Russia’s Strategic Puzzle: Past lessons, Current Assessment, and Future Outlook

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## Table of Contents

### Introduction
- Yonah Alexander .......................................................... 1

### Historical and Contemporary Context
- Professor Matthew Rojansky ........................................ 6
- Dr. Adrian Hänni .......................................................... 10
- Dr. Richard Weitz .......................................................... 14

### Case Studies

1. Separatist Movements
   - Professor John Lenczowski ........................................ 15
   - Paul Goble .......................................................... 19

2. The Ukraine Crisis
   - Yaroslav Brisiuck .................................................. 22
   - Ian Brzezinski ......................................................... 27
   - Dr. Patrick Murphy .................................................. 32

3. Russia’s Middle East Strategy
   - Professor Shireen Hunter ........................................ 34
   - Scott Edelman ...................................................... 42

4. The Sochi Olympics
   - Peter Roudik .......................................................... 47
The relationship between Russia and the NATO member states has swung between limited cooperation and confrontation ever since Vladimir Putin took the reins of power in 1999-2000. Over the past two years, the situation has deteriorated into a real conflict. The Ukraine crisis has frozen into a stalemate. The United States and the European Union apply sanctions against Russian individuals, officials, and businesses, and Russia counteracts by banning all food imports. In Syria, the two sides are engaged in a deadly proxy war, as Russia bombs rebel groups financed, armed, and trained by the United States and Saudi Arabia in a multi-billion dollar covert action aimed at bringing about the downfall of Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad.

If history was evoked to make sense of the current conflict between Russia and the West in the last years, the focus has almost exclusively been on the Cold War: the global rivalry that shaped the second half of the “short twentieth century,” setting Western democracies against Eastern totalitarianism, liberalism against communism, and the U.S.-led NATO alliance against the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. Numerous newspaper articles, nonfiction bestsellers, think tank reports and the covers of magazines like Time or the American Review invoke and warn of a New Cold War. Even an American punk band calls itself the New Cold War. Wikipedia has an entry for “Cold War II”: “Cold War II, also known as the New Cold War, Second Cold War and Cold War 2.0 refers to a state of political and military tension between Russia and the Western World akin to the Cold War that saw the global confrontation between the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc led by the USSR.” So it must be a real thing. But is it really?

I argue that the Cold War analogy is ill-suited to understanding the emerging conflict. Moreover, accepting at face value the narrative that Russia and the West are engaged in a new Cold War—meaning a conflict that resembles the geopolitical rivalry of the 20th Century—could lead policymakers to choose not only wrong but even dangerous strategies. Let me briefly outline four decisive factors that illustrate the quintessential difference: ideology, economy, influence, and innovation.

The Cold War was to a significant degree an ideological conflict. Particularly in its first two decades, communism constituted a serious alternative to capitalism and liberal democracies, an alternative that appealed to people around the world. Today, Russia has no relevant ideological base. The influence of much nurtured Russian nationalism is, for obvious reasons, strongly restricted to neighboring countries with a significant population of ethnical Russians. Slavophilia, while producing strange effects among pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, is subject to similar limitations. Accordingly, Russia’s potential to project soft power is strongly limited.

Besides ideological/cultural charisma, the other main foundation to project power abroad is the economy. Russia’s economy resembles that of a developing country, in that it relies on energy revenues for economic growth, and exports mainly natural resources (oil, natural gas, minerals, and timber). The oil-and-gas sector, mainly under state control, accounts for more than half of federal budget revenues and over 70 percent of Russian exports (as of 2012). Oil and natural gas exports continue to be
the main source of hard currency, shaky ground on which to be challenging NATO, the most powerful alliance in world history.

Russian oil revenues and earnings have now plummeted, since oil prices began collapsing in the second half of 2014. Additionally, Russian oil production has flatlined on a plateau of 10 million-odd barrels a day. With the large conventional oil fields in Western Siberia growing old, production will start declining within a decade unless Russia is able to develop its unconventional oil resources—shale oil in Western Siberia and deep sea oil in the Arctic. Because the production of these resources is technologically challenging, Russia needs the help of Western technology and know-how, which would in turn require that sanctions against Russia be eased. Under the current regime, Western companies are banned from undertaking new unconventional oil projects with state-controlled Russian producers.

There are, in fact, strong parallels to a dynamic in the mid-1980s that contributed to the end of the Cold War: oil price collapse, plateauing oil production set to decline, and large dependence on oil revenues for hard currency. For the time being, Russia simply lacks the economic and financial base to rebuild an empire or a large sphere of influence.

That brings us to the third decisive difference: influence. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union could make use of a sphere of influence that was global in reach. Besides the satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe, its orbit encompassed clients in East Asia, Africa, the Middle East and even in Latin America. Today, Russia can only count on a small, disparate gang of allies: the former Soviet Republics of Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan; Venezuela; Nicaragua; Cuba; whatever remains of Assad’s Syria; and maybe Iran (where, in any case, its influence would be only second to China’s).

Besides of a lack of ideology, income, and influence, Russia is unable to generate innovation or major advancements in science and technology. Whether it is nuclear research, robotics, semiconductors, molecular biology, genetics or medical innovation, Russia has largely sunk into insignificance. Neither Apple, nor Google, Tesla, or Uber are Russian companies. Putin’s state does not bear comparison to the Soviet Union in the early Cold War, which shocked the world with the Sputnik satellite in 1957, sent the first human into outer space in 1961, and achieved a higher life expectancy than the United State far into the 1960s. Without the ability to produce cutting-edge innovation, today’s Russian society poses no real challenge to the West.

If we keep on relying on the Cold War analogy, we therefore risk falling into the Maginot trap. What I call the Maginot trap is the drawing of wrong or misleading lessons from the past because the fundamental structures and conditions have changed. Today’s world is far removed from the bipolar stasis of the Cold War that juxtaposed the peer competitors USA and USSR in equilibrium. The United States is still the only superpower and by far the most powerful nation, but the margin over its potential competitors has been shrinking. A revanchist Russia and China are increasingly pushing against American supremacy, seeking to build a new international order. Our global state system resembles much more the decade before the outbreak of World War I, when the British Empire went into relative decline, other
powers such as Germany began challenging its hegemony, and the international system became unstable.

In contrast to the Soviet Union, the system of Putin’s Russia shares more characteristics with the expansionist Czarist Russia of the 19th century—from the domestic symbiosis between the political leadership and the Orthodox Church, to the quest for a land-based empire in the “near abroad,” to the ideological centering of Eurasianism, promoted as an alternative to the secular materialistic West and as the basis to rebuild a resurgent Russian state. If we keep focusing on the Soviet Union and the assumed resurrection of the Cold War, trying tenaciously to understand the new conflict with Russia through the lens of that geopolitical rivalry, we will miss these much more insightful analogies and lessons from historical events that predate the Cold War.

History, writes Oxford historian Margaret Macmillan, helps us to understand those we have to deal with (as well as ourselves): “If you do not know the history of another people, you will not understand their values, their fears and their hopes or how they are likely to react to something you do.” If nothing else, history has provided Russia with the experience of invasions. As Harold Mackinder observes, “the Russians were originally a people [...] who, for the sake of their own security, had to seek out and conquer—from the High Middle Ages into the early modern era—the incoming Asiatic nomads of the steppe to the south and east.” The protracted presence of the Mongols was succeeded by disastrous invasions of Napoleonic France and then Hitler Germany. In combination with its flatness and the lack of natural borders to the west and south, this historic vulnerability of being invaded explains Russia’s often paranoid fear of invasion and why, perhaps, insecurity is the quintessential Russian national emotion. This historical lesson helps us better understand Russia’s recurring desire to gain security through the creation of a land-based empire and a buffer zone in Eastern Europe, as well as its deep-seated militarization, both of which were revitalized under Putin. It also allowed us to anticipate Russia’s anti-access/area denial strategy based on complex missile defense systems, and suggests that the way NATO expanded eastwards since the 1990s made the new conflict with Russia almost inevitable.

To avoid the Maginot trap while drawing lessons from the past, history should be treated like a rearview mirror (to expand on an image used by the eminent Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis). The appropriate sectional view of the road over which we have passed helps us understand where we came from and who else is on the road, enabling us to drive safely. However, if we angle the mirror incorrectly to focus on the wrong points, a crash becomes inevitable.
1 During World War I, defensive weapons dominated due to a combination of trenches and greater and faster firepower, resulting in the infamous trench warfare. The long stalemate on the Western front that led to enormous losses convinced the French military leaders and politicians in the interwar period that the future of warfare lay in defense. France therefore paid too much attention to defense. The most visible symbol of that doctrine was the Maginot Line: a vast line of concrete fortifications and weapons installations constructed on the French border to Germany, Luxembourg and Switzerland. In the 1930s, the French invested their hopes and a major share of their defense budget in this defensive wall, while, at the same time, advances in mobile artillery, tanks and combat aircraft made it possible to bypass or attack fortifications. In spring 1940, the German Wehrmacht invaded France, bypassing the line to the north, and conquered its archenemy with a Blitzkrieg campaign.
