

The Reincarnation of the Cold War

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This paper describes the complex challenges to present-day state relations between the United States and the Russian Federation, and how the worsening of state relations between these two powers is indicative of the reincarnation of the Cold War of the 20th century. In describing the complexities of the U.S.-Russia relationship, this paper explores three contemporary international issues that have led to its aggravation. First, it examines the apparent Russian hacking of the U.S. Democratic Party during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and how such interference is comparable to that which occurred during the 20th century Cold War era. Secondly, it analyzes how the Syrian Civil War, characterized by the United States and Russia supporting opposing sides of the conflict, shares a likeness to the proxy wars of the 20th century Cold War. Lastly, it describes how the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the American-led response to it, are reminiscent of the Soviet and American practices of expanding the limits of their own power while trying to limit that of their rival following the Second World War.

The end of the Second World War ushered in a period of global politics characterized by tension and distrust between the two newly emerged global superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Ideological differences between the superpowers, their desires to expand their spheres of influence, and their mutual fears about the intentions of their rival came together to produce a situation that threatened the world with nuclear destruction. This period was known as the Cold War. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the diplomatic relationship between the Russian Federation and the United States got off to a strong start, with both governments beginning to work together bilaterally and multilaterally to confront a number of pressing global challenges, thus reaffirming liberal notions of the utility of collective action (“200 Years”). However, in recent times, this relatively cordial relationship between the United States and Russia has degraded in the face of a number of international incidents which have led to a greater emphasis, in both states, on realist assumptions of the primacy of national interests in international relations (which characterized the Cold War), and have consequently put the United States and Russia toe-to-toe. Conflicting interests in Syria, tensions in Eastern Europe in the face of the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the U.S. election meddling fiasco are all issues that have prompted a worsening of U.S.-Russia diplomatic relations, which U.S. President Donald Trump has said are at an “all-time and dangerous low” (Collinson, 2017). Accordingly, these contemporary issues have exacerbated the U.S.-Russia relationship,

resulting in the repetition of history with the emergence of a modern reincarnation of the Cold War, which shares much similarity with its earlier equivalent.

2016 U.S. Presidential Election Campaign Hacking

The controversy over the apparent Russian hacking, and subsequent leaking, of U.S. Democratic Party emails is an important development which is symptomatic of the reincarnation of the Cold War, as U.S.-Russia relations have continued their downward spiral in the aftermath of its occurrence. This hacking, in and of itself, is akin to election interference that took place during the Soviet era. For instance, in 1982, the KGB (Soviet security agency) attempted to discredit Ronald Reagan in order to prevent his re-election (Osnos, Remnick, & Yaffa, 2017). Russian election interference in 2016 was also reported by the CIA, as in 1982, to have been carried out to harm the reputation of an American presidential candidate who was unfavourable in the eyes of the Russians (“2016 Presidential Campaign”). This candidate was, of course, Hillary Clinton. In response to the apparent hacking, the U.S. government issued sanctions against Russia and expelled 35 of their diplomats (“2016 Presidential Campaign”). Russia denied any involvement in the hackings, and, in response to the sanctions imposed by the United States, fired back by dismissing 755 American diplomatic personnel (“2016 Presidential Campaign”). This back-and-forth issuing of sanctions is another way in which current U.S.-Russia relations are comparable to the relationship which characterized the Cold War. In fact, S.V. Kazantsez (2017) has acknowledged how the modern-day American “sanction[s] declared against the Russian Federation represent an easily evident analogy to President Ronald Reagan’s secret plan” (p. 87). The mention of “Ronald Reagan’s secret plan” refers to the Reagan administration’s strategy of weakening the Soviet economy (Kazantsez, 2017, p. 87). This is not unlike the program pursued by the Obama administration in attempting to deter Russian interference by issuing economic sanctions.

Critics of the idea that these developments signal the emergence of a new Cold War have cited the fact that Russians and Americans are more connected through technology nowadays, as opposed to during the 20th century (Rojanski & Salzman, 2015). However, while this may be true, this interconnectedness has seemingly not been able to prevent a worsening of relations at the state level to a point comparable to the Cold War. Hence, 2016 election interference and the subsequent issuing of sanctions by the governments in Washington and Moscow against one another are developments in international relations that signal the commencement of a new Cold War which maintains a likeness to that of the 20th century.

Disagreement in Syria

Syria, a country which has been embroiled in civil war since 2011, has been a site of ongoing tension between Russia and the United States. Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, has been a staunch supporter of Syrian President Bashir al-Assad, blocking UN resolutions to protect his regime, and supplying arms to his military (“Syria Crisis,” 2015). On the other hand, the United States has been bolstering Syrian opposition forces and providing limited military aid to “moderate” Syrian rebels (“Syria Crisis,” 2015). Given these alignments, it is hard to deny the resemblance that the situation in Syria has with proxy wars of the 20th century Cold War era, such as the Congo crisis of 1960–1965 (“The Congo”). During this crisis, the United States supported pro-Western Congolese governments, and provided them with military aid to enable them to effectively fight a vigorous rebel insurgency, bolstered by the Soviet Union (“The Congo”).

In present-day Syria, just like in the Congo of the Cold War era, American and Russian interests are clashing as both countries try to maximize their power and influence in the region.

In continuing to draw similarities between the Syrian Civil War and earlier proxy wars of the 20th century, it is necessary to understand the motivation of both the U.S. and Russia for being involved in Syria, and how these motivations compare with that of the USSR and United States of the 20th century. According to Geraint Alan Hughes (2014), present-day Russia is so adamant in its support for Assad because it realizes that the downfall of Assad's regime would "represent the loss of Moscow's only ally in the Arab world" (p. 530). Keeping this in mind, the Syrian Civil War is similar to the proxy wars of the 20th century Cold War era in the sense that Russia is attempting to safeguard influence in international politics by ensuring the survival of pro-Russian regimes, which can also be said of the Soviet Union post-WWII with regards to pro-Soviet regimes. American motivations for Syrian involvement also stem from an underlying desire to continue their work of the earlier Cold War era in maintaining their superpower status by empowering opposition groups to replace a leader who is aligned with Moscow and is hostile to American hegemony.

Some say that the Cold War is dead, given the suggestion that there is no longer an ideological dimension to the tension between Russia and the United States (Rojanski & Salzman, 2015). In reality, this is poor evidence to disprove the advent of a new Cold War, as it has already been said that this new conflict thrives without characterization by ideological domination. Unlike during the 20th century, the United States and the Russian Federation are not advocates of vastly different ends of the political-economic spectrum. Instead, the modern reincarnation of the Cold War is characterized by a struggle for worldwide economic and political influence, with a lack of ideological motivation. Thus, given the diplomatic tension that the crisis in Syria has created, and the similarities that the situation has with earlier proxy wars of the 20th century, it is evident that we are seeing a return of Cold War rivalries between the United States and Russia.

Tensions in Eastern Europe

The Russian annexation of Crimea has created a tense standoff in Eastern Europe, characterized by a deep distrust which was so prevalent during the 20th century Cold War. After the former pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted in February 2014 (after months of protests), Russia annexed the region of Crimea and reportedly began supplying military aid to pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine ("Ukraine in Crisis," 2014). As for the motivation of the annexation, the most plausible theories on this topic relate to the idea that Russia under Vladimir Putin has a desire to "gradually recapture the former territories of the Soviet Union" and to reduce "the threat of NATO's further expansion along Russia's western border" (Treisman, 2017). These likely motivations are reminiscent of the 20th century, when the Soviet Union, following the Second World War, expanded its influence to encompass Eastern European countries which had been liberated from Nazi tyranny ("History of the Soviet Union"). As for the United States, their present-day response to the crisis in Ukraine has been characterized by Jonathan Steele (2016) as being motivated by a "containment" of Russian influence (p. 29). NATO, under U.S. leadership, has executed this by deploying troops in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland, by issuing sanctions against Russian businesses and political leaders, and by providing non-lethal military aid to the Ukrainian military under the pro-Western Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko ("Ukraine in Crisis," 2014). American attempts to protect their influence in Eastern Europe by limiting Russia's power are comparable to U.S. foreign policy following the Second World War, which was also characterized by the "containment of

[Soviet] expansive tendencies” (“Kennan and Containment”). Hence, the American foreign policy goals of containment have made a substantial resurgence with regards to handling the Russian threat.

Some cite the fact that Russia is no longer a superpower (unlike the USSR) as evidence that we are not witnessing the occurrence of a new Cold War with regards to Ukraine (Adelman, 2015). However, while this may be true, Russia has continued to maintain its status as a formidable state actor in global politics, even if they lack the relative power that the USSR once had. Therefore, given the history of the Cold War, the tense situation in Eastern Europe today, characterized by Russia and the United States attempting to expand their own influence while limiting that of their rival, is reminiscent of the 20th century Cold War, and is thus indicative of its reincarnation.

Conclusion

The Cold War of the 20th century was a very dangerous time in human history. The extremely bipolar nature of the global system meant that even the smallest misunderstanding could have resulted in worldwide nuclear destruction. Unfortunately, this frightening threat to global peace and security is beginning to re-emerge as history repeats itself in the face of a number of international crises that have pitted the United States and Russia against each other once again as they endeavor to expand the extents of their own power. 2016 U.S. election interference and subsequent sanctions, conflicting interests in Syria, and the fallout from the Russian annexation of Crimea are all contemporary global issues that bear similitude to the issues at hand between the Soviet Union and the United States in the 20th century. Luckily, a direct military confrontation between the U.S. and Russia is not inevitable. In the article “A New Cold War? Missile Defenses, Nuclear Arms Reductions, and Cyber War,” Cambala and McDermott (2015) claim that “U.S.-Russian security cooperation in the present century is a necessary condition for the accomplishment of both states’ interests” (p. 105). They then continue to say that lack of cooperation between both powers “is driven more by . . . domestic politics in the United States and in Russia, than it is by strategy” (Cimbala & McDermott, 2015, p. 105). In other words, if Russian and American leaders focus less on perceptions at home, and more on working collectively to obtain mutual gains, then U.S.-Russian state cooperation is possible, if not likely. Having said that, only time will truly tell where relations between these two powerful states will go from here.

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