
U.S.-Russian Relations and the “New Cold War” Metaphor

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 547

November 2018

Mark Kramer¹

Harvard University

Over the past twenty years, observers such as Stephen F. Cohen have [argued](#) that relations between the United States and Russia have been plunged into a “new Cold War,” which Cohen attributes to the failure of U.S. policymakers to take account of Russian security interests. Cohen started using the “new Cold War” characterization long before other analysts did, but the Cold War metaphor has gained wide popularity over the past several years, particularly with the surge of East-West tensions resulting from Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014; Russia’s central role in the prolonged armed conflict in Ukraine since 2014; Russia’s military intervention in Syria since 2015; the Russian government’s wide-ranging interference in the U.S. presidential election in 2016; and the Russian intelligence services’ use of assassins against Russian defectors living in the West. Articles and books proclaiming a “return to the Cold War” or a “new Cold War” have poured forth.

Even though the “new Cold War” metaphor may now be commonly used, it is misleading and should not serve as the basis of U.S. policymaking. The U.S.-Russian relationship has been tense and rancorous in recent years, but the conflicts have not been equivalent to the reemergence of the Cold War as it existed from the mid-1940s to the late 1980s. Without anywhere near the same international stature, military strength, or ideological appeal that the Soviet Union once had, the Russian Federation is now simply a great-power rival of the United States.

The Metaphor of a New Cold War

Lasting from the mid-1940s through the end of the 1980s, the Cold War had three underlying features:

- (1) The two countries were – and were seen as – vastly stronger than other countries

¹ [Mark Kramer](#) is Director of the Cold War Studies Program and Senior Fellow at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.

and were therefore characterized as “superpowers,” the two “poles” in a fundamentally bipolar world.

(2) There was a deep-rooted ideological divide between the two superpowers, pitting Marxism-Leninism against liberal democracy.

(3) Large parts of the world, above all Europe and much of Asia, were divided into two rival camps led by the superpowers. This bifurcation sparked, or at least fueled, destructive wars in East Asia, Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and Central America.

One could perhaps find a few historical periods that bore some parallels to the Cold War, but the period since 1991 (or since 2014) is not one of them. All three core features of the Cold War are absent now.

(1) Russia has nowhere near the stature in the world that the Soviet Union did. China is now stronger—and is widely seen as stronger—than Russia. The United States remains the dominant power in the world, and China is the rising challenger. Russia continues to have a large nuclear arsenal capable of inflicting catastrophic damage on the United States, and Russia’s immense natural gas reserves afford a good deal of leverage vis-à-vis Europe. Nonetheless, Russia lacks the dynamism of China and cannot come close to matching the overall strength of the United States. Even when adjusted for purchasing-power parity, for example, Russian income per capita is only about one-seventh that of the United States, and Russian military spending is only around one-eighth the level of the United States.

(2) The only virulent ideology in the world now is radical Islam, which has no appeal other than among a minority of Muslims and has never been close to attaining the global following that Marxism once did. Radical Islam has nothing to do with the tensions between Russia and the West. The only ideology (or quasi-ideology) espoused by Russian President Vladimir Putin and his supporters is an incoherent mishmash of so-called traditional values, including homophobia, laced with anti-Western rhetoric. Although Putin sometimes invokes ideological trappings for the actions he takes abroad (including the annexation of Crimea), he has been more interested in consolidating his own political power than in developing a coherent ideology with an appeal beyond shared resentment of Western dominance.

(3) Europe is now almost entirely united in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), and other Western institutions. Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova have not been well integrated into Western structures, and a few countries in the western Balkans have not yet been admitted into NATO or the EU, but there is nothing like the divide that once existed between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Nearly all of the European countries that have not yet gained entry

into Western institutions – Bosnia-and-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and others – aspire to be admitted into those organizations in the future.

If the metaphor of a Cold War is not intellectually sustainable, how can we best understand the deterioration of Russia's ties with the United States and other Western countries? To answer this question, we need to compare U.S. policy toward Russia with U.S. policies toward other countries such as China, Iran, and North Korea over the past 25 years.

Comparisons with US-China Relations

U.S. relations with Russia over the past six years have borne some important similarities to U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) during that period. China has sought to undercut U.S. hegemony in the world, especially in East Asia. Xi Jinping became the highest leader in China in 2012, just after Putin returned to the Russian presidency. Xi launched his One Belt One Road initiative to establish China as the leading power in a broad Eurasian economic infrastructure and trade network. U.S. officials envisaged the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a means of offsetting the Chinese initiative, but the Trump administration's abrupt abandonment of the TPP greatly weakened U.S. leverage in East Asia and paved the way for Chinese economic hegemony in the region. Although Japan, South Korea, and other major Asian countries have tried to put a check on China's economic dominance in the region, they have had to make greater accommodation with China in the absence of U.S. participation in the TPP. Moreover, the Trump administration's imposition of trade tariffs against South Korea and Japan has made it much more difficult to obtain South Korean and Japanese cooperation in efforts to counter China's unfair trade practices.

The Chinese People's Liberation Army has not engaged in military operations outside PRC borders since 1979, but the Chinese government has greatly expanded Chinese military power over the past 25 years and has taken an increasingly assertive military stance in the South China Sea, building artificial island garrisons. The Chinese authorities are striving to offset U.S. military power in East Asia and to deter U.S. attempts to rely on coercive diplomacy against the PRC.

China's desire to compete with the United States in both economic and military terms – and also in the use of soft power – has not resulted in a Cold War between the United States and the PRC. Rather, the competitive nature of the relationship is similar to the sorts of relations one would find between great powers in many different contexts. Competition is present, but it does not produce a fierce, all-encompassing, global struggle.

Russia lacks the economic dynamism and influence of China, but it, too, has sought to develop a rival economic bloc under its own leadership. The Eurasian Economic Union

is designed to be an alternative to the European Union and also a means of limiting U.S. economic influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Eurasian Economic Union is not close to the One Belt One Road initiative in the scope and depth of its economic activities, but it does signal Putin's desire to promote an alternative to full-scale integration into Western economic institutions.

In the military sphere, Russia has been much more forceful than China in using its own troops in external military operations and competing militarily with the United States. Over the past ten years the Russian government has taken part in three foreign wars – against Georgia in August 2008, in Ukraine since 2014, albeit mainly through proxies, and in Syria since 2015 – and pursued a large-scale military buildup and modernization. Russia has also carried out major military exercises and engaged in military provocations against member-states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In all of these ways, Putin's administration has sought to project Russia as a military rival of the United States.

In much the same way that China's economic, military, and political rivalry with the United States is typical of great-power rivalries over the past two centuries, Russia's attempts to compete militarily and to some extent economically are simply a competitive great-power relationship. The competition is intense at times, but it lacks the severity, scope, and ideological overlay of the Cold War.

Comparisons with US-Iran Relations

Over the past four decades, the United States has had a deeply hostile relationship with Iran. Although Iran has far less capacity than either China or Russia to rival the United States militarily – not least because Iran, unlike Russia and China, does not have a nuclear arsenal – the Islamic regime in Iran has made maximum use of its military leverage in Syria and elsewhere and has also sponsored terrorism as an equalizer. To the extent that the Iranian authorities can sow instability and violence in the Middle East and southwest Asia, they are able to counter U.S. power in the region.

Economically, Iran's only real influence is its energy resources, particularly oil. Unlike China and Russia, Iran cannot form its own economic bloc to counter U.S. hegemony. The Iranian economy is relatively small and unevenly developed, and the maintenance of international economic sanctions against it until 2014 markedly reduced whatever economic leverage Iran could wield against the United States.

Yet, even though Iran does not have the capacity to compete with the United States on the same scale that Russia does, the hostility between Iran and the United States is much greater than between the United States and Russia. On almost every significant issue, the United States and Iran have been at odds over the past four decades. The two countries have not engaged in a direct military clash, but they have fought through

proxies in both Iraq and Syria, and the United States has repeatedly indicated in public that it will not rule out a military strike against Iran if Iranian leaders acquire nuclear weapons.

The U.S.-Iranian relationship illustrates that the extent of hostility is not what determines whether a Cold War is under way. The four decades of hostility between the United States and Iran have not resulted in a Cold War. The relationship is instead one of a dominant power and a defiant regional power. Iran is a major regional power, but it has nowhere near the wherewithal to be a global rival of the United States. Russia is more than just a major regional power, but it too lacks the wherewithal to be a true global rival of the United States the way the Soviet Union was for 45 years.

Comparisons with US-North Korea Relations

The United States fought North Korean troops from June 1950 to July 1953, and the two countries have remained at least formally in a state of war ever since. North Korea provoked serious crises with the United States in 1968 and 1975, and the relationship between the two countries became increasingly tense and acrimonious in the 1990s and 2000s when North Korea moved ahead in building nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. The surprising turnaround in 2018, with a friendly summit meeting in Singapore between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, partly alleviated the antagonism between the two countries, but it has done nothing to eliminate the concrete circumstances that divide Washington and Pyongyang. Although President Trump claimed that the one summit meeting had “eliminated the nuclear threat” from North Korea, the evidence in the months since the meeting shows the opposite--namely, that North Korea has been expanding and modernizing its nuclear arsenal, not moving toward denuclearization.

Despite the many years of intense hostility between the United States and North Korea from 1950 to 2017, no one would characterize the relationship as equivalent to the Cold War. North Korea has been a destabilizing influence in Northeast Asia and has at times challenged the United States directly, but at no point has North Korea been capable of confronting the United States outside Northeast Asia.

Conclusions

The relationship between the United States and Russia over the past five years has been typical of a great-power rivalry (e.g., the rivalry between Great Britain and France in the 18th century or between Tsarist Russia and Ottoman Turkey in the 19th century) and is best characterized as such rather than as a “new Cold War.” Great-power rivalries can be relatively benign, or they can be tense and unstable, sparking periodic crises. The notion of a “new Cold War” may be useful for activists who are seeking to persuade Western governments to take a strong stand against Putin, but the use of that term is not

analytically meaningful unless the three fundamental features of the Cold War recur in the future. That has not been the case with post-Soviet Russia despite the surge of tension under Putin.

The acrimonious relationship between the United States and Russia over the past five years has been a stark contrast to the friendly, cooperative ties between the two countries in the early 1990s, when they were partners rather than rivals. Nowadays, the United States and Russia are indeed rivals and often antagonistic, but they are not engaged in a new Cold War. Putin and his aides would like the world to see Russia as a superpower capable of challenging the United States the way the Soviet Union once did, but U.S. policymakers should avoid such misleading metaphors. The Cold War reflected special circumstances that are unlikely to return. Analytical precision is crucial if we want to understand why and how a great-power relationship can deteriorate and, potentially, how it could improve.

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
● TO RESEARCH AND
E U R A S I A ● SECURITY IN EURASIA

**Elliott School of
International Affairs**

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

© PONARS Eurasia 2018. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of scholars advancing new approaches to research on security, politics, economics, and society in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the [Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies \(IERES\)](#) at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. www.ponarseurasia.org