directed against perceived domestic and foreign enemies alike, while outside observers worry about the future of Moscow's nuclear arsenal and the nation's potential alignments in the years ahead.

The United States stands virtually unchallenged in its status as a truly global power. Overdue military reinvestments and modernizations are taking hold, and a recent demonstration of the nation's military prowess against a smaller adversary allayed concerns that America had lost its edge. Though it faces enormous challenges financing entitlement spending in the years ahead, the U.S. economy remains remarkably resilient and accounts for about a quarter of the entire globe's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). America's constitutional order has shown similar resilience against domestic-political tensions, but the nation is deeply divided over its priorities at home and its role in the world.

Dateline 2026? Yes, the statements fit the facts. However, the previous two paragraphs also could have been written with essentially no changes over the holiday season in 1991, as an analyst began to make sense of what

the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic's (USSR's) formal demise shortly before on New Year's Eve, and the subsequent rise of the Russian Federation, meant for international security.

On the one hand, anyone alive for the last 35 years would find the notion that "nothing has changed" laughable. Americans and Russians have lived through an impossibly long list of domestic upheavals, economic downturns, technological revolutions, and wars. And yes, there's China. Yet, consider that we have much more to learn by exploring why the passage of more than a generation—and everything on that impossibly long list of experiences—has brought Russia and the United States to such familiar places.

What seemed to be the epochal collapse of communism, and the end of the long Cold War, did not transform the world or even its former protagonists to anything near their imagined extent. The relative positions of Russia and the United States are remarkably similar today. Our big, unresolved questions—America's role in the world and Russia's political order, most prominently—remain unresolved. Not even our immediate intentions on the world stage are clear to anyone, least of all to ourselves. Why? And what does this teach us?

The Theories (Mostly) Did Not Help

When asked by a journalist about his concerns in office, former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan reportedly quipped, "Events, my dear boy, events."¹ Apocryphal or not, no observation more effectively demolishes the perennial Great Man Theory of human affairs, in which the roles of individual leaders are assumed to be pivotal in

¹ Adam Raphael, "Mrs. T looks out of touch," *The Observer* (March 11, 1984).

shaping the future. The administration of President George H. W. Bush was a veritable pantheon of (at least small “g”) great leaders and thinkers in the fields of diplomacy and international security, not least the President himself. Yet, none of those individuals could take credit for the collapse of the Soviet Union, which they did not even particularly desire. Writing two decades later with the benefit of declassified archives, the Ukrainian-American historian Serhii Plokhy notes Bush’s strong “personal attachment” to the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the U.S. President’s preference for saving the Soviet Union as a “junior partner in the international arena.”² But 1991 brought what Bush called “changes of almost biblical proportions”³ inside the collapsing USSR, which he responded to soberly but could not steer. Events, my dear boy.

In the years since, President Bush and his successors have been no more able to stay above the torrent of unexpected challenges and to pursue a resolute vision of America’s own role in the world, assuming that they even had one. The attempted liberal internationalism of the first President Bush and his successor, Bill Clinton, faltered after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when America’s own interests once again came naturally to the fore. Post-9/11, President George W. Bush’s neoconservative belief in nation-building—pursued most aggressively in Afghanistan and Iraq—foundered on the sociopolitical conditions that had set those countries apart from the American experience in the first place.

Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump (in his first term) both disdained meaningful foreign policy

² Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), pp. 404-405.

³ George H. W. Bush, State of the Union Address (January 28, 1992), <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-28-1992-state-union-address>.

strategies altogether and instead improvised their responses to setbacks in the Middle East, the ongoing rise of China, and the nuclear threats posed by rogue states. Arms-length airstrikes, rhetorical flourishes, and personal diplomacy characterized both administrations. "I've got a pen and I've got a phone," Obama said in 2014 to describe his domestic governance style.⁴ His international security policy was little different, leaving (like Trump's from 2017-21) few enduring effects. Presidents Obama and Trump developed and refined the practice of declaring rather than achieving preferred realities, exemplified in Obama's case by a nuclear weapons deal with Iran supported only by a manufactured online echo chamber⁵ and, in Trump's case, by the relentless use of social media to declare friendships and diplomatic breakthroughs with the likes of Kim Jong-Un and Vladimir Putin despite all evidence to the contrary.

Russian leaders have fared no better in imposing their will on human affairs, from the increasingly dissolute Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s to the quarter-century rule of pseudo-czar Putin and his hangers-on. Putin has forced a modicum of domestic-political stability on Russia through authoritarian power grabs and cronyism, without creating principles or structures likely to outlive him. Facing increasing isolation, and unable to complete his Ukraine adventure despite a massive loss of his people's lives and treasure, Putin appears likely to leave Russia not as a great power but in a state of anything-is-possible confusion once again.

⁴ Remarks by the President Before Cabinet Meeting (January 14, 2014), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/14/remarks-president-cabinet-meeting/>.

⁵ David Samuels, "Rapid-Onset Political Enlightenment: How Barack Obama Built an Omnipotent Thought-Machine, and How It Was Destroyed," *Tablet* (December 19, 2024), <https://www.tabletmag.com/feature/rapid-onset-political-enlightenment>.

The Great Man Theory is a soft target, but the major alternatives explaining what was supposed to happen after 1991 fared little better. Subscribers to the once ubiquitous “End of History” notion, born in 1989 and predicting “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government,”⁶ found little solace in the subsequent 35 years. Even if one believes that the alternatives to liberal democracy have all been tried, the theory failed utterly to account for humanity’s endless willingness to recycle its mistakes—from oligarchies and theocracies to the endless varieties of state socialism and communism. According to Freedom House’s long-standing rankings, “global freedom declined for the 20th consecutive year in 2025,” as 54 countries experienced a deterioration in their rights and liberties while only 35 saw improvements.⁷

Samuel P. Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis—a challenger to the End of History that emerged in the same period—has proved just as shaky as a guide to the post-Cold War world. Huntington declared that “the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations.”⁸ The breakup of Yugoslavia, followed by the rise of Islamism and the 9/11 attacks, appeared to bolster the idea that conflicts would have a cultural basis. Despite the inconclusive U.S. military interventions of the 2000s, however, nothing resembling a civilizational front emerged in the Middle East over the last quarter-century. The region is more internally divided than at any time in living memory. And fault lines defined by Huntington’s other candidate civilizations—including

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989), p. 4.

⁷ *Freedom in the World 2026: The Growing Shadow of Autocracy*, Freedom House (2026), p. 1, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/FIW2026_final_digital%20%281%29.pdf.

⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993), p. 22.

“African,” “Confucian,” and “Latin American” – lie in even greater ruin. According to this school, the United States was to have found itself in a “West versus the rest”⁹ scenario since the collapse of the Soviet Union, while Russia was to have led what Huntington called a “Slavic-Orthodox” bloc. Instead, transatlantic ties are frayed to a breaking point and the dominant American intellectual ethos discredits Western civilization, while Russia is in the fifth year of a devastating war with a “Slavic-Orthodox” neighbor.

One analysis from the early 1990s – ironically much less talked about today than its failed competitors – endures almost unscathed where the United States is concerned. The paragraphs at the outset of this chapter were written with the benefit of hindsight. Charles Krauthammer’s 1990 article, “The Unipolar Moment,” displayed genuine foresight and could be republished today with only modest edits on the margins.¹⁰ Swimming against the elite euphoria of the time, Krauthammer warned against beliefs in a benign multipolarity that the United States could manage by adhering to liberal internationalism amid few serious threats. There would be no multipolarity, he argued, only unipolar American power and the relentless expectations of leadership flowing from it. There would be no U.S. consensus behind liberal internationalism but rather an endless domestic battle between interventionism and isolationism. And there would be no enduring global peace but rather a persistent threat from weapons of mass destruction (WMD) wielded by rogue states.¹¹ Check, check, and check – for the last 35 years, and still today.

⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁰ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (1990/91), pp. 23-33.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 23.

A Reset in Expectations – and Possibilities

More than a generation after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the Unipolar Moment essentially endures. China's economy and technological prowess have grown enormously, and its financial and trade relationships reach across the world. China's status as a "Great Power" is far from demonstrated, however, as Beijing nervously considers its readiness to conquer a nearby island the size of Maryland while almost every internal demographic and economic indicator turns negative.

China may yet claim global dominance—the struggle for supremacy in Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a wildcard—but for now the strangely frozen conditions and unresolved questions of 1991 are just as important: whither Russia and the United States?

Americans and Russians both "await change" as an almost perpetual state in recent years, looking for a definitive outcome in their domestic-political arenas. None is likely to be forthcoming. The U.S. electorate remains exquisitely divided between populist extremes and an anxious middle that repeatedly throws its weight from one unpalatable set of choices to the other. Only an accident or a cataclysm seems likely to produce an enduring consensus in the near term. Russia's post-Putin political future is by nature even murkier, as uncertain power plays unfold largely beyond the public gaze. Confident predictions about both nations are impossible, but looking at a fresh balance sheet may be helpful.

Consensus estimates are that Russia has lost between 300,000-500,000 young men so far in Ukraine, nearly a generation, compounding a demographic collapse that few societies have experienced since the plagues of the Middle Ages. Russia's sub-replacement birth rate is among the lowest in the world while its mortality rate for men between

18 and 64 was double Western Europe's—before the Ukraine war even began. Its total population is on course to decline by at least 25 percent in the remainder of this century.¹² Demographic catastrophe and war, of course, have not helped the Russian economy, which ranks below Malaysia and Mexico in per capita GDP and continues to depend on agriculture, energy, and military industry rather than on dynamic growth sectors.

On the more positive side of the ledger, assuming that most of the diaspora is willing to return, the estimated 650,000 Russians who left the country after the Ukraine invasion represent a jolt of capital, ideas, and experience in waiting.¹³ That their new experience in most cases includes exposure to liberal democracy and freer markets is a powerful sweetener. Russian returnees could be the founding generation of an entrepreneurial economy and a vibrant political culture of the sort stifled since the 1990s.

The U.S. balance sheet is similarly inconclusive but still hopeful. On the negative side since the 1990s, Americans appear to have lost some of the civilizational confidence necessary to navigate their nation's unipolar moment. At the most basic level, numerous surveys show that declining percentages of Americans describe themselves as "proud" of their country, though the numbers still constitute a majority.¹⁴ Also since the 1990s—driven in particular by the

¹² See Harley Balzer, *A Russia Without Russians? Putin's Disastrous Demographics* (Atlantic Council, 2024),

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/russia-tomorrow/a-russia-without-russians-putins-disastrous-demographics/>.

¹³ Alexandra Prokopenko, "The great Russian brain drain," *The Catalyst* (Fall 2024), <https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/the-great-gray-wave/the-great-russian-brain-drain>.

¹⁴ See, for example, Davi Schulman, "Proud to Be an American?" *U.S. News and World Report* (June 29, 2026), <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2026-06-29/proud-to-be-an-american-new-poll-finds-patriotism-dips-to-quarter-century-low-ahead-of-250th-anniversary>.

rise of digital and social media and related institutional transformations—Americans trapped in tribal silos have developed what appears to be a structural inability to listen to one another let alone to reach meaningful cultural or political consensus.¹⁵ This situation has greatly exacerbated the divide between internationalists and isolationists already identified by Krauthammer in the 1990s.

America's demographics and economy, meanwhile, remain perplexing in their contradictions. Immigration to the United States fuels pitched domestic-political battles while simultaneously protecting the nation from the burdens of aging populations, disappearing workforces, and shrinking tax rolls common to most other countries—lately including even China. America in the 2020s is home to as many of the most wasted and as many of the most accomplished human beings who ever inhabited a single land. The results include 40 percent of fourth graders (meaning about 1.5 million children in that grade alone) who cannot read at the most basic level of measurement,¹⁶ alongside seemingly irrepressible economic growth rates—driven by brilliant entrepreneurs, engineers, investors, and scientists responsible for constant innovations in AI, biotechnology, robotics, and a quietly burgeoning, “garage-style” military industry.¹⁷

And the rest of the world may get a vote. While history did not end in 1991, neither did it enter the pit. Ironically, as Russia's trials seem endless and American confidence

¹⁵ This challenge is explored in detail in Gary L. Geipel, *Post-Truth and National Security: Context, Challenges, and Responses*, National Institute for Public Policy, *Occasional Papers*, Vol. 1, No. 12 (December 2021).

¹⁶ “The Nation's Report Card,” National Assessment Governing Board (January 29, 2025), <https://www.nagb.gov/news-and-events/news-releases/2025/nations-report-card-decline-in-reading-progress-in-math.html>.

¹⁷ See Michael Gibson, “The Next Arsenal of Democracy,” *City Journal* (Summer 2024), <https://www.city-journal.org/article/the-next-arsenal-of-democracy>.

appears to wane, other countries and regions are signaling hope. Europe's cultural, demographic, and economic struggles remain very large, but it has awakened at long last from its post-Cold War strategic slumber, and renewed sobriety about military defense and the importance of sustaining civilizational values bodes well for rapprochement with a post-Putin Russia. Where the transatlantic world is concerned, Huntington may get the nod he deserves, after all. Responding to brutal military attacks in 2022 and 2023, Ukraine and Israel have exemplified resilience and maintained or even strengthened their liberalism under the most difficult circumstances.¹⁸ Individual African and Latin American nations may move up or down in freedom rankings from year to year, but long-term downdrafts toward authoritarianism and socialism appear to be waning once again, even in bastions of repression such as Cuba and Venezuela, thanks in some measure to Russia's recent distractions. Meanwhile, India rises, portending an epochal move in the balance sheet.

Back to the Future?

We return, then, to America's and Russia's familiar places, 35 years apart—at least open to the possibility that what happens next may be different this time. So much else has changed. And so much, perhaps, has been learned.

As the prolific Russia-watcher Mark Galeotti has noted, "Putin absolutely fits within the wider patterns of Russian history, although probably as an essentially transitional figure, neither Soviet nor truly post-Soviet."¹⁹ That distinction may be telling when linked to another, long-in-

¹⁸ There are conspiracy-style notions to the contrary, of course, but they merely prove the point: outraged opponents will swarm any liberal who dares fight for freedom, since the resistance is so unexpected.

¹⁹ Mark Galeotti, *A Short History of Russia* (New York: Hanover Square Press, 2020), p. 207.

coming insight about the Soviet Union. The historian Serhii Plokhy argues convincingly that what happened at the end of 1991 was the end of an empire:

The heirs of the tsars were the last to lose their imperial possessions, following the former masters of the Habsburg, Ottoman, British, French, Portuguese, and a few minor land-based and maritime empires. What seems so special about the Soviet Union is that very few people considered it an empire during its lifetime or were prepared to treat it as anything but a nation-state.²⁰

One man certainly saw it as more than a nation-state. Historian Mary Sarotte recalls the disgust of then-Lt. Col. Vladimir Putin in December 1989, as he asked a military colleague what support they might receive in defending the Dresden outpost of Soviet State Security (the KGB) from the exuberant East Germans who had just stormed their own country's nearby secret police offices. "Moscow is silent," the colleague replied, which did not stop Putin from informing members of the crowd that they would be shot if they went farther into the KGB's domain.²¹ Putin's disgust with his superiors—and his practical insubordination—suggests that he was Soviet only as long as the USSR defended Russia's honor and preserved its empire.

But neither has Putin been a post-Soviet figure, to the extent of establishing an order that is likely to transcend his own lifespan. He has clung to and occasionally tried to reassemble parts of the Soviet empire while mainly demonstrating that it cannot be done—any more than it could have been done by other vanished empires.

In any optimistic notion of the future, the last 35 years will have provided Russia with a decent interval in which

²⁰ Plokhy, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

²¹ M.E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), Chapter 2.

to come to grips with the loss of empire, to consider the impossibility of rebuilding it, and to imagine alternatives. Predictions would be foolish after cataloguing how many of them failed the last time. But constructive optimism may not be entirely out of place. Russia was not, and will not be, the “junior partner” to America that President George H. W. Bush envisioned for a neutered USSR in 1991. But a Russia after Putin need not be America’s adversary, either.

Having exhausted several more alternatives to liberal democracy, Russia may be ready for a serious dance with the end of history. Having failed to establish a Slavic-Orthodox civilization under its rule, Russia may be ready to embrace some of the still-functional Western Civilization that its diaspora has come to know. And having not been crushed by a United States enjoying or enduring its “Unipolar Moment,” Russia may be open to collaboration with its former rival. Because yes, there’s China.

Dr. Gary L. Geipel is a Senior Associate at the National Institute for Public Policy, a professor of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University, and a communications consultant to industry and public affairs clients. Previously, he held diverse analysis and communications roles in government, industry, and the nonprofit sector in the United States and abroad.

Lessons from the Soviet Experience

Robert Joseph and Franklin Miller

The Past is Prologue: The Soviet Union Still Lives

The Soviet Union formally expired on December 26, 1991. Aptly dubbed the “Evil Empire” by Ronald Reagan, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) died of its own internal contradictions and, in the process of dying, released its hold on the Central and Eastern European countries it had occupied since the end of World War II. A decade and a half later a revenge-oriented former KGB lieutenant colonel, chosen by outgoing Russian President Boris Yeltsin to succeed him in a highly questionable deal to preserve Yeltsin’s accumulated wealth, made clear his intent to recreate as much of the old USSR as possible, including former Soviet territories which had joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. But the Soviet Union never really went away, in large part because the West failed to apply the lessons from the Cold War experience.

Between December 1991 and February 2007, when Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the United States and NATO to be the enemy and revealed his intention to reestablish Russia as a great power,¹ Western leaders, politicians and pundits sought to convince themselves and others that Russian policy had truly been transformed, that Russia had become a responsible member of the rules-based international order, and that it had foresworn military aggression and subversion in favor of

¹ Vladimir Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

arms control, transparency and cooperation. Self-delusion, a powerful potion, prevailed and would continue to prevail in large part until Putin's first war against Ukraine in 2014.

In many ways the new Soviet Union which has emerged under Putin's iron grip is more dangerous than that of Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev. The old Soviet leadership experienced and was tempered by World War II. It understood the devastation war could cause in the Russian homeland. For the most part power was exercised by a collective leadership which increasingly eschewed adventurism, a point emphasized by the dangerous crisis created by Khrushchev's decision to send nuclear-armed missiles to Cuba in 1962. This is not the case in Putin's Moscow. Unfamiliar (at least until recently, given Ukrainian strikes within Russia) with the cost of war, essentially unhindered by other bureaucratic actors, willing to kill any prominent dissenters or potential challengers, almost completely in control of information in the public sphere, and with the power ministries and the central bank held in thrall, Putin has increasingly displayed an appetite for risk-taking. That behavior is encouraged and made more dangerous by his evident estrangement, if not divorce, from reality, as evidenced by his inability to recognize the enormous cost of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Putin's risk-taking is now manifest in multiple ways, first among which is his illegal, bloody occupations of Crimea and the Ukrainian provinces of the Donbas. His forces in Ukraine are guilty of rape, murder, looting and kidnapping, all of which have been reported widely. He has also:

- Initiated a massive buildup of strategic and sub-strategic nuclear forces which he and his cronies use to threaten and intimidate members of the NATO alliance.
- Refused to withdraw forces from Moldova as previously agreed by treaty.

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- Invaded the Republic of Georgia and still occupies Georgian territory.
 - Initiated a sweeping gray area war against the West, disrupting underwater cables, and sabotaging civilian cargo aircraft and military storage sites.
 - Instructed his naval and air forces to carry out hazardous operations which imperil allied naval ships and aircraft in defiance of international agreements to which Russia is a party.
 - Violated numerous arms control agreements with the West.

Based upon what has happened over the last 35 years, it is incumbent on the West generally and on the Trump Administration in particular to understand the mistakes that were made in the past and how and why policies should change to prevent their recurrence. Unfortunately, the evidence to date suggests that the lessons learned from the Soviet experience are not being applied to counter today's threats.

Lessons: Learned and Unlearned

It is clear that the mistakes of the past have been and are being repeated, not only with Russia but also with North Korea and Iran. The reasons are primarily two-fold: first, the tendency of American leaders to base policy more on their hopes and wishes than on the harsh realities that define our adversaries, and second, an inability or unwillingness to abandon flawed strategic concepts. Accordingly, we provide below four "lessons" which we propose should guide U.S. policy toward each of these three states.

Lesson: We must recognize the true nature of our adversaries. Our policies must be based on who they are, not on who we want them to be. We do not share the same values or the same goals.

Throughout the Cold War, from the days of Stalin to Gorbachev, every American president correctly viewed the Soviet Union as the major threat to the security of the United States and our allies. While American leaders understood the implacable nature of the ideological division, there was almost always a belief by U.S. presidents that they could, in Margaret Thatcher's words, "do business" with their Soviet counterparts.²

This optimism was often based on a false set of perceived common interests and was reinforced by mirror imagining on a personal level sometimes to the point of absurdity. Whether it was because Stalin liked White Horse whiskey or Brezhnev listened to jazz music, a reason to be optimistic was always found. It would take repeated brutal Soviet actions, such as the overthrow of central and eastern European governments after the defeat of Germany in 1945, the erection of the Berlin Wall or the military invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, to end these delusions, at least temporarily. While each successive Soviet leader proved a disappointment, the hope that the next leader would prove different never ceased.

Even after the failure of the Russian experiment with democracy under Yeltsin and the return of authoritarianism under Putin, the false hope that we can find a mutually advantageous accommodation with Russia persists. George W. Bush considered Putin a potential partner, at least until Putin invaded Georgia in 2008. Obama continued the illusion until the first invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Trump in his first term

² Margaret Thatcher, *BBC*, December 17, 1984, TV.

was the most optimistic, calling Putin a “good guy” and a “friend.”³ Biden, while referring to Putin as a “killer,”⁴ nevertheless made multiple calls to him following the termination of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) to negotiate a new nuclear arms treaty. And in his second term, while criticizing Putin for the continued war in Ukraine, Trump has praised him for his efforts to improve relations with the United States.⁵

Common to all the above presidents is the underlying belief that Putin can be convinced to conform to international norms through offers of concessions or the imposition of sanctions. This belief ignores what are irreconcilable interests. While Putin may make tactical concessions when it is in his interest to do so, he has proven his absolute determination to achieve the goal of restoring Russia as a great power at the expense of U.S. and allied national security interests worldwide. It is realizing this determination that should guide U.S. policymakers, not the delusion that Putin can be convinced to accept the Western-inspired international order.

The failure to learn from our experience with Soviet leadership is also apparent in U.S. policy with North Korea and Iran. North Korea is the last of the totalitarian states, controlling every aspect of its citizens’ lives through brutal repression, regimentation, and the total control of all

³ Nathan Place, “Trump says Putin ‘was a friend of mine’ in bizarre phone chat with golfer John Daly,” *Independent*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-putin-friend-john-daly-b2029785.html>.

⁴ Anna Chernova, Zahra Ullah, Rob Picheta, “Russia reacts angrily after Biden calls Putin a ‘killer,’” *CNN*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/18/europe/biden-putin-killer-comment-russia-reaction-intl>.

⁵ Kathryn Watson, “Trump and Putin stress improving U.S.-Russia relations in phone call, White House says,” *CBS News*, March 18, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-putin-speak-phone-call-ukraine-war/>.

information. Iran is ruled by a religious dictatorship that has waged a medieval war on its own people, killing tens of thousands of its own citizens in the streets across Iran and executing thousands more, with hangings of political prisoners on an almost daily basis.

The regimes in both North Korea and Iran need to be recognized as evil in the same way that Reagan characterized the Soviet Union. For Reagan, the goal was not to compromise or appease the leaders in the Kremlin but to bring an end to their immoral and corrupt rule. His policies and public speeches were directed to this end and he succeeded. He characterized his strategy in a very straightforward way: "we win; they lose." Yet, this lesson has not been applied to North Korea and Iran by U.S. policymakers. The false hope that North Korean and Iranian leaders will change their behavior continues to shape U.S. policy.

For more than two decades the almost exclusive focus of U.S. policy toward North Korea has been on denuclearization. Today, the Kim regime is building as many nuclear weapons as fast as it can. Yet, despite North Korea having violated every nuclear-related commitment it has made, U.S. policy continues to call for denuclearization negotiations. Other issues, including the North's continuing provocations and horrific human rights abuses, are relegated to secondary matters to be addressed later.

The reason for the failure of the denuclearization efforts is clear: the Kim regime believes that nuclear weapons are essential to its very survival. As a result, there is no chance that the regime will abandon its nuclear program in exchange for oil or condominiums on the beaches. Yet, despite decades of failure, U.S. policy remains resistant to change, unable to accept the true nature of the regime. The fact remains that, as long as the Kim dynasty rules North Korea, it will continue to expand its nuclear arsenal. Denuclearization can only be achieved with the end of the

regime. In the interim, applying maximum economic and political pressure while ensuring credible deterrence, is the most effective means to manage the threat until the North falls from its own internal weaknesses, just as the Soviet Union did.

Similarly, for more than two decades, U.S. policy toward Iran has been based on the false hope that its leaders will become more moderate and recognize that it is in their interest to abandon their quest for nuclear weapons. As with North Korea, this hope has been consistently disappointed but never abandoned. While there have been major differences in approach, from appeasement to maximum economic pressure, and most recently the use of military force, including Operation Midnight Hammer that destroyed much of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, the objective has always been to negotiate constraints on Iran's nuclear program to block the pathway to a weapon. All of these efforts have failed because, as with North Korea, nuclear weapons are considered essential for regime survival, especially since the ascendancy of the IRGC following Epic Fury.

Iran appears to have internalized four lessons since the launch of Epic Fury, despite the substantial military achievements of the operation:

- First, regime change cannot be accomplished by airstrikes alone. Given that the United States has likely ruled out a large-scale ground invasion, the regime may feel more secure than before the conflict.
- Second, the Strait of Hormuz can be controlled by threats and attacks on shipping, providing the regime with leverage over its neighbors and the global economy. The Strait has become the regime's most prominent hostage to gain financial and political concessions.

- Third, as reflected in the U.S.-Iranian Memorandum of Understanding of June 2026, the regime's negotiation playbook still works.⁶ Negotiations are used to buy time and extract concessions, to manipulate the adversary by playing the game of good cop-bad cop, and making only cosmetic concessions while seeking new means of leverage.
- Fourth, Iranian leaders may well have concluded that had they already possessed nuclear weapons, Epic Fury would not have happened in the first place. In fact, the attacks and the additional sanctions may have convinced the regime that it is even more urgent now to acquire nuclear weapons to deter future attacks and serve as a shield against outside intervention if the Iranian people revolt.

The problem is that all of these lessons ring true. The Trump Administration's willingness, at least until recently, to play the cat and mouse game with Iran's leaders offers encouragement to the regime and incentives to continue its behavior.

The underlying problem, as with Russia and North Korea, is the failure to accept the true nature of the Iranian regime. These are not leaders that we can "do business with." The notion that we can persuade, cajole, or coerce Iranian leaders to "behave" is a dangerous folly. The regime is driven by hatred of the West and cannot change. While it may make tactical concessions when compelled to do so, it will never abandon its ideology or its goals, including its nuclear ambitions and its new ambition to control Hormuz. Yet, in and out of government false hope remains that, with the right combination of carrots and

⁶ "Read the full text of Trump's preliminary U.S.-Iran agreement to end the war," *NPR*, June 18, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/06/18/nx-s1-5863027/us-iran-trump-memorandum-of-understanding-full-text>.

sticks, Iran will back away from its insistence on control of the Strait and accept meaningful limits on its nuclear program. Despite the mass uprisings this past December and January and the mass murders of the demonstrators by the regime, this continues to be the mainstream view, a view based on the false belief that the regime remains strong and that it is only wishful thinking that it can be overthrown by the people. Ironically, it is wishful thinking that has long guided U.S. policy and perpetuated its consistent failure.

Lesson: We must abandon the faulty strategic concept that strategic missile defenses are destabilizing and accept that such defenses are essential to strengthen deterrence and protect our country from the threat of nuclear attack or war.

For much of the Cold War, from the Nixon Administration forward, U.S. nuclear policy was shaped by the belief that developing and deploying strategic defenses capable of protecting the U.S. homeland, our territory and population centers, was “destabilizing,” resulting in an arms race because our adversaries would seek to build more and more offensive missiles to offset American defenses. This was the underlying rationale of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that prohibited the United States and Soviet Union from acquiring such defenses. While perhaps seductive in theory, and although a central component of U.S. strategic doctrine for over 30 years, the concept was in fact counterfactual. The most rapid nuclear arms race in history took place after the Treaty went into effect, largely caused by the emergence of missiles with Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles. And years later, when the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, President Putin stated that the U.S. withdrawal was not a threat and that Russia would continue to reduce its offensive strategic forces.

But the facts have always been secondary in the debate over homeland missile defenses which very early took on quasi-religious dimensions in the United States. The notion that such missile defenses will start an arms race and derail the prospects for arms control agreements is an article of faith among the anti-missile defense crowd even though history makes clear that, after President George W. Bush withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2001, the United States and Russia concluded two separate nuclear force reductions treaties (the Moscow Treaty of 2002 and New START of 2010). For its part, the Soviet Union (and later Russia) never agreed that their missile defense capabilities were destabilizing. The ABM Treaty was seen by Moscow as a means to limit U.S. capabilities as they, in direct violation of the Treaty, continued their development and deployment of missile defense capabilities outlawed by the Treaty.

In contrast to the decades-old argument over the value of missile defenses at the strategic level, there is a broad consensus at the theater level that defenses are stabilizing, an urgent priority needed to protect population centers and national infrastructure from attack. The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Gulf have reinforced the view that missile defenses are both essential to the war fight and, in fact, are “stabilizing,” increasing the prospects for ending the conflicts. As a consequence, the United States and its allies are seeking to provide large-scale missile defense capabilities to Ukraine and the Gulf Arabs by accelerating the production of Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense interceptors.

At the strategic level, Reagan was the first president to question the foundational premise of the ABM Treaty. He rejected the long-standing conventional wisdom that mutual assured destruction provided the best means of deterrence and believed that defending against missile attacks could stabilize the balance of power with the Soviet Union. The goal was never an impenetrable perfect defense

but rather the ability to intercept enough missiles in an initial strike to decrease the Soviets' confidence that their objectives could be met, thereby strengthening deterrence. Reagan challenged the nation to build defenses to shield America from ballistic missile attacks. In the more than 40 years since he announced the Strategic Defense Initiative, despite the revolutionary advances of technology and the successful fielding of capabilities against short- and intermediate-range threats to protect our military forces and allies, Reagan's challenge remains unmet.

Except for small-scale strikes from North Korea, the American homeland remains defenseless against intercontinental-range missile attacks. The principal reason is not technology or funding but rather the adherence to the outdated and counterfactual Cold War belief that, at least for peer and near-peer adversaries, defending U.S. cities and territory would lead to an arms race. After the Soviet Union fell, George H.W. Bush continued the pursuit of strategic defenses through the Global Protection Against Limited Strikes program. This program envisioned both ground-based interceptors and 1,000 small satellites with sensors and kinetic kill capabilities for intercepting missiles in space. But with Bill Clinton assuming office, a distinct partisan pattern emerged. Secretary of Defense Les Aspin gleefully announced the end of "star wars" on his first day in office. The ABM Treaty was lauded as the "cornerstone of strategic stability."

Under George W. Bush, the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty and, in 2004, deployed defenses to protect against "handfuls" of missiles from rogue states such as North Korea. Although a major accomplishment, the GMD (ground-based midcourse defense) system did not anticipate the coercive threats from Russia and China that have emerged since then. The Obama Administration did what the Clinton Administration had done. Defenses were seen primarily as an arms control bargaining chip to secure

nuclear reductions. The number of GMD interceptors was reduced, the third GMD site in Europe was canceled, and all major programs were ended.

In his first term, President Trump emphasized the importance of strategic defenses, but the results were disappointing. In remarks introducing the 2019 *Missile Defense Review* (MDR), he said, “We are committed to establishing a missile defense program that can shield every city in the United States.”⁷ He emphasized that “space is a new warfighting domain” and that “my upcoming budget will invest in a space-based missile defense layer.”⁸ Despite these promising words, his Pentagon’s MDR focused almost solely on North Korea and relegated space-based interceptors to a research project. The next-generation land-based interceptor became the program of record to augment or replace aging interceptors despite not contributing to the deterrence of coercive threats or perhaps even being able to keep pace with the North Korean threat.

The Biden Administration’s 2022 MDR explicitly ruled out defenses to strengthen deterrence against Moscow and Beijing.⁹ It also ruled out any meaningful work on space-based interceptors on the grounds that such capabilities would “weaponize space.” Given the militarization of space by Russia, China and other adversaries, and the creation of our own Space Force, the Biden rationale was clearly driven not by facts but by the inability to abandon the Cold War concept of defenses.

⁷ “Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review,” January 17, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-announcing-missile-defense-review/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Missile Defense Review*, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf>.

A new factor was injected into the debate in 2023 with the report of the Congressionally Mandated bipartisan “Strategic Posture Commission.”¹⁰ The Commission recognized that the technology available to defend the U.S. homeland against ballistic missiles had advanced significantly, principally through the use of space-based sensors and interceptors. The Commission, taking account of events in Ukraine, concluded that homeland missile defenses would raise the cost of ballistic missile attack by a large factor and thereby enhance deterrence. The report’s conclusions, however, while embraced by key members of the House and Senate, have not been fully translated into U.S. policy. Furthermore, the division of responsibility for homeland missile defense among the Missile Defense Agency, the Space Development Agency and the Space Force is hardly the best management arrangement for developing and deploying rapidly advanced missile defenses.

The question today is whether the Trump Administration will succeed in the call to develop and deploy the “Golden Dome,” with an emphasis on space-based capabilities. While more resources are being devoted to exploring space-based interceptors, the fate of the “Golden Dome” is far from settled. The antibodies in and out of government remain active, including in the Department of Defense, where policy differences are often disguised as budget and technology questions. The long-standing bias in the Missile Defense Agency in favor of ground-based interceptors, which are not effective against Russian and Chinese threats, remains evident in the program. And when the next Democrat administration

¹⁰ Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, <https://ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

takes office, it is possible that the “Golden Dome” initiative will be ended, and the space-based interceptor program cancelled, with the outcome being a continuation of ground-based architecture specifically intended not to “destabilize” the strategic balance with Russia and China. Once again, we will have failed to learn.

Lesson: Russia, like North Korea and Iran, has used arms control negotiations to gain unilateral advantages. Unlike the U.S. approach, our adversaries view arms control as a zero-sum game, as a tool to advance their national security interests, not the common good. All have cheated on the agreements when their leaders determined it was in their interest to do so.

It has often been observed that negotiating and adhering to nuclear, or indeed any, arms control agreements are easiest when the international political climate makes them unnecessary, and most difficult when the international climate could actually use them. The history of U.S.-Soviet/Russian arms control during the Cold War and its aftermath bears much of that out.

The earliest “successful” (in that it produced a treaty) attempt at U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms control was the negotiation which led to the ABM Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks 1 Interim Agreement. These were motivated by a concern that investments in ABM technology, though rudimentary given the limitations of then extant technology, would foster the growth of strategic nuclear forces on both sides, which were already reaching extremely high levels. Spurred on by Presidents Johnson and Nixon, as well as Premier Kosygin, the sides ultimately reached agreements which prohibited ABM deployments to defend their nations and allowed the growth of strategic nuclear forces to rise (unequally) essentially to levels previously planned by both sides’ militaries. The negotiations established a leitmotif which continues to this

day: the Soviet side was highly compartmented, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs diplomats deliberately kept out of Soviet plans and capabilities while the U.S. side was all on the same page. Indeed, Soviet officers admonished the U.S. side for distributing unclassified documents displaying Soviet force levels to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, arguing it had no right to know.

Follow-on attempts to refine the Interim Agreement during the Ford and Carter presidencies proved fruitless because the Soviets, embarked on a major force modernization program while the United States had plans but no programs underway, were not motivated to engage seriously. It took Ronald Reagan ordering an across-the-board modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal to provide Moscow with an incentive to engage in efforts to limit the growth of the U.S. force. Reagan made clear, however, that he was uninterested in codifying further growth of both sides' forces: he wanted real reductions.

A similar dynamic occurred with respect to shorter-range nuclear forces where the Soviets were expanding their capabilities by deploying a new medium-range missile, the SS-20, which threatened to decouple NATO Europe from the United States. Again, Moscow showed no interest in arms control until NATO began deploying Pershing 2 missiles to offset the SS-20. This provided a second leitmotif: the U.S. side generally approached arms control as a universal good while the Soviet side saw the process as useful only if it limited U.S. capabilities it found threatening. The negotiating dynamic was further complicated because the U.S. side fought among itself to determine the best outcome a treaty could provide, and then presented it as the opening U.S. position, whereas the Soviets generally waited for Washington to make the first move and then asked for more concessions.

We do not intend here to summarize the failings of the many U.S.-Soviet arms control agreements concluded from

the 1970s until today. Suffice it to say, under Putin the Russian government has either openly or clandestinely violated at least nine treaties or agreements. No arms treaties are currently in force between the two countries, although there are concerns about a possible secret agreement between Trump's special envoys, Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff, and their Russian counterpart, Kirill Dmitriev, that commits the United States to remain within the limits of the now-expired New START. What we want to emphasize are the lessons learned that should be taken into account in future negotiations with U.S. adversaries:

- Moscow only negotiates if it perceives Western programs and deployments, pose a threat which it is unable to counter militarily or undermine politically inside Western bodies politic.
- Expect Russia to cheat either outright or by designing clauses within the treaty which permit Moscow to field systems which the treaty ostensibly was designed to ban, as witnessed in the Chemical Weapons Treaty, ABM Treaty, and New START.
- Expect the Western arms control community to see arms control as a substitute for deterrence (it is not) and to decry Western attempts to catch up to Russian nuclear force expansion/modernization as beginning an arms race (which, as a response to Russian actions, it cannot be.)
- Avoid believing Russian interest in a treaty mirrors U.S. motives and avoid leading with the best outcome as the opening.

Lesson: U.S. allies are essential to protect the homeland and to project power and influence abroad.

It has become fashionable in some quarters to declare that the United States no longer needs allies. Indeed, with the notable exceptions of France's help to win the Revolutionary War and the tacit support of the British Navy to help sustain the Monroe Doctrine, America flourished well into the twentieth century with a majority of citizens believing allies only brought entangling difficulties, few benefits, and restricted freedom of action. The two oceans were thought sufficient to protect us. The advent of submarines, long-range airpower and intercontinental ballistic missiles, to say nothing of the rise of dictators with ambitions of global empire, finally put an end to this notion, at least for most observers. The recognition that German domination of the European landmass held dangers for U.S. national security finally propelled us into World War I. Two decades later, having once again been drawn reluctantly into war, this time to prevent Nazi domination of Europe and Imperial Japanese domination of the Pacific and East Asia, the United States on a broad bipartisan basis determined that alliances and forward presence could forestall future major wars—which they have done successfully for over seven decades, including through the Cold War when the Soviet experience reinforced the essential role of allies in what was essentially a conflict between two irreconcilable blocs. That proposition is now being tested.

Alliances are unique relationships. For the most part, they are designed to fulfill specific purposes and shared goals. Allies are not vassals; they do not support every policy initiative of every U.S. administration. They do, however, provide a common front against those threats which have been previously agreed. They require leadership and management, both of which can be tiresome

and time-consuming. But they also provide influence and access. Throughout the Cold War NATO members stood together as a solid front to check Soviet expansionism. One of the greatest tests of the alliance was the decision to respond to the SS-20 deployments by fielding counter capabilities in five European basing countries. Despite tremendous pressure, domestic and Soviet-inspired, the Alliance held strong and sent a powerful message to the Kremlin leaders that NATO could not be broken. This experience contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union in less than a decade.

Today, the NATO alliance presents a barrier to Putin's imperial dreams; in the Pacific, a series of bilateral ties has also slowed both the effectiveness of Chinese efforts to become the regional hegemon and the North Korean desire to conquer and control the entire Korean peninsula. Since the end of the World War II, allies have provided U.S. military forces with basing facilities, overflight access and logistic support without which U.S. power projection across the globe would not be possible. In this manner, both the United States and our NATO and Asian-Pacific partners benefit. Furthermore, intelligence sharing with and among allies provides critical information which supports our ability to defend our borders against narcotics and terrorists.

It is manifestly true, particularly since the end of the Cold War, that some allies have failed to carry out their partnership responsibilities. Many NATO nations consistently underfunded their defense forces and programs in favor of more popular domestic and social welfare activities, relying in essence on the largesse of the United States to protect them. That is changing, thanks in large measure to the threats posed by Putin, Xi and Kim and to the persistent and unyielding pressure from Washington, particularly in both of Trump's terms. As allies increase their defense spending, it is important to remember that

spending is an input; the desired output is a strengthened military capability which enhances the security of all. It serves a collective alliance little if an ally's increase in defense spending serves only to enhance its ability to promote jobs in its domestic defense industry and leads only to a stronger capability to defend its own borders. American leadership is critical to ensuring that the end product of the nascent defense renaissance produces a NATO which in its entirety is better prepared to deter and, if necessary, defeat a Russian attack. Similarly, Japan's growing defense forces need to be fully compatible and interoperable with those of the United States in deterring North Korean – and Chinese – aggression.

One area which requires particular American attention is regional nuclear extended deterrence. At the end of the Cold War, Washington and Moscow agreed to radically reduce their short- and medium-range nuclear forces. The United States carried out its commitment; Russia did not, and in the past decade and a half has built and deployed a large modern force of ground-, air-, and sea-launched theater and tactical nuclear forces which are daily used to try to intimidate NATO governments. Similarly, China, whose regional nuclear capabilities were negligible as the twenty-first century began, has now fielded a significant regional nuclear arsenal, alongside a major expansion of its strategic nuclear forces. The Kims, too, now threaten their neighbors with nuclear capabilities.

Because nuclear war would almost certainly begin in a theater and not over the poles, it is essential that the United States be capable of deterring and responding (and seen to be such by allies and adversaries alike) to Russia's, China's and North Korea's nuclear threats. That said, as the 2023 bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission concluded:

- the US theater nuclear force posture should be urgently modified;

- additional US theater nuclear capabilities will be necessary in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific to deter adversary nuclear use and offset local conventional superiority. These additional theater capabilities will need to be deployable, survivable and variable in their available use options.¹¹

More specifically, the United States needs to increase the priority of developing and deploying the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), which can enhance deterrence in both the North Atlantic and the Pacific. Similarly, in light of Russian and Chinese increasingly sophisticated integrated air and missile defenses, the Air Force should take steps urgently to develop and deploy a stand-off nuclear capability for its dual-capable fighters whose current capability consists only of free-fall bombs. Failure to upgrade regional deterrent capabilities risks lowering the threshold of potential enemy use of nuclear weapons, or increased allied questioning of the U.S. security guarantee leading to their proliferation, or both.

Conclusion

The lessons identified above, all based on the Soviet experience, should inform current and future policymakers and assist them in designing and implementing more effective responses to national security threats. Individually and collectively, the lessons provide valuable insights that can contribute to improved policy outcomes. In doing so, however, U.S. policymakers have to overcome the two overarching obstacles which have made us unable or unwilling to apply the lessons in practice to counter the threats from Russia, North Korea, and Iran. As noted, these are: first, the failure to accept our enemies for who they are

¹¹ Creedon, Kyl, et al., op. cit.

and what they seek to achieve; and second, the failure to abandon outdated strategic views and concepts.

With Russia, there is still a lingering view, often expressed by President Trump, that we can do business with Putin despite his continued determination to pursue his war on Ukraine without regard to the cost in lives and treasure in both Russia and Ukraine. Even presidents who have understood Putin's true character have nevertheless sought agreements that inevitably would be violated whenever Putin determined that it was in his interest. While this may be attributable in part to the often false belief that agreements will be negotiated with effective monitoring and verification provisions, the more likely reason is the lack of imagination and patience, and an unwillingness to employ modern instruments of containment and deterrence.

The failure to apply the lessons of the Soviet experience to North Korea is even more apparent and possibly more dangerous. Kim Jong Un is a third-generation despot ruling a truly evil regime that, as documented by the UN, commits crimes against humanity in the barbaric treatment of his own people. Kim is also directing the rapid buildup of the North's nuclear arsenal to ensure his survival. Given Pyongyang's refusal to negotiate, it is almost certain that in the next few years the North will possess hundreds of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them with modern missiles. Meanwhile, the U.S. and international response is to place North Korea on the back burner by continuing to call for denuclearization, nothing more than a pipe dream while the threat expands. There is clear unwillingness to accept that there are irreconcilable interests with Kim's regime and an inability to design more effective policies and capabilities to prepare for the growing threat. Failing to do so will ensure that the danger will only grow. The United States and our Pacific allies must ensure we have robust deterrence capabilities integrated across our

space, cyber, conventional, regional nuclear and strategic nuclear forces. A robust and effective regional and U.S. homeland missile defense system will be a critical underlay for all of this.

Iran may well be the main test case as to whether policymakers can and will draw on past lessons to counter a critical threat to U.S. national security. Following Epic Fury and the failure of the ceasefire and the memorandum of understanding, Trump has accurately called Iran's leaders "scum" and has, again accurately, noted numerous times that they always lie and cheat. He is using military force to coerce Iran from threatening traffic in the Strait and to compel its leaders to negotiate an agreement that will block Iran from building a nuclear weapon. The problem is obvious but unstated in U.S. policy and in almost all media and pundit commentary. If the regime lies, cheats, and has an unbroken record of violating every agreement it has made, how can negotiations possibly be a solution even if Iran were to concede everything? This glaring inconsistency is, once again, due to the failure to accept the true nature of the adversary and an unwillingness to abandon past strategic constructs, in this case, that the solution to the nuclear threat from Iran is another agreement. In short, doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result.

If we are to succeed with Russia, North Korea and Iran, we must learn from the Soviet experience. We must adjust our expectations and modify policies to achieve an effective defense of our national security. This is equally true, and perhaps even more critical, for China. Given Xi's expansionist goals in the Pacific, his apparent confidence in the use of military force against the United States and/or our allies, and the growth in Chinese forces across the board, it is quite possible he could miscalculate and start a war. China has rebuffed all attempts at significant diplomatic engagement, falling back on increasingly untrue

statements about peaceful intentions and “no first use.” The first step at countering this is to enhance our deterrent posture in the Asian Pacific. Working with regional allies which possess highly capable military forces is already underway and must continue. This must be accompanied by strong public diplomacy campaigns to expose the scale and scope of Chinese goals. And, U.S. strategic and regional nuclear forces must be sized and planned to deter China and Russia simultaneously. Any attempt at arms control must not undercut this posture. While it is unlikely Xi will change, we should be ready to deal with his successor(s) in a manner which is informed by our Soviet and Russian experiences.

Dr. Robert Joseph is a Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy and former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security.

Hon. Franklin Miller is a Principal at the Scowcroft Group, and served for several decades at the Pentagon and later on the NSC Staff as a senior nuclear policy and arms control official.

From Adversaries to Partners to Adversaries

Susan Koch

Beginning shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union, and accelerating after its dissolution, the United States forged new partnerships with its former adversaries – the Soviet Union and its successor states, especially Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

In retrospect, that new era began in March 1985, with two initially unrelated developments, which together paved the way to 15-20 years of unprecedented defense and security cooperation. First was the opening of the Nuclear and Space Talks (NST), an umbrella for three separate arms control negotiations, on strategic arms (START), intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) and Defense and Space (DST). While a DST agreement never materialized, the INF Treaty was signed in December 1987 and START in July 1991.

Second was the ascension to power of Mikhail Gorbachev. Recognizing that constant military buildup, political corruption and secrecy were bankrupting the Soviet state, weakening ties with the constituent republics, and fueling Cold War tensions, he pressed for *glasnost* (transparency) and *perestroika* (restructuring) to try to save the Soviet system. Without *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the Soviet Union probably would never have agreed to the INF Treaty, with its elimination of all U.S. and Soviet land-based missiles of 500-5500 km range, to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with its deep reductions, or to the extensive, intrusive verification measures which characterized both. Those in turn opened the way to far deeper cooperation between the former adversaries. Somewhat ironically, the end of the INF Treaty in August 2019 marked the definitive end of that period of cooperation

with Russia, although it was on its last legs a decade or more before then.

While the INF and START Treaties each had important novel features, another U.S.-Soviet arms control accord was completely unlike anything seen before or since. Its origins lay in the Soviet coup attempt of August 19-21, 1991. The coup's extremely short duration might make it seem laughable, but at the time it posed a serious threat to all that Gorbachev had achieved domestically and internationally. The coup plotters included many, if not most, of the most powerful people in the Soviet Union. Led by KGB head Vladimir Kryuchkov, they included Vice-President Gennady Yanayev, Premier Valentin Pavlov, Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, Interior Minister Boris Pugo, and others.

The coup plotters were dedicated to restoring Soviet (and especially Russian) Communist leadership. They immediately placed Gorbachev under house arrest at his Crimean dacha; to this day, we do not know the status of Soviet nuclear command and control during those days. The coup collapsed when Soviet troops led by Boris Yeltsin, the new President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, disobeyed orders to fire on demonstrators in Moscow.

President George H.W. Bush was concerned that the turmoil in the Soviet Union could lead to serious nuclear weapons proliferation. First, there was the fear that Soviet nuclear command and control was not secure during the coup, and might grow even weaker over time. Second, it appeared inevitable that the Soviet Union would soon disintegrate into 15 constituent republics.¹ Four of those—

¹ The 15 republics listed by the Soviet Union included Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Because the United States had never recognized the 1940 incorporation of those three into the Soviet Union, the United States counted only 12 Soviet republics.

Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan—had nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles on their territory. The greatest proliferation concern was posed by the thousands of easily movable, widely scattered short-range nuclear forces in Belarus and especially Ukraine.

Separately, but coincidentally, U.S. ground- and sea-launched short-range nuclear forces posed political and operational difficulties. In Spring 1991, NATO abandoned plans to modernize the Lance short-range missile system, and the U.S. Army proposed to end its nuclear role. The U.S. Navy was also concerned at the operational and security difficulties posed by nuclear weapons on board surface ships.

All those factors led President Bush in early September 1991 to task the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to develop recommendations for deep U.S. reductions in short-range nuclear forces. The Office of the Secretary of Defense made just two changes to the JCS proposal. First, it kept the unilateral nature of the proposed U.S. reductions, but added a “challenge” to the Soviet Union to reciprocate. Second, it objected to the proposal to eliminate all U.S. shorter-range sea-launched nuclear weapons. That led to a compromise whereby the United States would remove all those weapons from deployment, eliminate “many,” and put the remainder in storage.²

On September 27, 1991, just over three weeks after the President’s initial charge to the JCS, Bush announced the first Presidential Nuclear Initiative (PNI I). In addition to the sea-launched missiles (SLCM) elimination/storage decision, PNI I included the elimination of all U.S. ground-

² The United States proceeded to eliminate all its nuclear torpedoes and one-half of its nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs). The other U.S. nuclear SLCMs remained in storage until the Obama Administration completed their elimination in 2013. In FY 2023, Congress began to appropriate funds for a new nuclear SLCM; the second Trump Administration supports that effort.

launched short-range nuclear forces. Regarding air-launched systems, the PNI canceled modernization of the tactical and strategic versions of the short-range attack missile. One month later, in October 1991, NATO ministers agreed to remove a “substantial portion” (later described as one-half) of nuclear-capable fighter aircraft deployed in Europe. For almost 35 years, the remaining fighter aircraft have provided the only U.S. nuclear forces in Europe.

Concerning strategic forces, PNI I cancelled the programs to develop mobile Small and Peacekeeper intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Further, the United States would remove from alert all ICBMs scheduled for elimination under the START Treaty. Finally, the United States ended the practice of keeping strategic bombers on alert; it has never resumed.

Eight days later, Gorbachev responded to PNI I. He echoed the U.S. initiative regarding ground- and sea-launched shorter-range nuclear forces, removal from alert of ICBMs to be eliminated under the START Treaty, and cancellation of a mobile small ICBM program. The rail-mobile ICBM force would not be modernized or expanded, and would be confined to garrison. In a nonstarter for the United States, the Soviets invited the United States to join them in a unilateral moratorium on explosive nuclear testing; the President refused, but was overruled by Congress one year later, when it imposed a moratorium in the Fiscal Year (FY) 1993 National Defense Authorization Act.³

The follow-on PNI II was in January 1992, just one month after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. President Bush presented the U.S. proposals in his State of the Union address. Boris Yeltsin, President of newly independent

³ As of this writing, that moratorium has lasted over 34 years. The last U.S. explosive nuclear test, named Divider, was on September 23, 1992.

Russia, responded the next day. Unlike its predecessor, PNI II focused on strategic-range nuclear forces. The United States cancelled the Small ICBM program, stopped Peacekeeper production, capped B-2 heavy bomber production at 20, ended the purchase of advanced air-launched cruise missiles, and ended production of new submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) warheads.⁴ PNI II also included a proposal which led to the START II Treaty; specifically, if Russia eliminated all of its ICBMs with multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), the United States would eliminate all Peacekeepers, download all Minuteman ICBMs to one warhead, reduce SLBM warheads by about one-third, and convert “a substantial portion” of heavy bombers to conventional roles.

For its part, Russia pledged to reduce strategic forces to START I levels within three years, and proposed further strategic warhead reductions up to 3,000-3,500 on each side. It also would end production of Backfire bombers, Blackjack bombers and air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs). It would hold no exercises with more than 30 heavy bombers. and further reduce nuclear ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN) combat patrols. The Russian PNI measures undoubtedly reflected the harsh economic realities facing the newly independent country. It is quite possible that Russia would have taken the same steps independently because of budgetary strictures. However, the PNI framework probably increased their political acceptability at a time when a more productive relationship with the West was a widely popular Russian goal. It is noteworthy in that regard that Russia ceased to comply with its PNI I

⁴ The end to production of new SLBM warheads made a virtue out of necessity. The plant in Rocky Flats, Colorado, which produced the W-88 warhead, was closed in November 1989 for gross violations of environmental laws. After complete demolition and environmental remediation, the site was turned into a national wildlife refuge in 2007.

commitments regarding shorter-range forces when its economic situation was still dire.

The United States and Russia negotiated the START II Treaty through much of 1992; Presidents Bush and Yeltsin signed it in Moscow on January 3, 1993. The sides agreed on the Russian-proposed deployed strategic warhead limit of 3,000-3,500. Most notably, START II called for the elimination of the most destabilizing strategic systems, MIRVed ICBMs. ICBMs with up to six warheads could be downloaded by five warheads. Any ICBMs with more than six warheads would have to be eliminated.

START II never entered into force. The Senate approved the Treaty in January 1996. The Russian Duma finally followed suit in April 2000, but that was conditional on U.S. ratification of Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty demarcation agreements that had been signed in September 1997. The Clinton Administration knew that the Senate would never approve those agreements, and did not even submit them. In June 2002, the day after the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty, Vladimir Putin declared that Russia was no longer bound by its signature of START II. The Treaty was officially dead.

Somewhat ironically, a new U.S.-Russian arms control treaty was directly tied to the end of the ABM Treaty. Conventional arms control wisdom, and long-standing Soviet and Russian statements, held that strategic nuclear arms control depended on strict constraints on ABM systems. Putin turned that theory on its head in late 2001/early 2002. Shortly before President Bush announced the U.S. intent to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, Putin made clear to him that Russia would temper its reaction if the sides could first complete a treaty further reducing deployed strategic nuclear warheads. The day that the United States announced its intent to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, Putin issued a statement that "we believe this

decision to be mistaken,” but that it “does not pose a threat to the national security of the Russian Federation.”⁵

In May 2002, the United States and Russia signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT, or Moscow Treaty), which simply reduced START limits to 1,700-2,200 deployed strategic warheads. The next month, U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty took effect.

Cooperation with New Partners

U.S. arms control negotiators had long experience dealing with their Soviet counterparts, primarily in the Foreign Ministry, most of whom retained similar positions in the newly independent Russian government. In contrast, they knew few officials in the other former Soviet states with nuclear forces on their territory. Moreover, although the United States had a consulate in Kyiv, we had no diplomatic history, let alone presence, in Kazakhstan or Belarus. We also had little to no familiarity with Russian military, atomic energy, space, finance and intelligence officials who were not openly part of the Soviet arms control negotiating teams. All of that would change dramatically after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Beginning in early 1992, the United States worked closely with all four governments to ensure the removal of proliferation-prone short-range nuclear weapons from Ukraine and Belarus to Russia, and to work out the succession arrangements to the START Treaty and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). The four and the United States signed the Lisbon Protocol to the START

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Daily News Bulletin: A Statement Made by Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 13, 2001, regarding the Decision of the Administration of the United States of America to Withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972*, December 14, 2001.

Treaty in May 1992. Key provisions included: assumption of START Treaty obligations by all four states as successors to the Soviet Union; and, commitment by Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan to adhere to the NPT as non-nuclear-weapon states “in the shortest possible time.” In addition, the heads of government of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine signed side letters promising that all strategic offensive arms on their territory would be eliminated by the end of the START reduction period. Interestingly, each of the side letters was addressed to President Bush, rather than to all the other Lisbon Protocol parties. The message seemed clear: that the three governments trusted the United States far more than they trusted Russia.

Belarus and Kazakhstan ratified the START I Treaty and joined the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states in 1993. Ukraine was a harder sell. Many of our Ukrainian interlocutors argued that we were naïve in believing that independent Russia was far more peaceful and trustworthy than the Russian Empire and Soviet Union had been. Finally the Ukrainian Government was persuaded to adhere to START and the NPT when the United States, United Kingdom and Russian Federation signed the Budapest Memorandum, in which they promised to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and to come to its aid if it faced real or threatened nuclear attack. The Budapest Memorandum and Ukraine’s instruments of accession to START and the NPT were all signed on the same day, December 5, 1994. The last nuclear warheads left Ukraine on June 1, 1996.

A New Form of Cooperation

On December 12, 1991, just 13 days before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, President Bush signed into law the Soviet Nuclear Threat Reduction Act of 1991 (commonly known as Nunn-Lugar, after its sponsors Senators Sam Nunn and

Richard Lugar). The Act authorized \$400 million to assist the Soviet Union and its successor entities⁶ to:

- (1) destroy nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, and other weapons,
- (2) transport, store, disable, and safeguard weapons in connection with their destruction,
- (3) establish verifiable safeguards against the proliferation of such weapons...⁷

The Nunn-Lugar Act presented three problems to the Bush Administration. First, no American or former Soviet officials, in the public or private sector, had any experience in security cooperation with the Soviet Union. Second, the \$400 million was authorized, but not appropriated. Third, the Act included six certification requirements that threatened to prevent any assistance being provided:

United States assistance in destroying nuclear and other weapons under this title may not be provided to the Soviet Union, any of its republics, or any successor entity unless the President certifies to the Congress that the proposed recipient is committed to the following:

- (1) making a substantial investment of its resources for dismantling or destroying such weapons;
- (2) forgoing any military modernization program that exceeds legitimate defense

⁶ Because the United States had never recognized Soviet annexation of the three Baltic states, Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) assistance could not be used there until Congress lifted the geographic restrictions on the program in the George W. Bush Administration.

⁷ Public Law 102-228, December 12, 1991, Section 212, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/3807/text>.

- requirements and forgoing the replacement of destroyed weapons of mass destruction;
- (3) forgoing any use of fissionable and other components of destroyed nuclear weapons in new nuclear weapons;
 - (4) facilitating United States verification of weapons destruction carried out under section 212;
 - (5) complying with all relevant arms control agreements and
 - (6) observing internationally recognized human rights, including the protection of minorities.⁸

Many outside observers claim that the Department of Defense (DOD) under then-Secretary Dick Cheney worked to hinder implementation of the Nunn-Lugar Act. In fact, the reverse is true. First, Secretary Cheney ordered the transfer of \$400 million in other DOD funds to Nunn-Lugar; he did the same in FY1993, when Congress again authorized \$400 million, but appropriated nothing for the program. Second, the DOD General Counsel proposed a legally acceptable way to fulfill the certification requirements. The Administration reported to Congress that the former Soviet states had all committed to the required courses of action, but were too new actually to have implemented them; the Executive Branch would continue to assess their commitment over time.

In 1993, the name of the program was changed to Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR). For its first years, DOD transferred some CTR funds to the Department of Energy (DOE) for its nuclear nonproliferation programs. DOE began funding its own programs in FY1996. The two

⁸ Ibid., Section 211.

together, and the much smaller State Department effort, totaled more than \$1 billion a year by 2001.

CTR in its first decade concentrated on nuclear counterproliferation and START I implementation. Important efforts were also devoted to nuclear infrastructure reduction and chemical weapons elimination. After trust had been built during some years of cooperation, the Russian Navy approached DOE, and the Russian General Staff DOD, for help in upgrading security of nuclear warheads in storage and transport. As Colonel-General Evgeny Maslin, head of the 12th Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff, said in July 2005, “you [the United States] are not the enemy, proliferation is.”⁹

In June 2013, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) issued the last of its periodic DOD CTR scorecards. Program achievements in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus,¹⁰ Kazakhstan and Albania included:

Nuclear warheads deactivated ¹¹	7,816
ICBMs destroyed	926
ICBM silos eliminated	498
ICBM mobile launchers destroyed	197
Bombers eliminated	155
Nuclear air-to-surface missiles destroyed	906
SLBM launchers eliminated	492
SLBMs eliminated	695
SSBNs destroyed	33
Nuclear test tunnels/holes sealed	194

⁹ Personal conversation with the author in the Pentagon, Washington, D.C., July 2005.

¹⁰ The CTR program ended in Belarus in 1997, three years after Alexander Lukashenko came to power there. By 1997, DOD could no longer certify to Congress that Belarus met the certification criteria, particularly the one regarding adherence to Western human rights standards.

¹¹ Definition—number of warheads carried on destroyed ICBMs and SLBMs.

CW agents destroyed (metric tons) _____	4,128
Nuclear weapons train shipments assisted ____	616
Nuclear weapons storage security upgrades ____	24
Cooperative biological laboratories secured ____	47 ¹²

The CTR programs of the DOE National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) concentrated on physical security for nuclear materials in storage and transport, and Russian naval nuclear warheads in storage. They also worked to minimize nuclear materials worldwide, including shutting down or converting highly enriched uranium (HEU)-fueled civilian research reactors to low-enriched uranium (LEU) and removing special nuclear material from partner countries.

In February 1993, the United States and Russia signed an HEU purchase agreement, which later became known as “Megatons to Megawatts.” Over 20 years, until 2013, the United States purchased a total of 500 metric tons of LEU downblended from Russian HEU from dismantled warheads. Thus, the arrangement furthered the goals of reducing the Russian nuclear stockpile while preventing the proliferation of the resulting HEU. The Russian material was used to fabricate fuel for U.S. civil nuclear reactors. LEU and energy were fungible in the U.S. fuel fabrication process, so the Russian material paid for itself through energy cost savings.¹³

¹²All achievements on this list were in the former Soviet Union, except some CW agents destroyed in Albania. SLBMs, SSBNs, the rest of CW, and nuclear weapons storage and transport work were all in Russia. Nuclear test site tunnels and holes were in Kazakhstan.

¹³ The HEU agreement had the unintended side effect of making the U.S. nuclear power industry dependent on Russian LEU. Thus, imports of the Russian material continued after 2013, for purely commercial purposes, without any nonproliferation benefit. In August 2024, a legislative ban on those imports took effect, but with waivers allowed until January 2028 to avoid disrupting the U.S. power industry.

Western threat reduction assistance programs grew significantly when the 2002 G-8 Summit created the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction. That program grew from a U.S. proposal that the United States commit for ten years to \$1 billion a year in threat reduction assistance to the Former Soviet Union, and the other G-8 members collectively to another \$1 billion a year. The Global Partnership (GP) now has 31 members, not to include Russia, and undertakes projects worldwide.

In 2013, Russia cancelled its participation in CTR. The following year, it was expelled from the G-8 (and therefore the GP) after its first invasion of Ukraine. DOD and DOE CTR and the GP remain active, with projects worldwide, outside Russia.

Conclusion

The history of the security relationship between the United States and former Soviet states is decidedly mixed. During the early years, the new partners worked closely to reduce former Soviet nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) stocks and delivery vehicles. However, Russia gradually ceased to be a partner and ultimately derived at least some one-sided military benefits from the PNIs and CTR.

As for the INF Treaty, large numbers of Soviet intermediate-range missiles were eliminated. However, we do not know how many of the formerly prohibited cruise missiles Russia will deploy, but that will almost certainly be more than the United States or NATO will have, at least for some years.

Russia failed to fulfill its PNI commitments, while the United States complied scrupulously. The result has been a significant Russian advantage—indeed, a monopoly—in short-range ground-launched nuclear forces.

Many of the CTR counterproliferation achievements have been longer lasting. There are no nuclear warheads in Ukraine, Belarus or Kazakhstan, and only Belarus has any special nuclear material.¹⁴ Some observers believe that Ukraine would have been protected from Russian invasion if it had not denuclearized. However, Ukraine lacked the expertise or infrastructure to maintain any nuclear warheads, still less the thousands on its territory. Moreover, it seems likely that Russia would have invaded Ukraine earlier to remove the threat that it probably would perceive from a sizable, and potentially unstable, nuclear arsenal.

The three denuclearized former Soviet states also no longer have strategic-range missiles or bombers, for which they did not have (and still do not have) any military need. If they had retained those systems, they would have required substantial, and continuous, maintenance at great cost, with little to no military benefit.

More broadly, CTR programs to improve WMD security appear to have succeeded. There are no known cases of proliferation of nuclear materials or warheads from the former Soviet Union. The same is true for biological facilities; to our knowledge, nothing has happened in the former Soviet states comparable to the 1979 anthrax outbreak in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg) or the 1980s accidental Marburg exposures at the Vector Institute in Novosibirsk.

On the negative side, DOD CTR may have helped Russia to modernize its military forces. In one important example, CTR supported the elimination of several older SSBNs at the Severodvinsk naval shipyard. One Congressional staff critic of the program used to say that we were just keeping the yard alive so that one day it could

¹⁴ In 2010, Belarus agreed to transfer its estimated 230 kg of HEU to Russia, but suspended that effort in 2011. To our knowledge, Belarus retains about 100 kg of HEU.

return to building new SSBNs. That is exactly what has happened. Severodvinsk is now the primary production site for the new Yasen-class SSGN and Borei-class SSBN. And we have no idea what is happening inside the Russian nuclear and biological facilities that we helped to secure.

The disintegration of the partnership between the United States and Russia came as a shock to most American officials and observers. But, in retrospect it was long in coming. In September 1999, Secretary of Defense William Cohen led a delegation to see the CTR work at Severodvinsk. The visit had been carefully planned long in advance. However, on arrival, the delegation was held at the gates for some time. After a significant delay, the visit proceeded as planned. But when the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy took some pictures of the CTR project to dismantle the Typhoon SSBN, his camera was confiscated; it was returned at the end of the visit, without any film.

CTR continued in Russia for another 14 years. For much of that time, the U.S. executive branch continued to hope that a close partnership would return. In 2007, Putin gave a speech at the Munich Security Conference that should have removed any hopes for close partnership.¹⁵ But, in the early days of the Obama Administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for a “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations, and President Obama espoused a sincere goal of the elimination of nuclear weapons. Even after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the United States refused to provide that country with any “lethal” aid, to include air defense systems; the reasons are unclear, but it seems most likely that the Administration did not want to exacerbate relations with Russia. However, the days of partnership were over. Finally, when Russia invaded Ukraine in

¹⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

February 2022, not even the most naïvely optimistic could argue otherwise.

Dr. Susan Koch has served in the Central Intelligence Agency, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Department of State, and White House National Security Council Staff.

Democracy versus Autocracy and the Dissolution of the Soviet Union

Matthew Kroenig

For a half century, the United States and the Soviet Union competed head-to-head in an intense ideological Cold War that sometimes teetered on the brink of nuclear annihilation. There were periods when many Americans believed the Soviet Union would surpass the United States and that the best Washington could do was to lock in a kind of uneasy coexistence — *détente* — with its communist rival. Then, not long thereafter, the Cold War ended. Washington and its free world allies had won the Cold War. Moscow lost. The Soviet Union formally ceased to exist on December 26, 1991.

What was the cause of America's Cold War victory and the Soviet Union's dissolution? A major driving force was the difference in their domestic political and economic systems. The Cold War was a systemic rivalry between America's open market, democratic regime and Moscow's autocratic politics and state-planned economy. In the end, and as we have seen many times throughout history, free market democracy prevailed. Understanding this lesson is important as Washington again squares off in a new Cold War — this time against communist China.

In a 2020 book, I examined democracies versus autocracies in great power rivalries from the ancient world to the United States and China.¹ I found that democracies possess many economic, diplomatic, and military advantages, which help them prevail in great power rivalries. Autocracies, on the other hand, possess many

¹ Matthew Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

inherent weaknesses. There are, of course, autocratic strengths and democratic vulnerabilities as well, but these are more than outweighed by the opposite.

Democracies tend to generate larger and more dynamic economies. They put in place inclusive economic institutions, backed by the rule of law, which incentivize a broad cross section of society to engage in growth-enhancing economic activity. Free societies encourage out-of-the-box thinking, which leads to radical innovation and economic growth. They are more open to goods, people, and ideas flowing across their borders and they tend to becoming international trading powers. Since their people are also power holders, governments are more trusted to issue and repay sovereign debt, helping democracies emerge as international financial centers.

Democracies are better alliance builders. Open debate and checks on executive power mean that democracies' intentions are transparent and they tend to stay on a steadier course, making them more reliable partners.

They also forge powerful militaries, which rest on the strong economic and technological foundations noted above. They often become sea powers to protect their far-flung international trading routes. They entrust their soldiers to take initiative on the battlefield, and they have the luxury of focusing their forces on foreign foes, not repressing their own people. Open debate means their leaders are more informed on matters of war and peace.

Taken together, this is an impressive array of democratic economic, diplomatic, and military strengths.

The opposite happens in autocracies. Autocracies set up extractive economic institutions that benefit corrupt power holders but discourage hard work and long-term economic planning by society. Why work hard to build a business if your property is likely to be expropriated by the state, or if your wealth makes you a threat to the dictator and you wind up in prison? Thinking outside the box is discouraged

in dictatorships, stifling innovation. Autocracies insulate themselves from foreign influences, including international trade and financial flows. Investors do not trust their wealth to autocratic regimes, which is why Moscow and Beijing are not major financial centers and why wealthy Russians and Chinese park their money in London and New York.

Autocracies make poor allies, as unconstrained dictators can quickly turn on erstwhile partners. Their ruthlessness means that other countries tend to balance against, rather than bandwagon with, them.

Autocracies' greatest threat comes from their own people, and their security forces prioritize domestic repression above all else. The lack of institutionalized mechanisms of leadership succession means that changes at the top often result in regime collapse. Their soldiers are afraid to do anything but wait for top-down orders and are reluctant to take initiative on the battlefield. Their leaders, surrounded by yes men and women, are told what they want to hear and tend to make bigger mistakes on matters of war and peace.

Combined, autocracies are hobbled in great power rivalry by serious economic, diplomatic, and military liabilities.

For these reasons, we have seen time and again throughout history that the greatest explosions of wealth in power tend to happen in free societies: Athens, Rome, the Venetian Republic, the Dutch Republic, the British Empire, and the United States. Their autocratic rivals, such as the Persian Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Spanish Empire, Napoleonic France, and Nazi Germany, mount serious and dangerous challenges for a while, but they eventually are beaten back, run out of steam, or collapse altogether.

These same verities were manifested in the Cold War and ultimately resulted in the Soviet Union's collapse. The United States was a paragon of a dominant democracy. Its inclusive institutions provided sustained economic

innovation and growth throughout the twentieth century from the airplane to the internet. After WWII, New York City replaced London as the world's financial capital, the dollar became the world's reserve currency, and investors flocked to safety in U.S. Treasury bonds. At the Breton Woods Conference and through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and other mechanisms, Washington pushed for, and achieved, an open international trading system, which greatly lifted the economic fortunes of the West.

Washington's wealth, ideals, and culture gave it enormous soft power around the world, including behind the Iron Curtain. It brought the other major free world powers together in NATO, history's longest lasting and most successful standing military alliance. Its large economic and technological base ensured an enduring military edge over its autocratic rival. When Washington and Moscow locked in numeric parity in nuclear arms control agreements, for example, Washington continued to race for a qualitative edge, developing stealth technology and precision-guided munitions.

The Soviet Union's autocratic model proved less effective in long-term great power rivalry. Its alliance system had always been held together by coercion, not attraction. Moscow had to use military force to keep its allies from defecting. When the people of Berlin had a choice between communist East Berlin and democratic West Berlin, they voted with their feet and fled to the West. Moscow had to build the Berlin Wall in 1961 to physically trap people in the Soviet empire. Anti-Soviet uprisings took place in Hungary in 1956 and again in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Warsaw Pact mobilized to crush the dissidents. Indeed, the Warsaw Pact's most notable military engagements during the Cold War were invasions of its own members to keep them in line. When the Soviet Union and China found themselves in a border dispute in 1969,

Moscow threatened nuclear war against its ostensible ally. Moscow could only retain allies by shutting them behind walls or crushing them under the treads of tanks. Subjugated people within the Soviet Bloc caught glimpses of life in the West, and they liked what they saw. They switched sides as soon as they got the chance.

The Soviet Union's troubles extended beyond diplomacy. It was struggling to keep up economically. Centralized power resulted in a centralized, planned economy. Moscow's planners were able to generate high rates of industrialization and economic growth in the short term through forced industrialization. According to official Soviet statistics (which were likely exaggerated), the Soviet Union's annual growth rate was 14 percent in the 1920s and 10 percent in the 1950s.² As theory would lead us to believe, however, a planned economy cannot deliver sustained high rates of economic growth over the long term. As Nobel Prize winners Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson explain, "you can move someone to a factory, [but] you cannot force people to think and have good ideas by threatening to shoot them."³ Without market competition, managers had little incentive to be efficient or turn out high-quality products and workers had scant motivation to put in a hard day of labor. As the old joke had it, people pretended to work and the state pretended to pay them.

Moscow's imperative to compete with the United States meant that there were always resources for military expenditures, but this led to a hypermilitarized economy that crowded out investment in the commercial sector. In 1985, during the vaunted Reagan buildup, U.S. military

² Mark Harrison, "Soviet Economic Growth Since 1928: The Alternative Statistics of G.I. Khanin," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45, No. 1 (1993), pp. 141-167.

³ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Currency, 2013), p. 131.

spending accounted for roughly 6 percent of GDP.⁴ The Soviet Union spent roughly the same aggregate amount, but from a much smaller economic base, meaning that defense expenditures made up a whopping 17 percent of GDP.⁵ All of these factors operated as brakes on Russian economic development.

And things were only about to get worse for Moscow. The Cold War military competition was about to kick into high gear. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan entered office. He was determined to overturn “détente,” challenge the nation he called an “evil empire,” and develop a strategy to “roll back” communism around the world. Of greatest concern to Moscow, however, was Reagan’s promise to make nuclear-armed missiles obsolete through the development of a Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) missile defense system. While Reagan’s Star Wars system was little more than a distant dream at the time, Moscow’s leaders understood that they would not be able to keep pace with the United States in an increasingly sophisticated strategic arms race.

Given its weakening position across the board, the Soviet leadership decided that changes were needed if Moscow was going to continue to compete. In 1985, the new Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev announced a policy of *Glasnost* (openness) and *Perestroika* (restructuring). The intention was to selectively incorporate political and economic reforms to reboot communism for a new era. Instead, it was the beginning of the end. The talk of new political and economic liberalization created new expectations and hopes among subjugated peoples. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev was unwilling to use military force to crack down on democratic movements in Eastern

⁴ The World Bank, “Military Expenditure (% of GDP),” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>.

⁵ Ibid.

Europe. A mistake at the Berlin Wall border crossing in 1989 led a guard to allow people to begin crossing freely and, suddenly, the Wall came crashing down. Two years later, the mighty Soviet Union itself disintegrated into 15 newly independent states.

It is important to fully comprehend the lessons of the first Cold War as Washington enters a new Cold War with Communist China. This new Cold War is also a systemic competition between democracy and autocracy. Many analysts fear that China's autocratic and state-led capitalist model is superior to Washington's free market democracy. They assume that, given China's massive population, it will eventually rise to overtake the United States and become the world's leading power.

They are mistaken. They are mistaken in large part because their analysis fails to account for Washington's democratic strengths and Beijing's autocratic vulnerabilities.

- The United States still possesses the world's largest and most dynamic economy. Contrary to repeated predictions of American decline, Washington is now a rising power in possession of 26 percent of global GDP – its highest share in two decades.⁶
- Its alliance network continues to expand and strengthen, with Finland and Sweden joining NATO, and allies pledging to spend 5 percent of GDP on defense. Combined, U.S. formal treaty allies possess nearly 60 percent of global GDP.⁷

⁶ "United States GDP," *Trading Economics*, <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/gdp>.

⁷ Matthew Kroenig and Ash Jain, "Present at the Re-Creation: A Global Strategy to Revitalize, Adapt, and Defend a Rules-Based International System," Atlantic Council Strategy Paper, 2019, p. 18.

- The United States remains the world's only military superpower, with global power projection capabilities.

There is no doubt that China's power has grown over the past several decades, but its autocratic weaknesses are already showing. Chinese state planning moved unskilled laborers from rural areas to cities and employed them in factories to sustain China's export-led boom. Now, it is struggling to come up with its next act. It is making a big bet on twenty first century technology, but China cannot dominate next-generation technology if the rest of the world does not trust it. Many countries are banning technological cooperation with China as they seek to "de-risk" their economies.

For decades, economists assumed it was inevitable that China would eventually overtake the United States to become the world's leading economy. As Chinese growth stalls and America's economy advances, such an event looks increasingly unlikely.

- China is a poor alliance builder. Xi Jinping's aggressive foreign policy has frightened his neighbors and erstwhile friends in Asia and Europe are now balancing against Beijing in new frameworks, like the Quad and the NATO Indo-Pacific 4 (IP4), Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.
- China is investing in a massive military buildup, but its armed forces are riddled with corruption. Xi has felt the need to purge much of his top military leadership. Moreover, the greatest threat facing China comes from its own people and it spends more on domestic repression than on its military.

Inaccurate assessments of the Sino-U.S. balance of power matter because they lead to bad strategy. Not unlike

the days of détente, some analysts and officials now argue that the best Washington can do is seek a “decent peace” with China.

In fact, given Washington’s strengths and China’s vulnerabilities, the United States should pursue a more ambitious goal. As was the case during the first Cold War, the desired end state of the U.S.-China rivalry is “we win, they lose.”⁸

Years from now I suspect I will be invited to write an essay on the dissolution of the Chinese Communist Party.

Dr. Matthew Kroenig is a professor of government and foreign service at Georgetown University and a senior fellow in the Atlantic Council’s Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. This essay is adapted from The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁸ Matthew Kroenig and Dan Negrea, *We Win They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy and the New Cold War* (New York, NY: Republic Books, 2024).

The Dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf War

David J. Lonsdale

Introduction

The year 1991 was quite a year. In popular culture, Nirvana released its album, *Nevermind*, which helped grunge go mainstream. The *Super Nintendo Entertainment System* was launched in the United States, and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* hit cinemas, showing the possibilities of CGI in modern films. In international politics, 1991 was bookended by two seismic events. The year started with the Persian Gulf War and ended on 26 December with the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union. The objective of this paper is to explore how these two events interacted. When doing so, it becomes apparent that the dissolution of the Soviet Union played an important role in the international politics surrounding the response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.¹ To put it simply, it mattered that Iraq invaded Kuwait when it did. The international political system at the time of Iraq's aggression was undergoing considerable change. Much of that change was being driven by the unfolding domestic situation in the Soviet Union. In this sense, one can identify additional layers to the significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

To that end, this paper will begin by briefly outlining four ways in which the Persian Gulf War signified an important shift in the international security environment.

¹ Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh note that the war must be understood in a wider context, including the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the USSR. Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

From here, we can then examine how events in the Soviet Union interacted with the goings-on in the Middle East, and thus better understand the broader significance of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Significance of the Persian Gulf War

Since this paper sits within a collection of works primarily focused on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it will prove useful to remind ourselves of the significance of the Persian Gulf War.² To that end, we shall identify four prominent movements associated with that conflict, ones that interacted most obviously with changes in the Soviet Union. First, for some the Gulf War heralded the arrival of the unipolar moment, when the United States appeared as the sole superpower, displaying a relative preponderance of military power and enhanced influence in the international system.³ Second, in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait it appeared, at least for a time, that the United Nations was able to act as originally intended, providing a coordinated global response to an act of aggression against a sovereign state. Third, the Gulf War signalled a shift in focus in U.S. foreign and security policy, within which the Persian Gulf became far more prominent.⁴ This new policy focus led to

² For a broader analysis of the significance of the Persian Gulf War, including what it tells us about international relations, see Fred Halliday, "The Gulf War 1990-1991 and the Study of International Relations," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 109-130.

³ Karen Brutents, for example, describes the war as the first conflict of the New World Order. See Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, "Gorbachev's 'Diplomatic Marathon' to Prevent the 1991 Persian Gulf War," *National Security Archive*, Briefing Book 746, February 26, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2021-02-26/gorbachevs-diplomatic-marathon-prevent-1991-persian-gulf-war>.

⁴ Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "The Long Shadow of the Gulf War," *War on the Rocks*, February 24, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/the-long-shadow-of-the-gulf-war/>.

more than a decade of sanctions, arms control measures, and military operations against Iraq (including Operation Desert Fox, 1998) and, of course, culminated in the 2003 war and the long counterinsurgency struggle that followed. Finally, due to the one-sided outcome of the 1991 conflict, the Revolution in Military Affairs debate, and the various Military Transformation programmes that followed, took hold in defence establishments around the world.⁵ This shift in conventional force postures was also facilitated, in part, by the relative decline of nuclear weapons as the Cold War receded. Importantly, all four of these movements were enabled, to some degree, by changes afoot in the Soviet Union as it navigated economic challenges, political reforms, and the forces of dissolution.

The Soviet Political Context

In their comprehensive study of the Persian Gulf War, Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh note that Iraq was unfortunate, or perhaps we might say guilty of poor judgement, because they invaded Kuwait at a time when changes in the Soviet Union had significantly altered the international political environment.⁶ Changes in the mindset of the Soviet leadership significantly affected how the erstwhile superpower chose to influence events abroad. Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party, regarded the internal and foreign affairs of the state to be symbiotic. He considered that Perestroika, his reforming approach, was required in both: “success in one

⁵ The literature on the RMA is extensive. Useful summaries of the main themes, arguments and developments can be found in Colin S. Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004); and David J. Lonsdale, *Clausewitzian Future: The Nature of War in the Information Age* (Abingdon, UK: Taylor Francis, 2004).

⁶ Freedman and Karsh, op. cit., p. xxix.

area encouraging progress in the other, setbacks slowing down progress in both.”⁷ In this sense, Gorbachev’s reforms at home were reflected in his “new thinking” in foreign policy.⁸ That new thinking encompassed an enhanced role for the United Nations, greater interdependence, common responsibilities, and a preference for joint action in international affairs.⁹

However, Gorbachev’s new approach to foreign policy was not solely motivated by his reforming ideology. Additionally, his actions abroad were also designed to offset hardline opponents at home, enhance his authority in the Soviet Union, as well as give the Soviet Union access to western economic and technological assistance.¹⁰ Specifically, in light of the relative decline of Soviet power, Gorbachev hoped to maintain a prominent place in international affairs by attaching the Soviet Union to the United States and by working more closely through international organisations. As Sergey Tarasenko, an aide to

⁷ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (London: Bantam Books, 1997), p. 517. See also, Freedman and Karsh, op. cit., p. 6.

⁸ Mikhail Gorbachev, “Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Summer 2021), pp. 211-238, 223.

⁹ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, op. cit., pp. 518-519.

¹⁰ Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals’ War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), p. 332. Regarding economic aid and assistance, Alexander Thompson reports that, for its support of the United States position on Iraq, the Soviet Union may have been awarded \$1 billion in grain credits and medical supplies. See Alexander Thompson, *Channels of Power: The UN Security Council US Statecraft in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 81. An indication of the internal pressures surrounding Gorbachev at this time can be found in the diary of Anatoly S. Chernyaev, an advisor to Gorbachev on international relations. See, “Excerpts from Anatoly S. Chernyaev’s Diary: January 17, 18, 29,” *National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21059-1991-01-17-chernyaev-diary-january>.

Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, explains: "We were sinking as a state, the status of a great power was only in our memory. The only way for us to hold on as a great power was to hitch ourselves to the American locomotive."¹¹ This was not an easy position to take, however. On the one hand, Gorbachev sought to maintain Soviet prestige abroad. At the same time, being too compliant with the United States invoked further criticism from his opponents at home. Gorbachev had to walk a fine line between these two positions.

Gorbachev's position was further complicated by the existing Soviet relationship with Iraq. The Soviet Union had a Treaty of Friendship with Iraq, and at a time of economic squeeze the Soviet Union "had billions of dollars" worth of economic projects ongoing in Iraq.¹² Iraq was the largest buyer of Soviet military equipment. Arms sales to Iraq totalled over 18 billion rubles over three decades.¹³ It is estimated that the sanctions imposed against Iraq in 1990, sanctions that the Soviet Union supported, cost the latter \$800 million.¹⁴ Gorbachev's position vis-à-vis Iraq was not just complicated by harsh economic realities; domestic political complications also had to be factored in. For some in the Soviet hierarchy, it was important to support their long-standing ally in the Middle East, especially as the Warsaw Pact was collapsing at this time.¹⁵ Indeed, as reported in the diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, an advisor to Gorbachev on international relations, sections within Soviet decision-making circles wanted Gorbachev to take a distinctly more pro-Iraq stance, complaining that

¹¹ Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 144.

¹² Gorbachev, "Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective," op. cit., p. 228; and, Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, op. cit., p. 711.

¹³ Zubok, op. cit., p. 142.

¹⁴ Freedman and Karsh, op. cit., p. 186.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 320.

Gorbachev was betraying an old ally in favour of working with its old imperialist enemy.¹⁶ Others feared that giving the United States too much of a free hand in the Middle East would undo years of Soviet diplomacy in the region.¹⁷ In summary, to understand Soviet foreign policy during the Gulf crisis, we must be cognizant of the conflicting forces within Soviet policy circles. Gorbachev had to contend with pressures emanating from reformers, hard-liners, Arabists, and those seeking independence for the Soviet republics. Gorbachev had to navigate a complex international crisis involving one of his allies, and whilst doing so keep these conflicting forces in balance.¹⁸

Soviet Responses to Iraq's Aggression

It is clear, then, that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait came at a challenging moment for Gorbachev. The Soviet leader was determined to push forward with his reforms, in both domestic and foreign policy. At the same time, he was trying to maintain the integrity of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Gorbachev describes the Persian Gulf War as a test for his "new thinking."¹⁹ How then did this complex situation manifest itself in Soviet policy towards the Iraqi situation? This was not an unimportant question for the United States at the time. Alongside Gorbachev's new thinking, President Bush was also seeking to establish a New World Order that

¹⁶ See "Excerpts from Anatoly S. Chernyaev's Diary: February 7, 9, 15, 18, 22," *National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21062-1991-02-07-chernyaev-diary-feb-1991>; and, Thompson, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

¹⁷ Freedman and Karsh, op. cit., p. 79.

¹⁸ In his reflections on this period, Gorbachev makes reference to the difficulties involved in having to offset the various forces at play in the Soviet Union. See Gorbachev, "Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective," op. cit., p. 230.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 228.

would reap the benefits of the end of the Cold War. This preferably included, in relation to Iraq, operating under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) to enhance the legitimacy of the U.S. response. For this, however, the United States would need Soviet support in the UN Security Council. In a 21 February phone call between President Bush and Gorbachev, just three days before the start of the ground war, the former indicated how important this was for U.S. policy: “we know that if it had not been for your total consultation and cooperation with us that we would never have gotten the UN action.”²⁰

As the United States monitored the situation in the Soviet Union, however, the former feared that domestic turmoil could render Soviet support unpredictable, and some in Washington even feared a possible lurch to the right by Gorbachev as he sought to offset hard-liners in Moscow.²¹ This fear became especially relevant in January 1991, just prior to the onset of military operations in the Gulf, when Soviet forces attacked key sites in independence-seeking Lithuania, killing 14 unarmed civilians. As a result, the United States found itself in a difficult position. As Bergmane states, “the U.S. administration was manoeuvring between condemning the Soviet actions in Vilnius and pursuing Soviet-US dialogue on the Gulf War.”²²

As it was, Gorbachev played a very active diplomatic role both before and during the Persian Gulf War. Indeed,

²⁰ “White House Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Subject: Telcon with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR on February 21, 1991,” *National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21066-1991-02-21-gorbachev-bush>.

²¹ Savranskaya and Blanton, op. cit.; Freedman and Karsh, op. cit., p. 231; Thompson, op. cit., pp. 47, 70.

²² Una Bergmane, *Politics of Uncertainty: The United States, The Baltic Question, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 130.

Gorbachev's actions, especially just prior to the start of the ground war, have been described as a "diplomatic marathon."²³ To illustrate, on January 18, one day into the air war, in a call with President Bush, Gorbachev called for a pause in hostilities for negotiations.²⁴ As the ground war got nearer, Gorbachev's efforts went into overdrive. He sent one of his leading Arabists, Yevgeny Primakov, to Iraq, invited Iraqi Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz, to Moscow (even sending a plane for him), and almost daily was on the phone with the U.S. Administration.²⁵ The day before the commencement of the ground campaign, is especially notable in this respect. On this day, Gorbachev had conversations with eleven national governments, including the United States.²⁶ As the war edged towards its conclusion in late February, Gorbachev desperately sought to reconcile the positions of Iraq and the United States concerning the details of the former's possible withdrawal from Kuwait. For its part, the United States feared that Saddam was using negotiations as a delaying tactic and seeking to escape the war with an increased standing in the Arab world.²⁷ Gorbachev, however, repeatedly expressed concerns about forthcoming human losses and feared squandering the

²³ Savranskaya and Blanton, op. cit.

²⁴ "Excerpts from Anatoly S. Chernyaev's Diary: February 7, 9, 15, 18, 22," op. cit.

²⁵ "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Francois Mitterrand," *National Security Archive*, February 21, 1991, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21065-1991-02-21-gorbachev-mitterrand-telcon-mb>.

²⁶ Gordon and Trainor, op. cit., pp. 333-334.

²⁷ See, for example, "White House Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Subject: Telcon with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR on February 22, 1991," *National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21067-1991-02-22-gorbachev-baker-bush>.

progress made in developing a new cooperative relationship between the two superpowers.²⁸

Gorbachev's active diplomatic role worked both for and against the U.S. position. On the one hand, the Soviets stood firmly alongside the United States, roundly condemning Iraqi actions and supporting punishments against them. This is evident in Soviet support for the sanctions regime against Iraq and their crucial support at the UN. This included the passage of Resolutions 660 (insisting on Iraqi withdrawal), 661 (the sanctions regime), and 678 (authorisation of military force).²⁹ Just as strikingly, the Soviets publicly stood side by side with the United States against their old ally. Most famously, the joint Baker-Shevardnadze statement on 3 August, condemning the Iraqi invasion, was described by the former as "breathtaking" and "the day the Cold War ended."³⁰ This was followed on 9 September with the Bush-Gorbachev Summit in Helsinki, when the two leaders issued a joint statement calling for the unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces.

On the other hand, at times Gorbachev's active diplomacy threatened to undermine the U.S. approach, especially as the latter moved closer towards the decisive phase of military action against Saddam's regime. In their history of the conflict, Gordon and Trainor note that "the White House was not enthusiastic about Gorbachev's peacemaking. White House Officials talked about an 'aperture' through which Saddam Hussein might avoid the humiliation of losing the war and hold onto his base of power."³¹ As noted, Gorbachev was unwavering in his condemnation of Iraqi actions, but was also intent on preventing war in the Middle East. And, when that war had

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Freedman and Karsh, *op. cit.*, pp. 376-80; and, Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

³⁰ Lissner, *op. cit.*; and, Zubok, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

³¹ Gordon and Trainor, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

started, he was intent on limiting the scale and consequences of that conflict. This seemed to serve his foreign policy interests in various ways. War did not sit comfortably with his “new thinking” in international politics; he sought to prevent the worst outcome for his ally in Iraq, and also feared a shift of power in the region should the United States position its forces there in great numbers.³² Gordon and Trainor conclude that Gorbachev was playing “a double game.” supporting the United States and its allies whilst seeking a diplomatic solution to prevent defeat of its old ally.³³ Moreover, perhaps it was a way of maintaining influence and preventing unilateral U.S. action. Even as late as 23 February Gorbachev was insistent on including the UN in the process of Iraqi withdrawal. Indeed, Freedman and Karsh note that emphasising the role of the UN was a means of reducing some of the criticisms at home.³⁴ Gorbachev even toyed with the idea, promoted by Primakov, of linking the Iraqi withdrawal to a broader peace conference on the Middle East.³⁵ However, he later gave up on this idea.³⁶

Conclusion

Often, there is a close relationship between domestic and foreign policy. The interplay of the Persian Gulf War and

³² Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58; and, Freedman and Karsh, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³³ Gordon and Trainor, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

³⁴ “White House Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Subject: Telcon with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR on February 23, 1991,” *National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21070-1991-02-23-gorbachev-bush>.

³⁵ Zubok, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144.

³⁶ “White House Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Subject: Telcon with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR on February 21, 1991,” *op. cit.*; and, Freedman and Karsh, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

the dissolution of the Soviet Union is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Gorbachev himself explicitly linked Perestroika in both the foreign and domestic arenas. More specifically, Chernyaev concludes that the fate of Perestroika rested on a continued cooperative relationship with the United States.³⁷ Thus, when seeking to understand Gorbachev's actions in relation to the Persian Gulf War, we must remain cognisant of events back in the Soviet Union as the forces of dissolution were taking shape. As Gorbachev himself stated when reflecting on this period, "Difficult decisions had to be taken under enormous time pressure" in a time of unprecedented political intensity.³⁸ As domestic turmoil increased and Gorbachev's authority declined, threatening Perestroika and the very existence of the Soviet Union, the Soviet leader hoped that improved international relations would shore up his rule.³⁹ Indeed, one could perhaps conclude that Gorbachev's domestic situation, allied to his desire for reform and new thinking in foreign policy, led him to lean even more heavily into seeking a joint diplomatic solution to the Middle East crisis.

However, his efforts to reach a diplomatic solution clashed with political realities. Gorbachev sought to achieve a difficult balancing act, one that managed the challenges at home, but also enabled him to maintain a cooperative relationship with the United States, enhance the role of international organisations, and thereby enable the Soviet Union to play a role in shaping the New World Order. This meant that he strongly supported U.S. efforts in the UN, sought to keep the latter involved in any ending to the

³⁷ "Excerpt from Anatoly S. Chernyaev Diary," National Security Archive, February 25, 1991, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21072-1991-02-25-chernyaev-diary-swan-song>. See also, Freedman and Karsh, op. cit., p. 125.

³⁸ Gorbachev, "Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective," op. cit., p. 226.

³⁹ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, op. cit., p. 852.

conflict, and tried to leverage his alliance with Iraq. In the end, Gorbachev was unable to fulfil his objectives either at home or abroad. The Soviet leader remained active in both spheres, but the shifting balances of power were overtaking him. As Chernyaev notes in his diary of 25 February, Gorbachev “kept hoping that the New Thinking criteria would kick in ... But no such luck! The logic of traditional politics was at work.”⁴⁰ In the final analysis, one might say that, in tandem with his new thinking, Gorbachev’s struggle against the forces of dissolution shaped how he approached the crisis in the Middle East. In turn, Gorbachev’s ultimate lack of success in the Middle East further signalled his declining authority.

What does this episode tell us about policymaking in such circumstances, especially from the perspective of the United States? There would seem to be five main lessons we can take away from the events of 35 years ago. The first, and rather obvious point, is that international politics is complex. Consequently, although decision-makers must distil complex issues into manageable phenomena, still, they should be cognisant of the many variables that play a role in international relations. In the case of the Persian Gulf War and dissolution of the Soviet Union, these variables included alliance politics, economics, domestic intrigues, regional factors, human interactions, and international organisations, to name just six. Our next two lessons follow from these variables. The second lesson indicates that policymakers should be mindful, as much as possible, of the domestic concerns that shape the actions of other states. International politics plays out on the global stage, but is subject to forces that emanate from elsewhere. Our third lesson, one that is rather Realist in outlook, is that organisations such as the United Nations can play an important role in coordinating and enhancing the

⁴⁰ “Excerpt from Anatoly S. Chernyaev Diary,” *op. cit.*

legitimacy of political activity. Nonetheless, one must always be aware that such organisations reflect the interests of the states that comprise them. Fourth, as evident from the situation in Lithuania just prior to the start of the Gulf air campaign, unforeseen events can seriously disrupt the political balance. The Bush Administration's developing relationship with the Soviet Union, a relationship that was important to the policy on Iraq, was thrown into doubt in mid-January 1991 following the actions of Soviet forces in Vilnius.

The preceding four lessons enhance the importance of the fifth and final lesson; policymakers must hold their nerve, and ground, in the face of the many complications and difficulties that face them.⁴¹ This is not to say that policymakers should be inflexible in the face of events. Rather, it is to note that the Bush Administration navigated these complex events quite effectively. Bush made room for Gorbachev's diplomatic efforts (driven in part by domestic upheaval in the Soviet Union), but only to the extent that they did not undermine the basic policy objectives of the United States.

Dr. David J. Lonsdale is a Senior Lecturer in War Studies at the University of Hull, UK.

⁴¹ This echoes Clausewitz's comments on the need for military commanders to have "presence of mind" and "character" in the face of the challenges and uncertainties of war. See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 103-105.

The Demise of the Soviet Union – From the “End of History” to a Major European War and the Threat of Nuclear Escalation

Mark B. Schneider

The implications of the demise of the Soviet Union were misinterpreted in the West as the “end of history.”¹ The collapse of the Soviet Union was certainly very important but the victory of Western democratic capitalism was at best temporary. Over a billion people remained under communist dictatorships. Communist China took advantage of the end of the Soviet threat, which it faced during much of the Cold War, and exploited the dramatic reduction of Western military capability to launch an unprecedented military buildup. As a result, this has created a two near-peer adversary environment, an unprecedented deterrence problem for the United States.²

The Rise of Dictatorial Expansionist Ideology

The gradual decline of the U.S. industrial base, combined with the growth of Marxism in American academia and politics, has contributed to the creation of a much more

¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/mono/10.4324/9781315255156-18/francis-fukuyama-1989-end-history-national-interest-16-pp-3-18-173-89-robert-lieber>.

² Jim Garamone, “General Says Deterring Two ‘Near Peer’ Competitors Is Complex,” *DOD News*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3496656/general-says-deterring-two-near-peer-competitors-is-complex/>.

dangerous world.³ Ideology has not declined in the world. Indeed, the dictatorial expansionist mentality is more important than the precise content of the ideology. Communist China and Russia have evolved toward a modern form of state-centered fascism, particularly in Russia.⁴ This has been accelerated by Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine.

China's President Xi Jinping is attempting to revive communist ideology in China.⁵ The difference between a statist/fascist China ruled by the Communist Party and a more doctrinaire Communist China regime is minor with regard to the national security threat it generates. Both represent hostile dictatorships. Indeed, the current Chinese threat toward the United States is more serious than what existed under Mao in many respects. In 2026, Assistant Secretary of State Dr. Christopher Yeaw said that "...we believe China may achieve [nuclear] parity within the next four or five years."⁶

The demise of the Soviet Union had a dramatic impact on reducing military expenditures in the West. U.S.

³ Mike Gonzalez and Katharine C. Gorka, "How Cultural Marxism Threatens the United States—and How Americans Can Fight It," The Heritage Foundation, Special Report No. 262, November 14, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/SR262.pdf>.

⁴ Richard Arnold, "Moscow Conducts Fascistization of Russian Higher Education (Part 2)," *Jamestown.org*, January 14, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/moscow-conducts-fascistization-of-russian-higher-education-part-two/>.

⁵ Stephen McDonnell, "Changing China: Xi Jinping's effort to return to socialism," *BBC News*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58579831>.

⁶ "Statement by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Arms Control and Nonproliferation The Honorable Dr. Christopher Yeaw to the Conference on Disarmament," U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, February 23, 2026, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2026/02/23/statement-by-u-s-assistant-secretary-of-state-for-the-bureau-of-arms-control-and-nonproliferation/>.

conventional forces declined in numbers and modernization was curtailed. Much of current U.S. military equipment is legacy Cold War designs, albeit sometimes with some improvements. The situation with regard to nuclear weapons is much worse. The U.S. nuclear arsenal was drastically cut. A 2024 report by the Department of State indicated that, "As of September 2023, the U.S. stockpile of nuclear warheads consisted of 3,748 warheads. This number represents an 88 percent reduction in the stockpile from its maximum (31,255) at the end of fiscal year 1967, and an 83 percent decrease from its level (22,217) when the Berlin Wall fell in late 1989."⁷ Moreover, U.S. nuclear delivery vehicles are very old. Today, the average age of U.S. ballistic missile submarines is 35 years.⁸ Furthermore, "The B-52H [bomber] platform has been operational for 64 years, the B-2A for 32, and the B-1B [no longer nuclear-capable] for 40. The Minuteman III missile has been on alert for 55 years."⁹ Moreover, the Minuteman III was not a new system but rather an upgrade of earlier versions of the 1960s Minuteman.

In contrast, Russia retains the largest nuclear weapons arsenal in the world and boasts that 92 percent of its

⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Transparency on the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile," Fact Sheet, July 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58579831>.

⁸ "Statement of Richard A. Correll, Commander, United States Strategic Command before the House Armed Services Committee on Strategic Forces," March 17, 2026, p. 9, https://www.stratcom.mil/portals/8/Documents/Posture%20Statements/2026%20USSTRATCOM%20Congressional%20Posture%20Statement.pdf?ver=Hb98LGT3_5gb01-f_KLHhQ%3D%3D.

⁹ "Statement of General Stephen L. Davis, Commander, Air Force Global Strike Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces," April 20, 2026, p. 2, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/davis_opening_statement.pdf.

strategic nuclear forces have been modernized.¹⁰ In 2021, noted Russian journalist Pavel Felgenhauer reported that, "...Russia may have more (maybe twice as many overall [nuclear weapons]) than all the other official or unofficial nuclear powers taken together."¹¹ Chinese and North Korean nuclear forces are almost entirely new.¹² According to the Biden Administration, China, Russia and North Korea "...are all expanding and diversifying their nuclear arsenals at a breakneck pace—showing little or no interest in arms control."¹³ These developments were not expected in the immediate post-Cold War environment when the decisions were made to cut the U.S. nuclear weapons capability.

In 2024, the Biden Administration concluded that, "Absent a change in the nuclear trajectories of the PRC [China], Russia and North Korea, we may reach a point where a change in the size or posture of our current

¹⁰ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 6, 2023), pp. 12, 14, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2023/item/2363-2023-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community>; and, "Expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board," *Kremlin.ru*, December 17, 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78801>.

¹¹ Pavel Felgenhauer, "Putin Delivers More Restrained National Address as Moscow Announces Partial Troop Withdrawal," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 18, Iss. 65, April 22, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-delivers-morerestrained-national-address-as-moscow-announces-partial-troopwithdrawal/>.

¹² Mark B. Schneider, "The Chinese Nuclear Threat," *Information Series*, No. 599, National Institute for Public Policy, September 26, 2024, https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-chinese-nuclear-threat-no-599-september-26-2024/.

¹³ Pranay Vaddi, "Adapting the U.S. Approach to Arms Control and Nonproliferation to a New Era," The Arms Control Association, June 7, 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/2024AnnualMeeting/Pranay-Vaddi-remarks>.

deployed forces is necessary.”¹⁴ However, to date, nothing has been done to expand U.S. nuclear forces to respond to these new threats.

One of the greatest Cold War intelligence failures was the lack of recognition that Soviet nuclear doctrine involved the first use of nuclear weapons in order to win militarily if that was required. This was proven when some former Warsaw Pact nations released to the public the Warsaw Pact war plan.¹⁵ Yet, this continues to be largely ignored in the West.

The failure to recognize the threat posed by Soviet nuclear doctrine contributed to the ill-conceived decision to eliminate all but two types of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons types in the 1991/1992 Presidential nuclear initiatives, with one of the two being eliminated by the Obama Administration’s 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review*. (Even without this understanding of Soviet willingness to engage in nuclear escalation, almost all senior officials of the Department of Defense opposed the 1991/1992 decisions to

¹⁴ Department of Defense, “‘Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies’: Remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Dr. Vipin Narang at CSIS,” August 1, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3858311/nuclear-threats-and-the-role-of-allies-remarks-by-acting-assistant-secretary-of/>.

¹⁵ “Taking Lyon on the Ninth Day? The 1964 Warsaw Pact Plan for a Nuclear, Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (PHP),” May 2000, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/108642/warplan_dossier.pdf; Kyle Mizokami, “Revealed: How the Warsaw Pact Planned to Win World War Three in Europe,” *The National Interest*, July 2, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/revealed-how-the-warsaw-pact-planned-win-world-war-three-16822>; and, “Soviets Planned Nuclear First Strike to Preempt West, Documents Show,” National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book, No. 154, May 13, 2005, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB154/index.htm>.

reduce dramatically the numbers and types of U.S tactical nuclear weapons.¹⁶⁾

In the post-Cold War world, the issue has never been whether the United States could win a conventional war without using nuclear weapons. It is how to deter adversary nuclear escalation when they had a large advantage in the number, modernization and diversity of their nuclear weapons. Russian military doctrine recognizes a fundamental truth that is politically incorrect in the West. This is, as Colonel General Vladimir Muravyev, then-Deputy Commander of the Strategic Missile Forces, stated in December 1999, "They [nuclear weapons] are capable of nullifying the combat qualities of all modern conventional systems."¹⁷ Russian military doctrine is built on this assessment.

In 2009, Lieutenant General Andrey Shvaychenko, then-Commander of Strategic Missile Forces, spoke about the role of Russia's nuclear ICBM force in conventional war. He said, "In a conventional war, [the nuclear ICBMs] ensure that the opponent is forced to cease hostilities, on advantageous conditions for Russia, by means of single or multiple preventive strikes against the aggressors' most important facilities."¹⁸

¹⁶ Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), pp. 325-327.

¹⁷ Quoted in Mark B. Schneider, *The Nuclear Forces and Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2006), p. 22, <https://nipp.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/05/Russian-nuclear-doctrine-NSF-for-print.pdf>.

¹⁸ "Russia may face large-scale military attack, says Strategic Missile Troops chief," *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, December 16, 2009, https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/professionalnewsstand/docview/460433852/fulltext/173438170CB2F81FF58/1?accountid=155509&site=professionalnewsstand&t:ac=173438170CB2F81FF58/1&t:cp=maintain/resultcitatio nblocksbrief&t:zoneid=transactionalZone_173de004188.

Russia's First-Use Nuclear Threats

Russian nuclear doctrine was originally developed by Putin when he was Secretary of Russia's National Security Council. Over the years, as Russia's nuclear doctrine evolved, Putin repeatedly indicated that Russian nuclear strategy reserved the right to use nuclear weapons first, in some cases in circumstances where no Western nuclear power would even consider doing so. The 2024 version of Putin's nuclear doctrine is the most detailed one made public. It considerably lowered the threshold for nuclear weapons first use by expanding the circumstances in which nuclear weapons can be used.¹⁹ Worse yet, "The [Russian] classified papers, seen by the *Financial Times*, describe a threshold for using tactical nuclear weapons that is lower than Russia has ever publicly admitted, according to experts who reviewed and verified the documents."²⁰ These papers, leaked to the press, describe Russian first use of nuclear weapons in military exercises.²¹

Since 2007, frequent nuclear weapons first-use threats have been the core of Russian foreign policy.²² Writing in

¹⁹ "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, December 3, 2024, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/.

²⁰ Max Seddon and Chris Cook, "Leaked Russian Military Files Reveal Criteria for Nuclear Strike," *Financial Times*, February 28, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/f18e6e1f-5c3d-4554-ae5-50a730b306b7>.

²¹ Mark B. Schneider, "The Leaked Russian Nuclear Documents and Russian First Use of Nuclear Weapons," National Institute for Public Policy, Information Series Information Series, No. 579, March 18, 2024, https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-leaked-russian-nuclear-documents-and-russian-first-use-of-nuclear-weapons-no-579-march-18-2024/.

²² Mark B. Schneider, "Putin's Plan to Send Russians to Heaven," *RealClearDefense*, December 1, 2018, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/12/01/putins_plan_to_send_russians_to_heaven_113995.html.

Foreign Affairs, Christopher Bort emphasized, “Putin also knows that in the back of his opponents’ minds lurks a fear of escalation to nuclear conflict, which limits their willingness to challenge him militarily.”²³ Until his Deputy Chairman of the Russian National Security Council Staff (and former President) Dmitri Medvedev took over the mantle of making irresponsible nuclear threats, President Putin enjoyed this distinction. Medvedev has even said that to defend the provinces of Ukraine annexed by Russia, “...any Russian weapons, including strategic nuclear weapons and weapons based on new principles, could be used for such protection.”²⁴ As noted Russian journalist Alexander Golts pointed out in 2014, “...even Soviet propagandists never allowed themselves to speak so flippantly about the prospect of nuclear war.”²⁵ Since 2014, Russian nuclear threats have worsened.

Nuclear weapons first-use threats became the core element of Putin’s effort to deter Western assistance to Ukraine and to re-establish the Soviet empire through political intimidation.²⁶ In 2022, Assistant Secretary of

²³ Christopher Bort, “Putin the Gambler – Why the Kremlin Rolled the Dice on Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putin-gambler>.

²⁴ “Russia’s Medvedev: new regions can be defended with strategic nuclear weapons,” *Reuters*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-strategic-nuclear-weapons-can-be-used-defend-new-regions-2022-09-22/>.

²⁵ Alexander Golts, “Russia’s Nuclear Euphoria Ignores Reality,” *The Moscow Times*, October 6, 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/06/russias-nuclear-euphoria-ignores-reality-a40110>.

²⁶ Mark B. Schneider, “Russian Use of Nuclear Coercion against NATO and Ukraine,” *The National Institute for Public Policy, Information Series*, No. 521, May 2, 2022, https://nipp.org/information_series/stephen-blank-russian-nuclear-strategy-in-the-ukraine-war-an-interim-report-no-525-june-15-2022/; and, Stephen Blank, “Russian Nuclear Strategy in the Ukraine War: An Interim Report,” *National Institute for Public Policy, Information Series*,

Defense for International Affairs, Celeste Wallander, testified to Congress that, “[Russia’s] nuclear arsenal backs a military doctrine that emphasizes the coercive military value of nuclear weapons, including limited nuclear first use in conventional regional conflict, at multiple levels of the conflict spectrum... Russia routinely threatens nuclear use irresponsibly and often casually, causing alarm with its nuclear saber-rattling, including in conjunction with its renewed invasion of Ukraine.”²⁷

The United States faces a major war in Europe and the risk of Russian nuclear escalation. Just because Putin (apparently under Chinese pressure) has not used nuclear weapons yet, there is no guarantee this decision will not change, particularly if Russia faces defeat. Russia will almost certainly use nuclear weapons in a war with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which President Putin may blunder into.

Even without nuclear weapons use, Putin’s war of aggression has taken the lives of 43,000 Ukrainian soldiers and has injured 370,000 since February 2022.²⁸ (Some estimates put Ukrainian dead considerably higher.²⁹)

No. 525, June 15, 2002, https://nipp.org/information_series/stephen-blank-russian-nuclear-strategy-in-the-ukraine-war-an-interim-report-no-525-june-15-2022/.

²⁷ “Statement by Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Dr. Celeste Wallander, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Before the 117th Congress Committee on United States Armed Services, House of Representatives,” March 30, 2022, p. 7, https://armedservices.house.gov/_cache/files/8/b/8b6799b3-d7ee-4386-94ff-aa258a80fe55/AF41AA1E1AD86583B8CA34739770C0D9.20220330-fc-witnessstatement-wallander.pdf.

²⁸ Alex Binley and Jonathan Beale, “43,000 troops killed in war with Russia, Zelensky says,” *BBC*, December 8, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yv75nydy3o>.

²⁹ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Putin’s Ultimatum to America,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 18, Issue 180, February 2, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/putins-ultimatum-to-america/>; Alex Kliment,

Russian losses in the war are estimated at 352,000 killed. The United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence estimates that Russia has sustained 1.3 million casualties (killed and wounded) and is now suffering 30,000 per month.³⁰ Putin cares little about how many Russians die in Ukraine as long as he remains in power and Russia's borders are expanded.³¹ He has no concern about how many Ukrainians die. He lives under a fantasy that he will be remembered as another Peter the Great.³²

It should be recognized that the objective of Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine was not just the conquest of Ukraine but rather the reestablishment of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. Just before the invasion, Russia presented what amounted to an ultimatum to the United States and NATO—a long list of demands which were mainly nonstarters. Russia even released the text of these documents to the press.³³

"Russia's costly invasion," *Gzero*, May 18, 2026,
<https://www.gzeromedia.com/graphic-truth/russias-costly-invasion>

³⁰ United Kingdom Government, "Evidence shows Russia continues to incur catastrophic losses for minimal gains in an unsustainable war: UK Statement to the OSCE," April 30, 2026,
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/evidence-shows-russia-continues-to-incur-catastrophic-losses-for-minimal-gains-in-an-unsustainable-war-uk-statement-to-the-osce>.

³¹ "Ukraine war: Vladimir Putin would sacrifice 20 million soldiers to win and ensure political survival, exiled diplomat says," *Sky News*, October 23, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-vladimir-putin-would-sacrifice-20-million-soldiers-to-win-and-ensure-political-survival-exiled-diplomat-says-12726372>.

³² Andrew Roth, "Putin compares himself to Peter the Great in quest to take back Russian lands," *The Guardian*, January 10, 2022,
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/10/putin-compares-himself-to-peter-the-great-in-quest-to-take-back-russian-lands>.

³³ Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, "Press release on Russian draft documents on legal security guarantees from the United States and NATO," December 17, 2026,
https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1790809/.

In December 2021, Putin stated in a meeting with foreign diplomats that, "In dialogue with the US and its allies, we will insist on legally binding agreements forbidding the further expansion of NATO and the deployment of threatening weapons anywhere close to Russian territory."³⁴ Putin had actually deployed very threatening nuclear-capable missiles against Europe in violation of the INF Treaty which eventually led to its demise.³⁵ He even threatened another Cuban missile crisis.³⁶

Putin did not invade Ukraine because he feared NATO; rather it was because he believed that NATO was weak and would not respond.³⁷ Putin expected that his invasion of Ukraine would result in a prompt and decisive Russian military victory which would so frighten the Europeans that they would acquiesce to Russian imperial dominance over the former Warsaw Pact states. Putin's ultimatum to NATO and the United States was buttressed with an unprecedented barrage of nuclear threats.³⁸ The pressure was aimed not only against NATO states but also Sweden and Finland, fundamentally changing their foreign policy, but not in the way Putin expected.

³⁴ Quoted in Felgenhauer, "Putin's Ultimatum to America," op. cit.

³⁵ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO and the INF Treaty," August 2, 2019, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/wider-activities/nato-and-the-inf-treaty>.

³⁶ Andrew Roth, "Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>.

³⁷ "Weakness is Lethal: Why Putin Invaded Ukraine and How the War Must End," *Understanding War.org*, October 1, 2023, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/weakness-is-lethal-why-putin-invaded-ukraine-and-how-the-war-must-end/>.

³⁸ Mark B. Schneider, "Threats of War and Nuclear War: Putin's Effort to Revive the Soviet Union," *Real Clear Defense*, January 18, 2022, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/01/18/threats_of_war_and_nuclear_war_putins_effort_to_revive_the_soviet_union_812521.html.

The Rise of China and the Decline of U.S. Military Capabilities

The decline in U.S. military spending, force size and the largely ideological deep cuts to U.S. nuclear forces paved the way for the gigantic growth of Chinese military power which now threatens a major war in the Far East over Taiwan. Even before this, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, “The counterintelligence and economic espionage efforts emanating from the government of China and the Chinese Communist Party are a grave threat to the economic well-being and democratic values of the United States.”³⁹

In 2018, the United States estimated that China had only about 200 nuclear weapons.⁴⁰ In the early 2020s, an enormous expansion of Chinese nuclear forces was discovered. The Pentagon’s annual reports on Chinese military power have estimated that China’s nuclear weapons will increase from over 600 operational weapons in 2024 to over 1,000 in 2030 and 1,500 in 2035.⁴¹ While these numbers are alarming, they are likely considerable underestimates.⁴² The United States has consistently underestimated the growth of the Chinese nuclear threat.⁴³

³⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “The China Threat,” no date, <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/the-china-threat>.

⁴⁰ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Nuclear Challenges*, August 2024, p. IX, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Nuclear_Challenges_2024.pdf.

⁴¹ Mark B. Schneider, “The Chinese Nuclear Arsenal: More DoD Nuclear Threat Minimization,” *RealClearDefense*, March 1, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/03/01/the_chinese_nuclear_arsenal_more_dod_nuclear_threat_minimization_1094753.html.

⁴² Mark B. Schneider, *Current and Projected Growth of China’s Nuclear Arsenal* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, October 2024), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Vol.-4-No.-10.pdf>.

⁴³ Senator Tom Cotton, *Seven Things You Can’t Say About China* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2025), p. 52.

China's public nuclear doctrine — no first use (NFU) — is cleverly worded propaganda. In 2006, Colonel (Ret.) Dr. Larry Wortzel, a noted expert on the Chinese military, pointed out that a careful analysis of China's NFU language indicated that "...if China launched a surprise nuclear attack tomorrow, it would still not be the first nation to use nuclear weapons," and, thus, the attack would not violate its NFU policy "...since the United States used nuclear weapons first in World War II."⁴⁴

Recognition by the U.S. Government of Chinese willingness to use nuclear weapons first was gradual. In 2022, DoD's China military power report stated that, notwithstanding its announced "no first use" (NFU) policy, "...China's nuclear strategy probably includes consideration of a nuclear strike in response to a nonnuclear attack threatening the viability of China's nuclear forces or C2 [command and control], or that approximates the strategic effects of a nuclear strike. Beijing probably would also consider nuclear use to restore deterrence if a conventional military defeat gravely threatened PRC [People's Republic of China] survival."⁴⁵ In its 2023 report, the bipartisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission reached the same conclusion.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Larry Wortzel, "Opinion: The Trouble With China's Nuclear Doctrine," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, February 22, 2006, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294129344_OPINION_-the_trouble_with_China%27s_nuclear_doctrine.

⁴⁵ Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022), p. 95, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

⁴⁶ Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl (co-chairs), Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, *America's Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), p. 12, <https://www.ida.or->

In light of the enormous buildup of Chinese conventional and nuclear weapons, Chinese willingness to use nuclear weapons first has great significance. China has a number of nuclear weapons types that the United States lacks. A 2024 Defense Intelligence Agency report stated that China had nuclear-capable glide vehicles, air launched ballistic missiles and medium-range ballistic missiles.⁴⁷ There are reports of additional types of Chinese nuclear weapons.⁴⁸

The evidence is more than Wortzel's linguistic analysis suggests. In 1996, China's U.N. Ambassador Sha Zukang, in a statement later walked back, said that since Taiwan was part of China, "...the policy of no first use does not apply."⁴⁹ A 2004 officer training book of China's Second Artillery (now the Rocket Force) stated, "The basic assault force" of several missile brigades must meet "...nuclear counter strike requirements, and be able to assure first strike effectiveness."⁵⁰ In 2011, Japan's *Kyodo News Agency* reported that it obtained classified Chinese documents which said China "...will adjust the nuclear threat policy if a nuclear missile-possessing country carries out a series of air strikes against key strategic targets in our country with absolutely superior conventional weapons."⁵¹

/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx.

⁴⁷ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Nuclear Challenges*, op. cit., p. VI.

⁴⁸ Schneider, *Current and Projected Growth of China's Nuclear Arsenal*, op. cit., pp. 20, 46.

⁴⁹ Liping Xia, "China's Nuclear Doctrine: Debates and Evolution" (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2016), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/06/chinas-nuclear-doctrine-debates-and-evolution?lang=en>.

⁵⁰ *The Science of the Second Artillery Campaigns* (Beijing: Press of the PLA, March 2004), pp. 119-120, 150.

⁵¹ "China military said to consider pre-emptive nuclear strike in event of crisis," *BBC Monitoring Newsfile*, June 5, 2011,

Conclusion

The most important development in the post-Soviet world is the military rise of China and the possibility of coordinated or opportunistic aggression by Russia and China and even possibly with North Korea. This was recognized in the Biden Administration's 2024 *Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance* which stated that "...the evidence of growing collaboration and collusion between Russia, the PRC, the DPRK [North Korea], and Iran makes the situation even more challenging. There is a possibility of coordinated or opportunistic aggression by a combination of adversaries in a crisis or conflict, which requires U.S. strategists to think carefully about complex escalation dynamics and deterring multiple adversaries simultaneously, including in extended crises or conflicts."⁵²

According to Admiral Richard Correll, Commander of the United States Strategic Command, Russia has 4,600 nuclear weapons, including 2,600 strategic and 2,000 non-strategic nuclear weapons.⁵³ This estimate is likely to be low. As previously noted, the Pentagon has estimated that Chinese nuclear weapons will increase from over 600

[https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/professionalnewsstand/docview/822370222/fulltext/190881A03A](https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/professionalnewsstand/docview/822370222/fulltext/190881A03A1200AF12E/2?accountid=155509&accountid=155509&site=professionalnewsstand&t:ac=190881A03A1200AF12E/1&t:cp=maintain/resultcitati onblocksbrief&t:zoneid=transactionalZone_5d02af8c11eb9)

[1200AF12E/2?accountid=155509&accountid=155509&site=professionalnewsstand&t:ac=190881A03A1200AF12E/1&t:cp=maintain/resultcitati onblocksbrief&t:zoneid=transactionalZone_5d02af8c11eb9](https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/professionalnewsstand/docview/822370222/fulltext/190881A03A1200AF12E/2?accountid=155509&accountid=155509&site=professionalnewsstand&t:ac=190881A03A1200AF12E/1&t:cp=maintain/resultcitati onblocksbrief&t:zoneid=transactionalZone_5d02af8c11eb9).

⁵² Department of Defense, "Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States," Department of Defense, November 2024, p. 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Nov/15/2003584623/-1/-1/1/REPORT-ON-THE-NUCLEAR-EMPLOYMENT-STRATEGY-OF-THE-UNITED-STATES.PDF>.

⁵³ "Statement of Richard A. Correll, Commander, United States Strategic Command before the House Armed Services Committee on Strategic Forces," op. cit., p. 4.

operational weapons in 2024 to over 1,000 in 2030 and 1,500 in 2035.⁵⁴

The number of U.S. nuclear weapons in 2023 was 3,748 active and inactive weapons.⁵⁵ The number of deployed U.S. nuclear weapons is reported to be about 1,770.⁵⁶ Thus, the combined Russian and Chinese nuclear force (5,200) is already about three times larger than that of the United States. This disparity will almost certainly grow as China and Russia increase the number of their nuclear weapons. The situation will be worse if the official numbers for Russia and China are underestimates, as they appear to be.

Giving Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping nuclear superiority in the hope that they will not exploit it is incredibly shortsighted. In 2008, Dr. Keith Payne characterized U.S. nuclear weapons policy as the “The Great American Gamble.”⁵⁷ If the United States does not reverse course soon, our nation may well lose this gamble.

Dr. Mark Schneider is a Senior Analyst with National Institute for Public Policy. He previously served in DoD as Principal Director for Forces Policy, Principal Director for Strategic Defense, Space and Verification Policy, Director for Strategic Arms Control Policy and Representative of the Secretary of Defense to the Nuclear Arms Control Implementation Commission. Dr. Schneider also served in the senior Foreign Service as a Member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff.

⁵⁴ Mark B. Schneider, “The Chinese Nuclear Arsenal: More DoD Nuclear Threat Minimization,” *RealClearDefense*, March 1, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/03/01/the_chinese_nuclear_arsenal_more_dod_nuclear_threat_minimization_1094753.html.

⁵⁵ National Nuclear Security Administration, “Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile,” July 2024, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/transparency-us-nuclear-weaponsstockpile>.

⁵⁶ Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and Mackenzie Knight-Boyle, “United States Nuclear Weapons, 2026,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2026, Vol. 82, No. 2, p. 119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2026.2633>.

⁵⁷ Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble* (Fairfax, VA: The National Institute Press, 2008).

The Collapse of Russia and its Nuclear Consequences

Bruno Tertrais

As Russia shows signs of military and economic exhaustion – not to mention an extraordinarily high human toll – caused by its ill-fated, full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the scenario of an implosion or collapse of the country is one that deserves a fresh look. The precedent of the dissolution of the Soviet Union naturally comes to mind, but the parallel should not be taken too far. It is likely, in particular, that the nuclear consequences of a disintegration of Russia would be less dangerous than was the case with the Soviet Union.

Would Russia survive a strategic defeat in Ukraine? This remains an extreme scenario, but one which is worth studying given its potentially enormous consequences. At the time of the writing, the regime is probably more solid than many in the West would like.¹ However, let us assume the collapse of the Russian government. One possibility would be its “natural death” along with Putin’s own disappearance.² Another would be Putin’s overthrow due to an elite split, fueled by economic discontent. Indeed, a state at war must often choose between guns and butter, and Moscow may find it increasingly difficult to provide either.³

¹ Dan Storyev, “Reports of Russia’s Collapse Are Greatly Exaggerated,” *The Moscow Times*, June 2, 2026, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/06/02/reports-of-russias-collapse-are-greatly-exaggerated-a92903>.

² Sergey Aleksashenko et al., “Cracks in the Kremlin walls: Threats to the stability of the Putin regime,” *New Eurasian Strategies Centre*, May 28, 2026, <https://nestcentre.org/cracks-in-the-kremlin-walls/>.

³ Philip Wasielewski, *Will Russia Survive Until 2084?*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 20, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/12/will-russia-survive-until-2084/>;

The fall of the Putin regime might be followed by the emergence of a reformist government, with a new balance of power, as happened after the 1905 defeat of Japan. Or it could be followed by a *de facto* collective form of government, as was the case in Soviet times.

Could Russia itself collapse? It is not uncommon for empires themselves to fall following major military defeats—which act either as a direct cause or as a catalyst for their implosion—with a lack of political legitimacy and the disorganization of state structures compounding the human and financial costs of war. This was, of course, the case in the breakdown of European monarchies after World War I, including that of Russia. It was also the case for the Soviet empire in the late 1980s; the quagmire in Afghanistan served both to expose the weaknesses of the Soviet army and to encourage revolt among the non-Russian republics. Historian Michael Khodarkovsky said in 2016: “We should not be taken by surprise if one day Russia were to implode.”⁴ This is now the position of some U.S. analysts, as evidenced by studies whose titles make their stance clear. Among them are *Failed State: A Guide to Russia’s Rupture*, and *Preparing for the Final Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Dissolution of the Russian Federation*.⁵

As long as he retains power, Vladimir Putin will do everything he can to prevent this scenario. We know that he admires Ivan Ilyin and has certainly read and reread the philosopher’s essay, *What Dismemberment of Russia Entails*

and, Nigel Gould-Davies, *The Coming Crisis in Russia’s Political Economy*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 18, 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2026/05/the-coming-crisis-in-russias-political-economy/>.

⁴ Quoted in Casey Michel, “Misfiring War in Ukraine Creates Potential for Russia’s Disintegration,” *The Financial Times*, January 10, 2023.

⁵ Janusz Bugajski, *Failed State : A Guide to Russia’s Rupture* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2022); and, Luke Coffey, *Preparing for the Final Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Dissolution of the Russian Federation*, The Hudson Institute, 2022.

for the World (1950). But, in case of a disaster in Ukraine, he or his successors will then have to face an even more dangerous scenario: the collapse of what is, even today, an empire in which one national group—the Russians—dominates other populations.

Following a hypothetical military defeat in Ukraine, conscripts returning from the campaign in Ukraine would likely be embittered, and perhaps socially ostracized. Former prisoners enlisted in the militias and the army might naturally be tempted by the underground economy of gangs, trafficking, and extortion. And, as with all authoritarian regimes in which leaders strike a Faustian bargain by fueling competition between rival centers of power, there could be a risk of large-scale armed conflict between and among the army, the intelligence services, the National Guard (created in 2016), and, of course, the militias that are more or less under state control.

The “vertical power structure” imposed by Putin over the past 20 years—including through redefinition of the entities that make up the federation—would be severely shaken by a strategic defeat in Ukraine. If it were destroyed, how could a state 30 times larger and 10 times more populous than Somalia possibly be maintained? The Russian empire, given the distances separating its heart from its periphery, actually resembles its European counterparts of the past. Could Russia survive the collapse of the national myth perpetuated by Moscow—that of a guardian nation superior to others and destined to control its neighbors?

Political secession would be compounded by the risk of territorial secession. There is no real Russian nation, says political scientist Sergei Medvedev: “there is just a population governed by a state.”⁶ The country currently

⁶ Galia Ackerman, “La Russie: un Etat sans Nation. Entretien avec Sergueï Medvedev [Russia: A State Without a Nation. Interview with

claims 89 federal subjects, including 21 non-Slavic autonomous republics.⁷ Not all Russian citizens (*Rossiiskii*) are ethnic Russians (*Russkii*), and the proportion of the latter (currently four-fifths) is declining. The other major ethnic groups—notably the Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvash, and Chechens—are experiencing population growth. As is well known, the poorest populations, often from remote regions, contribute disproportionately to the country's military ranks. To this point, as was the case in past empires, citizens from poor and remote regions have felt like cannon fodder for the central government. Could the breakup predicted by French political historian Hélène Carrère d'Encausse in 1978 regarding the Soviet Union—based at the time primarily on demographic data—have been prophetic?⁸

One is naturally reminded of the early 1990s, which—much like the late 1910s—saw a surge of nationalist sentiment and demands for independence throughout the entire Union, particularly within the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Few remember this: when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) collapsed, all 21 constituent republics had declared their sovereignty. In this scenario, Western observers would have to reacquaint themselves with a proliferation of names that would seem exotic to non-specialists. Who, outside the circle of a few highly specialized experts on the country, had ever heard of the *Chuulhn*, the Congress of the Kalmyk Nation, which

Sergei Medvedev],” *Politique Internationale*, No. 178 (Winter 2022–2023), p. 78.

⁷ Most of them are relatively small territories with the major exception of the Republic of Sakha in Siberia (three million square kilometers, twice the size of Alaska). The combined size of the 21 republics is 4,800,000 square kilometers, representing about 28 percent of Russia.

⁸ Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *L'Empire éclaté* [*The Shattered Empire*] (Paris: Flammarion, 1978).

declared the independence of the peoples it claims to represent on October 27, 2022?⁹

However, the breakup of the Soviet Union may be an imperfect precedent for imagining the scenario of Russia's own disintegration. While an authoritarian State, the USSR included genuine elements of federalism. Russia, on the other hand, "is an economically, socially, and regionally fragmented country, consisting of a few developed cities and microregions and a vast, disconnected, and impoverished hinterland."¹⁰ Instead of 15 member states, Russia claims 89 federal entities, five of which—the Ukrainian oblasts "annexed" by Moscow—are not internationally recognized as part of the country. Which of the 89 would be most likely to secede? One thinks first of those along the borders: the Caucasus republics, Tuva, and even Buryatia, though its population is predominantly Russian, which also happen to have particularly suffered from the Ukraine war. One also thinks of those that are the most homogeneous, where ethnic Russians have in some cases all but disappeared, and which are often the poorest (again, in the Caucasus). But others—which are among the wealthiest and have a history of nationalist demands—could also be affected, particularly two republics in the Volga basin: Tatarstan and Bashkortostan.

Five centuries after Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan and Astrakhan, the end of the internal empire that has been Russia since then could be on the horizon. A minority fringe of nationalists might view favorably the departure of non-Russian peoples from the federation, particularly since a Russia separated from Ukraine has seen the center of gravity of its imperium shift eastward, away from Europe and towards Asia. This would come, however,

⁹ On October 27, 2022, the "Congress of the Oirat-Kalmyk People" published a declaration of independence of the Kalmyk State. For more information see <https://congressoftheoiratkalmykpeople.org/>.

¹⁰ Bugajski, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

at the cost of a further demographic decline in a country already in dire straits in this regard. Indeed, four of the federal entities most likely to drift away from Moscow's center of gravity are also the only ones that have experienced a positive natural increase (more births than deaths) in recent years: Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Tuva. Minority populations could account for 30 percent of Russia's total population within a few years.

The precedent of Yugoslavia thus comes more naturally to mind than that of the Soviet Union. It is, in fact, frequently cited by Russian authorities – precisely because they fear it.¹¹ Some of the Russian administrative entities would have an easy time wielding the weapon of self-determination referendums, a tactic Moscow has used on several occasions to annex parts of Ukraine. According to one of the *most in-depth analyses of this scenario*: “The demise of the current Russian Federation is unlikely to follow a single path, unlike that of the Soviet Union, where the fifteen Union Republics became independent States almost by default. [...] The fracturing of the state is likely to be chaotic, prolonged, sequential, conflictive and, increasingly, violent. It can result in the full separation of some federal units and the amalgamation of others into new federal or confederal arrangements.”¹²

“It is rare for great empires to disappear gracefully,” warned the U.S. ambassador to Moscow in early 1991.¹³ The collapse of the Russian empire would likely resemble 1917 more than 1991. As with the Ottoman Empire at the time, the “Sick Man of Eurasia” could generate new conflicts. It might rouse the ambitions of neighboring powers, foremost

¹¹ “Putin says Russia will not be dismantled like Yugoslavia,” *Reuters*, December 4, 2014.

¹² Bugajski, op. cit., p. 285.

¹³ Quoted in Mary E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 107.

among them China and Turkey. And what would become of Belarus in that case? Would Moscow accept that it took its true political independence? Or would it seek at all costs to retain this remnant of the Soviet empire—much like Serbia held on to Montenegro after the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation—but perhaps at the cost of further bloodshed?

A silver lining in the scenario analyzed here is that the nuclear issue would likely not be as acute as it was in the case of the Soviet Union. At that time, the country possessed some 27,000 nuclear weapons, with nearly 7,000 of them stationed outside Russia. Today, Moscow possesses some 4,400 nuclear weapons, all of them within the country. (It is unlikely that there is a permanent deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus.) It stores its nuclear weapons at 40 permanent storage sites across the country, including only about 10 national-level central storage sites.¹⁴ With the exception of naval bases, the country's nuclear forces are mostly located in the heart of the federation, primarily in the south, along major transportation routes which are tightly controlled by the central government (though sometimes too close to the federation's borders not to be concerned about their fate in the event of serious unrest). The fate of Russian nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad would be followed closely, especially if Moscow attempted to "repatriate" them. But the risk of "internal proliferation"—that is, of Russian administrative entities gaining direct control of nuclear weapons or materials—would be much more limited than was the case in 1991.

In the 1970s, the Soviet Union was described as "Upper Volta with rockets." In the 2000s, it was referred to as "Mexico with nuclear weapons," and in the 2010s, "a gas

¹⁴ Hans M. Kristensen et al., "Russian Nuclear Weapons 2026," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 14, 2026, <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2026-05/russian-nuclear-weapons-2026/>.

station with nuclear weapons.” If it ever became a failed state or a “Somalia with nuclear weapons,” how would Westerners react? The past may be instructive. In 1991, two different positions emerged in Washington. One, embodied by Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, saw the collapse of the Soviet Union as an historic opportunity—a chance for the West to rid itself of the Russian threat. The other, supported by Secretary of State Jim Baker, advocated caution instead, emphasizing the risks posed by the disintegration of a major power, especially one with nuclear weapons. As is well known, it was the latter approach that President Bush Sr. adopted—to the point of traveling to Kyiv to ask the Ukrainians not to leave the Union. This was in line with the recommendations made as early as 1948 by George Kennan, the father of containment policy, who was revered in certain Washington circles.¹⁵ We would undoubtedly see the same debate resurface in Western countries, and perhaps the same caution on the part of the White House. But would America view Russia’s descent into chaos with even greater disfavor, as such a scenario might entail proliferation risks requiring political attention (which might push it even further away from a desired focus on Asia)? Or, would Washington relish the idea of a self-centered Russia, too busy with maintaining its own internal cohesion to sow trouble abroad?

China itself would hardly be favorable to Russian disintegration. Admittedly, it could win in the long run: a Russian Far East emptied of its inhabitants could become the Democratic Republic of the Congo of the 2000s—an ungoverned territory open to all predators—with Russia becoming a space more than an actor, and with China aiming to control the Northern Maritime Route and the

¹⁵ *The State Department Policy Planning Staff Papers 1948*, Volume II (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sites/default/files/public_file/2023/1948%20Policy%20Planning%20Staff%20paper%20re%20Ukraine.pdf.

resources of a territory that stands to be severely disrupted by the melting permafrost (60 percent of the territory). Beijing, however, is not fond of chaos.

The West's first duty would be to contain Russia in the sanitary sense of the term—like containing the spread of a disease. The objective would be to prevent the spread of violence and illicit trafficking outside Russia, as well as other collateral effects, particularly to the loss of control of nuclear warheads, materials and expertise, thereby ensuring that the implosion does not turn into an explosion. As an exiled Russian academic bluntly put it, “to ensure that this swamp does not rot and release atomic mushrooms,”¹⁶ such an outcome would disprove Bill Clinton's grim—though debatable—1999 prediction: “If Russia is not stable, the rest of the world will suffer.”¹⁷

The collapse of the Russian empire would not be irreversible. It is not wrong to say that Russia always ends up rebuilding itself, as it did in the late 1910s¹⁸ and the 1990s. In an optimistic scenario, this could eventually take place within the framework of a new, more egalitarian federation.¹⁹ Failing that, chaos could pave the way for a truly totalitarian regime.

Dr. Bruno Tertrais is Deputy Director of the Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS).

¹⁶ Quoted in Ackerman, op. cit., p. 82.

¹⁷ Quoted in Sarotte, op. cit., p. 301.

¹⁸ Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, “Putin's Last Stand: The Promise and Peril of Russian Defeat,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/putin-last-stand-russia-defeat>.

¹⁹ Marlene Laruelle, “Putin's War and the Dangers of Russian Disintegration: The Unraveling of a Fragile Multiethnic State Could Lead to More Violence,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/putins-war-and-dangers-russian-disintegration>.

Dissolving Evil Empires: Will China Follow the Soviet Union?

Bing West*

The Fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)

The Soviet Union voted itself out of existence in December of 1991, when the 542 members of the Supreme Soviet met for a final time. The proximate cause was that the command economy was a rigid Leninist collectivism with insoluble structural defects. Central planning could not allocate resources in an efficient manner across a massive, diverse economy. Investment in consumer goods was chronically underfunded, while the system prioritized heavy industry and military spending. Agriculture was still shaped by Soviet-era collectivization, forcing the Soviet Union to import grain despite having some of the world's best farmlands. By the early 1980s, these economic conditions had calcified. No data from the government could be trusted. Technology lagged far behind the West. Decades of shortages, the obvious gap between the party elite and the rest of society, and the defeat in Afghanistan over a decade from 1979 to 1989, combined to hollow out the public's belief in the system.

When Mikhail Gorbachev took control, he determined that radical reforms were required, but he never intended to dissolve the Soviet Union. He was trying to save

* The author used ChatGPT for drafting support and language refinement during the article preparation. All arguments, source selection, factual verification, and final editorial decisions were made and checked by the author, who takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the manuscript and its references.

communism by making it functional. Gorbachev introduced perestroika, or economic restructuring, to stimulate market mechanisms and decentralize economic decision-making. He emphasized glasnost to allow some free discussion and press stories to expose corruption and structural inefficiency. But glasnost let loose decades of suppressed grievances in the Baltics, Ukraine, Poland, East Germany and the rest of Eastern Europe. Perestroika did not deliver economic results. Gorbachev's reforms unleashed nationalism in the satrap republics, and dissent and power struggles in the Russian-dominated Communist Party.

By 1989, the Soviet/Russian control over Eastern Europe had slipped to the point where military intervention was required. Gorbachev, however, was not going to repeat Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968. When he balked at sending in troops, this provoked a hardline coup in August of 1991. That was crushed and gave rise to Yeltsin as a rival power center in Russia itself. By December of 1991, the Supreme Soviet conclave voted to end the Soviet Union.

The Cause of the Fall

Many historians have concluded that the tattered economy and collapse in the public's acquiescence to communist control were the basic causes of the downfall of the Soviet Union. This gives undue credit to economic determinism, a refined reflection of the historian Arnold Toynbee, who studied 26 civilizations.¹ For Toynbee, it mattered not whether a governing clique was hereditary, autocratic or democratic. In each case, a nation's leaders earned legitimacy through a creative spark, a means of problem-

¹ Arnold J. Toynbee was an English historian whose 12-volume *A Study of History* published between 1934–61 put forward a philosophy of history, based on an analysis of the cyclical development and decline of civilizations.

solving that the rest of society voluntarily imitated or at least accepted without rebelling. Dynamism by the leaders was the core mechanism of his whole system of history: Great civilizations arose when a society faced some challenge—economic, military, social—and a creative minority within it devised a successful response; usually this was military success on the battlefield. The rest of the population shared in the spoils and voluntarily followed the leaders.

The leadership visibly worked—and this inspired consent. Caesar, Napoleon, Stalin, Mao—according to Toynbee, these figures generated authority because enough people *wanted* to follow them, seeing value in doing so. Stalin had mass support for periods of Soviet history, mixed inseparably with terror, informants, and gulags. Hitler had authentic mass enthusiasm in the mid-1930s. Applying Toynbee's framework, the Soviet Union fell apart because a succession of leaders gradually lost the original creative, albeit rabid, 'spark.' Therefore, Toynbee concluded, great civilizations are not murdered; they commit suicide. They fall from within. Hence the popular belief that the Soviet Union fell due to internal contradictions and an inability to generate wealth for those under its control.

However, without the sustained U.S. anti-USSR commitment—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Marshall Plan, decades of defense spending, President Reagan's buildup and Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and U.S. ideological confrontation rather than passive coexistence—the Soviet system could have limped along far longer. Economists and Gorbachev himself pointed to the unsustainable burden of matching Reagan's buildup, especially SDI, as a direct trigger for needing perestroika.

In Poland, the Solidarity movement survived during the martial law period (1981-83) largely due to two factors. Russian forces were already stretched, having invaded Afghanistan. In addition, the United States and the Vatican

were providing material and moral support. Thus, Poland in 1983 did not go the way of Hungary 1956 or Czechoslovakia 1968. Instead, it was Poland that ignited the 1989 chain reaction across Eastern Europe which led to the USSR's collapse two years later.

Will China Fall?

As Michael Mandelbaum has pointed out in *The American Way of Foreign Policy*,² America's foreign policy is not based upon the realpolitik balances of power. The American people believe in the ideology of liberty and base international relations upon ideological principles enumerated in our Constitution. To be sure, throughout our history, its practice has been episodic but nonetheless real. Since the end of World War II, the public has viewed both Russia/USSR and China through an ideological prism.

Currently the public views Russia unfavorably because Putin invaded Ukraine. Concerning China, its record of corporate theft and cyber hacking over the past 15 years has increased its unfavorable record.³

China's unfavorable rating has rebounded somewhat in the past two years.⁴ President Trump has not been consistently critical of Chairman Xi.

² Michael Mandelbaum, *The American Way of Foreign Policy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2026).

³ Megan Brennan, "Record-Low 15% of Americans View China Favorably," March 7, 2023, *Gallup*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/471551/record-low-americans-view-china-favorably.aspx>.

⁴ Laura Silver and Laura Clancy, "Americans' views of China have grown somewhat more positive in recent years," *Pew Research Center*, April 14, 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/14/americans-views-of-china-have-grown-somewhat-more-positive-in-recent-years/>.

Overall, U.S. strategic posture toward China has been more carrot than stick. Toward the Soviets, there never was a U.S. policy premised on trading extensively, or integrating them into global institutions, or believing that if we traded with them, they would evolve into a liberal society. In contrast, with China, that was the U.S. bet for about 25 years. Nixon visited China in 1972 in order to weaken Mao's ties with the Soviet Union. By 1979, U.S.-China relations had 'normalized,' warming to the point that President Clinton conferred upon it Most Favored Nation trading advantages. The idea was that trade and prosperity would liberalize China's politics. Instead, China grew immensely richer and did not liberalize, becoming more repressive under Xi than under his immediate predecessors.

China's regime is under much less external structural strain than the USSR was in the 1980s. It has not faced anything resembling the 40 years of sustained, alliance-unified, ideological and economic pressure the way the USSR did. Today, the ideological divide between the United States and China is downplayed, if not denied altogether, by President Trump. China is the world's largest trading nation and central to global manufacturing supply chains, including for the United States itself. Trump has repeatedly said China and America can get along as two quasi-friendly business endeavors.

The problem is that China is determined to change with the power equilibrium in the Western Pacific. "The PRC [People's Republic of China] has made it clear," FBI Director Christopher Wray warned in 2024, "that it considers every sector that makes our society run as fair game in its bid to dominate on the world stage."⁵

⁵ Department of Justice, "Chinese Government Poses 'Broad and Unrelenting' Threat to U.S. Critical Infrastructure, FBI Director Says," April 18, 2024, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/chinese-government-poses-broad-and-unrelenting-threat-to-u-s-critical-infrastructure-fbi-director-says>.

Through military—primarily naval—pressure, China will persist in claiming sovereignty on the ocean frontiers, shoving aside the Philippines and deploying its warships into waters Japan considers its domain. Chinese aircraft and warships daily probe Taiwan’s territorial boundaries. “The Chinese Communist Party’s actions throughout the world,” General Dan Caine, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, “and conflicts in Europe, the Middle East and Asia make it clear: Our adversaries are advancing.”⁶

China’s trade depends upon the United States and Europe. That, however, does not assure peace. In the spring of 1914, an international commission concluded that the European powers “had discovered the obvious truth that the richest country has the most to lose by war, and each country wishes for peace above all things.”⁷ That “obvious truth” proved false. In June, the Austrian archduke was assassinated. Within a month, financial markets were in a panic as investors cashed in their stocks and bonds, provoking a continent-wide liquidity crisis before the guns of August ever fired a shot.

That America and China engage in massive trade does not lessen their opposing worldviews. As Professor Graham Allison has expressed it, “when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, the resulting structural stress makes a violent clash the rule, not the exception.”⁸ There can be no enduring accommodation between two nations

⁶ Seth Jones, “The President’s Defense Budget Misses the Mark,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/the-presidents-defense-budget-misses-the-mark-17d02713>.

⁷ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute for International Peace, 1914), p. 17.

⁸ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), p. xv.

with global reach and antagonistic philosophies of the international order.

By 2033, outside estimates suggest that China's property bust and local-government financing schemes will have generated roughly \$4–7 trillion in real losses concealed inside banks and state firms. Provinces roll the bad loans forward, understate their debts, and rely on Beijing's bond swaps and cheap credit to keep the machinery running. Unemployment among the youth hovers between 15 and 20 percent. Demand for the exports of consumer goods has flatlined. China's housing losses and collapsing exports guarantee stagnation, falling demand, and creeping deflation. The economy, controlled from the top, lacks an engine of sustained growth over the next decade.

But, as in the Soviet Union, the Chinese Politburo will keep control for several decades. Its military-industrial core will remain formidable because it receives resource priority. In 2033, Xi will be 80, running out of time on this earth. He knows that internal economic stresses imperil both his reign and the Beijing top tier of the Chinese Communist Party. His way out is obvious: Patriotism remains the last refuge of the scoundrel. Seizing Taiwan with its treasure of computer chips would boost mainland China's economy and the morale of its 800 million people. With China in control of the Pacific trade routes, South Korea and Japan would cut deals. A new horizon opens under a new world leader.

Conclusion

American superpower status has never rested on any single region in isolation—it rests specifically on the combination of unmatched blue-water naval power projection, a global alliance network, reserve currency status, and the ability to guarantee open sea lanes and airspace essentially everywhere. If China seizes Taiwan, the U.S. Navy is, de

facto, pushed out of the West Pacific. Japan and South Korea will cut deals with China to use the trade routes through the South China Sea. The wider Indo-Pacific under Chinese rather than American-guaranteed control is not a regional adjustment. It is the removal of the single load-bearing pillar that has made the United States a *global* rather than merely hemispheric power since 1945. Losing unchallenged primacy in the Western Pacific is not like losing influence in, say, the Sahel. It is losing the demonstration case that American hard power is globally uncontested, and that demonstration case is what every other U.S. alliance commitment worldwide—NATO, the Gulf, everything—implicitly depends on for credibility.

We have a problem. Our foreign policy elite, our presidents and our people implicitly agreed that our creed—our Constitution—demanded containment of the Soviet Union for both practical reasons—keeping Western Europe intact—and for ideological reasons, principally defense of liberty and liberal institutions. Our economic entanglement with China and the trend of President Trump to reject both our core beliefs and our allies in favor of evanescent trade “deals” have combined to prevent a consensus that China is an adversary whose power must be contained and channeled, not abetted.

In 1946, Ambassador George Kennan described the threat posed by the Soviet Union. “We have here,” he wrote, “a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with the US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken.”⁹

⁹ George F. Kennan, *Long Telegram*, February 22, 1946, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>.

Kennan's analysis applies with equal force to China today. China's bid for regional hegemony requires displacing the U.S.-anchored security order in East Asia that has held since 1945. The Chinese Communist Party is committed to undermining our alliances and replacing the existing international order with one centered on Beijing. It is not a competitor seeking an advantage within the current rules-based system. China is a rival seeking to rewrite the system according to its autocratic rules.

Bing West served as Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Reagan. He has written a dozen books about our recent wars. His latest book is Cat 5: The 2033 War.

The Unravelling of the Soviet Union: A Western European Perspective

NATO, Britain, and What We Failed to Learn

Kenton White

Introduction

There is a persistent and uncomfortable truth about the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991: the Western alliance that had spent 40 years preparing to fight it did not see the crisis coming. When the crisis arrived, Western governments treated it as a once-in-a-lifetime chance to save money, and quietly pushed defence and security to the back of the queue where they stayed for 30 years.

The failure was not a single misjudgement but a sequence of them, across defence economics, intellectual dogma, economic prescription, alliance design, and intelligence assessments, each defensible in isolation but collectively responsible for the strategic environment in which Britain and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) now find themselves. The West “won” the Cold War and then squandered a remarkable proportion of the advantage. This essay examines the Soviet collapse and its aftermath from a Western European, and specifically British, vantage point. The central contention is straightforward: the West treated the end of the Cold War as a financial windfall to be banked rather than a transformation to be managed jointly. NATO, having achieved its founding purpose, spent a decade deciding what it was for, and answered in a way that secured Central Europe while leaving Russia a “partnership” with no substance. The economic transition of the former Soviet Union was prescribed by people who grasped macroeconomics but not how institutions are built. And the

whole enterprise was conducted within an intellectual climate, Francis Fukuyama's above all, that mistook a contingent moment for the settled destination of history.

Britain occupied a distinctive position. As a nuclear power, a permanent member of the Security Council, a senior member of NATO, and a state with direct and recent experience in managing imperial dissolution, it was unusually well placed to temper the errors of the period. It did so only partially. Positioned between Washington and Brussels, instinctively Atlanticist and institutionally conservative, British policy too often managed change by "muddling through" rather than moulding it. More than once Britain found itself a spectator at the defining moments of the transition rather than a shaper of them.

Western governments were not ignorant of Soviet economic difficulties; the Central Intelligence Agency had been filing assessments on the structural decay of the command economy since at least the early 1980s.¹ In 1983 the British government re-established an economic intelligence section under the Joint Intelligence Committee, which reported, after just two weeks and almost entirely from open sources, that the Soviet economy lacked coherence and was bound to grind to a halt.² This was one of the first warnings that the Soviet Union was entering its terminal phase. The findings were ignored: nobody elsewhere in government was interested in that kind of broad study and few, if any, believed, institutionally, that the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics would dissolve within a single premiership.

¹ Bruce D. Berkowitz, "U.S. Intelligence Estimates of the Soviet Collapse: Reality and Perception," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2008), pp. 237–250.

² Peter Davies, *The Authorised History of British Defence Economic Intelligence: A Cold War in Whitehall, 1929–90* (London: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, 2018).

Now the assumptions of the early 1990s lie in ruins. Russia has moved in the opposite direction, rebuilding a neo-imperial sphere across Belarus, Georgia, Chechnya, Syria, and parts of Ukraine. Liberal democracy, far from advancing, is under sustained pressure across the Western world. How did this happen?

The easing of East-West tension in 1989 seemed to provide an opportunity, captured in the "New World Order" described by President George H. W. Bush at the United Nations that September.³ Additionally, Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* became the defining text of the moment.⁴ Its argument was that liberal democracy represented the destination of all functioning states, and that its global spread would produce a durable peace. Perhaps its adherents should have recalled Churchill's view, "... that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time"⁵ It rested on a flawed premise: that nations which are not Western, which do not share a comparable history, and which do not share a common culture, would converge in an open and friendly way.

These assumptions shaped Western foreign and defence policy, and academic discourse, for a generation, and their adoption exposed a failure of the structures meant to test them. Politicians are meant to protect citizens, academics to challenge received wisdom, analysts to deliver a realistic worldview. Instead, politicians treated the peace dividend as a windfall to spend on welfare and other government departments, denuding the armed forces of the essentials to necessary protect the nation. For Britain this showed less in

³ George H. W. Bush, "Address to the United Nations General Assembly," September 25, 1989.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992).

⁵ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (London, UK: House of Commons, 1947), Vol. 444, pp. 203-321.

the neoconservative interventionism characteristic of American policy in the 2000s than in a quieter assumption that market democracy was the natural destination of the post-Soviet states, and that Western policy need only accelerate an already-determined trajectory. What that framework discouraged, and British policy consequently neglected, was serious attention to the cultural, historical, and institutional specificities of each former Soviet state. Critics have charged Fukuyama with a Whiggish valorising of the United States as the perfect form of the modern state, and noted that forced exports of liberal democracy have often produced destabilisation and tyranny worse than what they replaced. Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* offered a direct counter, arguing that the fault lines of post-Cold War conflict would run along cultural boundaries, rooted in language, history, religion, custom and institutions, rather than ideological.⁶ Dismissed in political and academic circles, and not without faults, Huntington nonetheless illuminated the Russia-Ukraine dynamic with uncomfortable precision.⁷

Academia's proper function is to challenge received wisdom; after 1991 it too often did the reverse. The end-of-history thesis was absorbed less as a contestable hypothesis than as a settled description of where the world was heading, and globalisation was taught as its inevitable corollary rather than as a policy choice with winners and losers. Frameworks that cut against the consensus—Huntington's, most prominently—were dismissed rather than tested, and the discipline of international relations increasingly mistook the prevailing orthodoxy for analysis.

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Limited, 1996).

⁷ Anthony Hyman, "The Clash of Civilizations: A Critique," *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1995), pp. 43–54; and, Michael Kennedy, *Critical Review: The Clash of Civilizations (Samuel P. Huntington)*, (München: GRIN Verlag GmbH, 2014).

Rather than analysing real-world circumstances, this reflected an ideology which became entrenched in academia. The cost was a growing strategic irrelevance. A field that had signed up to the convergence thesis had little of use to say when convergence failed, and a generation of academics, officials and analysts trained within that consensus carried its blind spots further into academia and government. Academia did not cause the strategic failures of the period, but it ratified them; in retreating into a self-confirming orthodoxy it forfeited the independent, sceptical judgement that was the only thing that justified its claim on the attention of policymakers.

In Great Britain the peace dividend itself was largely diverted into social programmes: the National Health Service absorbed most of it, with welfare, education, and debt reduction taking the rest. The savings expressed in *Options for Change* and later in *Front Line First* were absorbed partly by the recessions of 1990–92 and the resulting surge in welfare costs, rather than directed into new programmes.⁸ The structural shift was real, but the gains were diffuse. The mantra of the British government was cutting the tail to provide for the teeth.⁹ The cuts were nonetheless brutal. The 1991 review, *Options for Change*, conceded that reducing the Army by as much as 40,000 while maintaining operational effectiveness would pose a major challenge.¹⁰ Even then, the document underestimated the cumulative effect of successive cuts to the share of GDP spent on defence. In 1989 the RAF had more than 800 such aircraft and the Navy some 50 destroyers and frigates. The false security of the 1990s was shattered in 2001, but despite

⁸ Ministry of Defence, *Britain's Army for the 90s* (London: HMSO, 1991); and Ministry of Defence, *Front Line First: The Defence Costs Study* (London: HMSO, 1994).

⁹ Kenton White, *Never Ready: Britain and NATO's Flexible Response Strategy, 1968–1989* (Warwick: Helion and Company, 2021).

¹⁰ Ministry of Defence, *Britain's Army for the 90s*, op. cit.

short-term funding for Afghanistan and Iraq the reductions continued, reaching a low of 1.9 percent of GDP in 2018 and the smallest army since the Napoleonic Wars.¹¹ The Royal Navy could muster 19 destroyers and frigates, the RAF no more than 120 front-line combat aircraft in that year.

Britain's Strategic Position: Between Washington and Europe

Britain's vantage point was shaped by three competing pressures that the government never fully reconciled: its commitment to the Atlantic relationship, its membership in the European Community, and its residual instincts as a former great power with direct experience of imperial dissolution. These pointed in different directions, and the resulting policy was a less coherent strategic design than improvisation under pressure—albeit improvisation by some remarkably able officials and ministers.

The Atlantic relationship came first, as it always has. Douglas Hurd at the Foreign Office and Margaret Thatcher, then John Major, in Downing Street were instinctively Atlanticist, and the endgame of the Cold War was managed through Washington rather than Brussels or Bonn. The American preoccupation throughout 1990 and 1991 was not a hostile Russia but a chaotic one: a state too weak to prevent the proliferation of its weapons or the breakdown of command over its nuclear forces and weapons of mass destruction.¹² Britain shared and amplified this anxiety through its own nuclear calculus. The Trident programme was at a critical stage, and British deterrence rested on the

¹¹ "Military Expenditure (% of GDP) - United Kingdom," (Stockholm: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database), 2026, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

¹² Wayne Merry, "Whose Russia Is It Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect," *Telegram*, Moscow, March 28, 1994, National Security Archive, FL-2017-13804.

assumption of a clearly identifiable, rationally deterrable adversary; a dissolving Soviet Union with uncertain custody of perhaps 27,000 warheads was not that adversary. Hurd's diplomacy was consequently focused, with considerable skill, on preserving the coherence of Soviet central authority even as it disintegrated—a paradoxical position for a government that had celebrated the defeat of communism.

The German question complicated matters. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's management of reunification, conducted with a speed that left London breathless, demonstrated both the possibilities and the risks of the moment. Thatcher's unease about a reunified Germany, expressed at the Chequers seminar of March 1990, was not merely wartime memory but a strategic assessment that a reunified Germany anchored in the European Community and NATO would tip the Alliance away from the Atlanticist structure Britain had spent 40 years building.¹³ German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Chancellor Helmut Kohl understood this precisely, which is why they tied reunification so decisively to European integration. By the time London had formulated its reservations, the outcome was settled.

What Britain was witnessing was not merely the end of the Cold War but a fundamental renegotiation of the European order, and here the record is less flattering. The British instinct—and it was an instinct more than a strategy—was to manage change conservatively and avoid grand gestures. There is a defensible case for this approach, but it also left Britain a spectator at several defining moments, a tendency reinforced decades later when Britain left the European Union in a vote influenced by Russian

¹³ Margaret Thatcher Foundation, "Seminar on Germany," March 24, 1990, <https://archive.margaretthatcher.org/doc11/900324%20no.10%20cnv%20PREM19-3000%20f39.pdf>.

manipulation. However, London retained a leading role in NATO.

NATO's Strategic Posture

NATO is now facing realities it deferred for three decades. The Alliance missed the window, most clearly open in the 1990s, in which a genuinely inclusive European security architecture might have been built. However, a strong case holds that the Kremlin reached for the language of Western encroachment to legitimise an authoritarian consolidation it wanted on its own terms, and that the panic caused by pro-democratic movements in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, for example, was useful precisely because it justified closing down domestic competition. What remains is the harder task of managing a relationship with a state that has shown both the will and the capacity to use force to reshape its neighbourhood.

NATO's posture throughout the 1980s was predicated on containment and deterrence. Its doctrinal architecture was designed to make Soviet aggression prohibitively costly, not to accelerate Soviet collapse. When Gorbachev announced *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the dominant reading in London and Washington was cautious optimism: a reforming leadership modernising the system, not dismantling it. Margaret Thatcher's famous assessment, made after their meeting at Chequers in December 1984, captured the *zeitgeist*: "... I like Mr Gorbachev. We can do business together ..."¹⁴ The question was not whether the Soviet Union would survive, but whether it would become less dangerous. The idea that it might simply cease to exist through administrative and economic implosion, rather

¹⁴ Margaret Thatcher, *BBC*, December 17, 1984, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105592>.

than military defeat or classical revolution, lay outside Western thinking.

When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the Baltic states asserted independence and Boris Yeltsin, chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, declared Russian sovereignty that summer. The Alliance found itself improvising responses to a transformation it had notionally sought for 40 years but never planned for. As Colin Gray observed, strategy requires not only ends but coherent ways and means, together with explicit and valid assumptions about the environment—and, this author would add, an assessment of risk.¹⁵ Western grand strategy had not reckoned with the possibility that success was imminent, still less with the risks it would bring.

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991 and of the Soviet Union that December confronted NATO with a question it had never been designed to answer: what was it for now? Its founding purpose had not been vindicated by deterrence; the adversary had simply dissolved. This removed the glue that had held together 30 years of fractious negotiation over burden-sharing, nuclear strategy, and out-of-area operations. The debate that followed, through the Rome Declaration of November 1991 and the subsequent *Strategic Concept*, was a competition among three visions.

The first was minimalist: NATO as an insurance policy, retained in reduced form in the event that Russia might again become threatening. This had support in Britain, particularly in the Treasury and parts of the Foreign Office; *Options for Change*, which had already cut the British Army of the Rhine and the Challenger order, expressed the same tendency at home. The second was transformational: NATO

¹⁵ Colin S. Gray, *Theory of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

as a vehicle for projecting stability eastward through enlargement. This prevailed in Washington through the Clinton years and culminated in the accession of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999. Britain felt genuine sympathy for the aspirations of the Poles and Czechs, but less appetite for the security commitments which expansion entailed. The third, the most intellectually coherent yet least successful, was a genuinely new architecture incorporating Russia rather than excluding it: the Partnership for Peace of 1994 and the NATO–Russia Founding Act of 1997 were its expressions, and both were inadequate; they offered the form of partnership without the substance, consultation without a real voice in decisions. Britain did not design this architecture; Washington did. But British diplomacy had the experience and the relationships to push harder for genuine accommodation. The British government chose not to.

The Economic Dimension: Shock Therapy and Its Consequences

Globalisation produced, slowly and with little fanfare, economic dependence on China, and within a few years the West had lost the strategic advantage of technological superiority. This loss was not a single event but the cumulative result of choices in defence spending, trade policy, technology governance, institutional design, and intelligence assessment, each of which was defensible in isolation but collectively produced an environment far less favourable to Britain and NATO than the one that existed in 1991.

The record of Western governments and their institutions—the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the G7—is genuinely troubling. The dominant prescription for the transition from command to market economy was “shock therapy”: the rapid, simultaneous

liberalisation of prices, privatisation of state assets, and opening to foreign competition. It was applied with particular rigour in Russia through the early 1990s, under the intellectual sponsorship of Western economists and the political patronage of Yeltsin's government.¹⁶

The results were catastrophic for ordinary Russians and, consequently, for the prospects of liberal democracy across the former Soviet Union. Russian GDP fell by between a quarter and a third in the first half of the decade. Male life expectancy collapsed. Hyperinflation wiped out lifetimes of savings. Privatisation, conducted at speed and without adequate institutions, transferred public assets worth hundreds of billions of dollars to a small group of well-connected individuals—the oligarchs. By mid-decade a large proportion of Russians had concluded, with justification, that democracy and capitalism meant poverty and humiliation in equal measure.

Britain's role in this crisis was secondary but not negligible. British economists and consultants were involved in the privatisation programmes; the City facilitated the flows of capital, much of questionable provenance, that left Russia for London property and finance; and, the government endorsed the IMF programmes and lent them legitimacy. None of this was done with malicious intent, but the British government turned a blind eye to the investment of oligarchs' money. Many politicians benefitted from their largesse; the nation suffered for it in the long run.

The belief, sincerely held, was that rapid transition was both necessary and desirable, and that short-term pain would yield long-term gains. It rested on a profound misunderstanding of what institutions do and how they are built. A market economy is not the mere absence of state

¹⁶ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007).

planning; it is a dense web of legal, regulatory, financial and social institutions that took Western economies centuries to develop and cannot be conjured by decree. The assumption that they could be reflected by a combination of ideological confidence and institutional ignorance is, in retrospect, difficult to justify.

Yugoslavia was the other contemporary dissolution crisis, and the West handled it no better. Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in June 1991, and the collapse that followed showed what economic stress and internal political incompetence could do to a multi-ethnic federal state. It was never a nuclear power, so the cases were not equivalent—but the West could have learned from one and applied the lessons to the other.

It did not. Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd resisted recognising the breakaway republics on a reasonable fear of the precedent, but the position had no strategy behind it, and Germany overtook it by recognising both that December.¹⁷ Lord Carington's peace conference foundered for want of Western will and means. President of the Council of the European Union, Jacques Poos proclaimed the "hour of Europe" but it proved considerably less glorious.¹⁸

The lessons—the dangers of rapid political change, the need for economic stabilisation, and the need for guarantees to potential losers—went unapplied to Russia. The Russian leadership also resisted many overtures from the West, for internal political reasons, to establish better relations. The two crises were managed in separate compartments, a

¹⁷ Douglas Hurd, "Debate on Foreign Affairs And Defence," House of Commons, November 1, 1991, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1991-11-01/debates/2be7be03-1c62-47e6-9e72-eadea19fa4c2/ForeignAffairsAndDefence>.

¹⁸ Josip Glaurdić, *The Hour of Europe: Western Powers and the Breakup of Yugoslavia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

failure of strategic coherence owing to nothing more than institutional fragmentation.

What Russia Expected and What It Received

Any honest assessment must grapple with Russian expectations and how they were managed. A considerable body of evidence—memoirs, declassified documents, retrospective accounts—suggests the Soviet leadership received, or believed it had received, assurances about NATO's future orientation that were not subsequently honoured. Whether U.S. and Russian conversations in February 1990 amounted to a binding commitment that NATO would not expand "one inch eastward" remains contested.¹⁹ What is not contested is that senior Soviet and Russian officials believed such assurances had been given, and that the subsequent expansion—to the former Warsaw Pact states and eventually the Baltic republics, themselves former components of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—was experienced in Moscow as a fundamental betrayal.

This matters, not because the case for expansion lacked merit but because of the way it was handled without serious engagement with and by the Russians over security concerns which created a cumulative grievance that Vladimir Putin has exploited with considerable effectiveness. The aspirations of Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic states were entirely legitimate, and their historical reasons indisputable. The argument is not that NATO should have remained static in deference to Russian sensitivities, quite the opposite. However, a more realistic understanding of Russian proclivity towards

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Conversation between James Baker and Eduard Shevardnadze in Moscow," February 9, 1990, National Security Archive Flashpoints Collection, Box 38, FOIA 199504567.

totalitarianism, expansion, and a desire to protect itself with puppet buffer states, should have demanded a more robust and clearer handling of the situation by NATO.

The deeper point concerns how diminished great powers are managed. Britain's own experience, as a declining power and as a participant in the management of post-war Germany, provided relevant precedents. The U.S. Marshall Plan of 1948 was premised on the understanding that a prosperous, integrated Europe was less dangerous than an impoverished and resentful one. The corresponding logic for Russia after 1991 was recognised in principle but applied with insufficient energy; Europe did not commit enough of its enormous resources. Russia was included in a "G8" format from 1994, but the substantive economic engagement that might have given the gesture meaning was never delivered at the scale required.

Britain's Particular Obligations

Britain's position in any future management of major-power dissolution is shaped by its unique position in Europe. There is also a specific and underused British experience: the management of imperial dissolution. The winding-up of the British Empire between 1945 and 1980 was, by the standards of imperial collapses, relatively orderly, though marked by considerable violence in Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus and Aden. The institutional knowledge developed in that process—how to manage the transfer of sovereignty, negotiate constitutional arrangements for multi-ethnic polities, and sequence political and economic reform—is genuinely applicable to dissolving states, and Britain possesses it in greater depth than most allies. However, Great Britain is rapidly losing this experience, which is being replaced by an ideological refusal to engage realistically with history.

The experience was not seriously applied in 1991: the post-Cold War Foreign Office did not treat the problem as one in which British decolonisation experience was relevant. That was a missed opportunity.

The more immediate obligation concerns the credibility of the NATO Alliance and the coherence of British foreign policy. One of the most damaging features of the post-Soviet period was the growing divergence between Western rhetoric about democratic values and the actual conduct of policy – the tolerance of kleptocracy, the facilitation of illicit financial flows, and the willingness to do business with authoritarian successors so long as they remained nominally cooperative. Britain was not the worst offender, nor was it the best. The extent to which London became a preferred destination for the proceeds of post-Soviet corruption – the “Londongrad” phenomenon, examined belatedly by the Intelligence and Security Committee’s Russia Report of 2020 – was a direct consequence of choices made in the 1990s and 2000s that prioritised financial services revenues over strategic coherence.²⁰ Correcting this is not simply a matter of legislation, though the Economic Crime Act of 2022 was a belated step. It requires recognising that foreign policy and domestic financial regulation are not separate domains, and that harbouring the proceeds of foreign corruption carries strategic consequences far beyond the transaction itself – a lesson Britain has been slow to internalise and one that has yet to be seriously applied to China.

²⁰ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Russia*, HC 632 (London: Stationery Office, 2020).

Lessons Learned, and Lessons That Might Yet Be Applied

What the West should do differently when crisis strikes is neither academic nor hypothetical. The lessons of 1991 are directly applicable, provided one draws them honestly.

The first is intelligence and imagination: an inability to imagine outcomes outside the established framework. Serious analysis must stress-test its own assumptions and protect the opportunity to challenge a consensus that bureaucracies are otherwise built to reward. This is difficult, but it is essential.

The second is sequencing. Shock therapy failed not because market economies are inferior to command economies but because the applicable model is not Russia in the 1990s but Germany in 1948, or East Germany in 1990: the latter are transformations that succeeded because the international community absorbed the cost rather than imposing it on the population.

The third is security. NATO enlargement was the right course of action, but the counterfactual thinking in which restraint buys Russian goodwill misreads the situation. Russia's strategic imagination has for centuries responded with a single reflex: security is demonstrated with a buffer, and any organised power on the near frontier is hostile until proven otherwise. This dates back far before Russia's philosopher and economist Nikolay Danilevsky wrote his Huntington-esque *Russia and Europe* in 1869.²¹ To the Russian elite schooled in that tradition, an alliance's declared intentions are not evidence but cover; the aggression was never inferred from what NATO did, only assumed from what NATO was. The Western failure was not that reassurance was withheld but that the mentality

²¹ Nikolay Danilevskii, *Рос́сия и Евро́па* [*Russia and Europe*] (St. Petersburg: За́ря, 1869), Issues 1-6 and 8-10.

and culture was never recognised for what it was—an inheritance to be worked around, not a misunderstanding to be cleared up.

The fourth is institutions. The IMF and World Bank were staffed by people who understood macroeconomics but not institutional development; the European Union's enlargement—slower, more prescriptive, more generous in its transfers—produced far better outcomes. Conditionality is not wrong, but it must be calibrated to what is achievable and matched by sustained help in building administrative capacity.

The fifth is ordinary people. The West engaged the elites of the transitioning states and ignored their populations. The narrative of liberal democracy was broadcast loudly and its benefits delivered sparingly; in Russia, transition meant dispossession, disorientation and humiliation, and the consequences are still being worked through. Any future engagement with a dissolving state must place the welfare of citizens, not the interests of reforming elites, at its centre.

The deepest failure was neither strategic nor economic but intellectual, and it is the hardest to correct. The end of the Cold War was met by a discipline that had decided the argument was over. Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis was absorbed not as a contestable hypothesis but as a description of where the world was bound, and globalisation was taught as its inevitable corollary rather than a policy choice with winners and losers. The lesson is that ideology is most dangerous when it is no longer recognised as ideology. No quantity of intelligence reform or institutional design compensates for a political and academic culture that has lost the habit of scepticism.

The Unfinished Business of 1991

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was the most significant geopolitical event of the second half of the twentieth century, and its management by the Western alliance was, at best, mixed. The avoidance of violent collapse, the preservation of central control over nuclear weapons and the peaceful transition of most of Central Europe to democratic governance was a genuine achievement that should not be minimised. The longer-term consequences represent, in part, the harvest of decisions and non-decisions taken in the decade after 1991.

History is not a controlled experiment, and the counterfactual elements—more generous economic engagement, a more inclusive security architecture, a slower pace of expansion with genuine Russian consultation—cannot be shown to have produced better outcomes with certainty. Russian domestic politics might have produced a similar trajectory regardless; Putin's rise owed as much to internal dynamics as to Western mistakes.

What can be said with confidence is that the West approached the Soviet collapse with inadequate strategic preparation, applied economic prescriptions wrong in their sequencing and insufficient in their scale, and built a security architecture that addressed the concerns of the newly liberated states of Central Europe without seriously engaging those of Russia. Britain, with a unique combination of intelligence capability, diplomatic tradition, and relevant historical experience, was well placed to mitigate some of these failures. It did so only partially.

The lessons are available to be learned. The question—relevant now, as the post-Cold War order continues its protracted decomposition—is whether the institutions and political culture exist to learn them. The record of 1991 and its aftermath does not inspire unqualified confidence, nor does it warrant despair. The Alliance has shown, at

moments, that it is capable of strategic coherence, of long-term commitment, and of the patient institution-building that the post-Soviet transition required and largely did not receive. The next crisis, whenever it comes, will test that capacity again. Better to have thought carefully about it in advance than to be improvising at the moment it arrives.

Dr. Kenton White retired as Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading, UK.

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