

RUSSIA AND THE USA: COOL WAR AHEAD?

Abstract. *In recent years Russian–American relations have seen a significant deterioration. However, the resulting confrontation is not as great in either scope or the level of intensity that existed during the Cold War. Although contradictions between Russia and the United States are significant, they are not antagonistic. The opposition on global issues is on the whole manageable, but could intensify if the system of treaties and arms control continues to erode, particularly due to the growing competition in cyberspace. Regional conflicts have an even greater negative impact on Russia–US relations, although almost all of them are on the periphery of world politics. An improvement in Russian–American relations is hardly possible in the immediate future, yet a sharp return to the Cold War level is also unlikely. The continuation of a ‘Cool War’ – limited confrontation – seems the most likely scenario.*

Keywords: *Cool War, Cold War, Russia, USA, global problems, regional conflicts*

Introduction

During the two decades since the Soviet Union collapsed, the relationship between Russia and the United States has experienced ups and downs, and elements of partnership and rivalry have both been present. Yet, negative trends have gradually intensified. The events in Ukraine and Syria simultaneously became a reflection of the deteriorating relations and a powerful catalyst of the process. In essence, the two countries have engaged in confrontation, but it has been of a different nature than in the Cold War. Although the overall ambience of Russian–American relations is in some aspects worse than during the Cold War, certain elements of partnership, including in the sphere of security, remain. In view of this, ‘Cool War’ seems to be a more accurate way of describing the current situation. Nevertheless, Russia and the United States have crossed a certain line. The main features

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of this new stage in their relations so far look quite fuzzy; basically, there is a process of erosion of the international treaties and institutions developed in recent decades. Still, the process has gone so far that it is now unlikely to be stopped – the point of no return has already been passed. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the ongoing changes in Russian–American relations and the prospects for their development.

The war is cool, not yet cold

Russian–American relations have entered a new stage where their circumstances and development will be determined by the following factors:

First, while socio-political systems in the United States and Russia are largely different, they are not as antagonistic as they once were during the Cold War. Both systems acknowledge the legitimacy of a market economy and private property. Among the high political echelons in Russia, they are certain the authoritarian model of capitalism best suits Russia. Naturally, the USA would prefer Russia to have a different political system. The Americans believe their model of social and political development is the best ever known but, as pointed out in the National Security Strategy (2017), “we are not going to impose our values on others”. It would be reductionist to explicate the contradictions between Russia and the USA by simply pointing out the differences in their socio-political systems. The Russian and American evaluations of the relative positions of their countries globally (with such views commonly held not only by policymakers, but across broad segments of the general public) differ significantly and often clash (Zubok, 2017). Yet, the extremes of the Cold War are entirely preventable. Even in the event of an arms race, a repeat of the 1962 Cuban crisis or the emergence of a similar complication seems highly unlikely. Whereas during the Cold War ideology was an important factor shaping foreign policy, it now only plays a supporting role, mostly to wrap up already made decisions within propaganda packages. The two sides must operate within a single world economic system – unlike the Soviet Union, Russia is not trying to create a special ‘world socialist economic system’. Exchanges in the fields of science, culture, education as well as person-to-person contacts remain at a uniquely high level compared to the Cold War period. Nothing remotely reminiscent of the Iron Curtain can be seen nowadays. Therefore, all the prerequisites are in place to prevent the current confrontation from deteriorating and to keep it at the level of a ‘Cool War’.

Second, it is their mutual suspiciousness that remains widespread in the higher echelons of society. As Angela Stent rightfully contends, in both the USA and in Russia, the policies towards each other, even at the best of times, have exhibited duality – in the business community and in those oriented

to peaceful development the line of thinking has predominantly focused on co-operation, whereas the approach in those connected to national security has been one of suspicion (Stent, 2015: 7). In the aftermath of the events in Ukraine of 2014, the Russian military's influence has increased dramatically. Many Russian politicians are inclined to interpret any developments at home or abroad as being driven with the help of the 'underhand practices' of the USA. Likewise, following the 2016 presidential election, the majority of the American establishment became convinced Russia had been 'meddling' in US home affairs, and began to hold extremely negative opinions about anything to do with Russia. It should be added that, unlike the Barak Obama Administration, the Donald Trump Administration appears to be under a much stronger influence of the military and the military-industrial complex. The current Administration, it seems, possesses a negative view of Russia, the likes of which have not been seen since the Soviet Union's collapse, although Trump himself has stayed clear of hostile rhetoric. Currently, the 'Russian problem' has become a powerful instrument in the domestic political struggle in the USA. Donald Trump's numerous opponents are using it to maximally weaken his position. Any American politician who would dare seek a way to improve relations with Russia encounters huge extra challenges. The same can be said about Russia - anyone now daring to call for improved relations with the USA risks ending up outside of mainstream Russian politics. A sign of the mutual suspiciousness is the extreme nervousness among the political class of both countries about any steps taken by their counterparts.

The third factor is that the political class in both countries is inclined to make fewer concessions now than during the Cold War, which limits the seeking of compromise. Even those few in the USA who advocate the need to improve relations with Russia expect Moscow to make the first move. Meanwhile, most policymakers in Russia espouse a view that one should not give ground first because that would be interpreted in the USA as a sign of weakness. Putin rejected the suggestion of his close friend and adviser Alexei Kudrin to change foreign policy due to economic troubles (RBK, 2018). A solution each side would be able to present as evidence of its own success has yet to be discovered.

Fourth, much will depend on the effectiveness of the western sanctions. The dominant opinion in the USA is that Russia is in a stage of a long-standing decline and sanctions should help to speed up that process. The American sanctions imposed following the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan proved a powerful blow to the Soviet Union. Remarkably, in December 1981, KGB Chairman Yury Andropov categorically spoke out against an intervention in Poland, arguing the prospect of *Solidarnost* coming to power would be a lesser evil than any possible tightening of American sanctions (Dokumenty,

1994: 100). Still, Russia, unlike the Soviet Union, is a country with a market economy, giving it greater room for manoeuvre. Initially, the gravity of sanctions was underestimated by the Russian political class. As Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev once put it, “all these stupid sanctions shall pass” (Medvedev, 2014). In a similar vein, state media outlets adopted the reasoning that it was not the sanctions but the talking about them that one should fear most. Today, it is quite clear the American sanctions are to stay in place for “very long” (Otchyot Pravitel’sstva..., 2017). Nowadays, members of the Russian ruling class are well aware of the great gap in the economic potential of Russia and the USA and its allies. Nevertheless, the overall tone is that the economy has adapted to the new unfavourable conditions and that it is capable of withstanding the sanctions for a very long time. This discrepancy in readings of the future reduces the chances that either side will be willing to make concessions.

The fifth factor is that, at present, a normally functioning mechanism for negotiations between Russia and the USA appears to be absent. In July 2018, Helsinki hosted the first post-2010 negotiations between the presidents of Russia and the USA (in the interim, they met at various international fora for brief exchanges). However, they did not bring about any noticeable shifts. So far, there is no clarity on how well dialogue at the highest level will develop. Contacts between the Russian Foreign Minister and the US State Secretary are happening more often, but even they do not take place regularly. It is noteworthy that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s name appears on the ‘Kremlin List’ – a roster of high-ranking Russian politicians, officials and businessmen, which serves as a kind of warning about the potential imposition of personal sanctions. Such channels are usually kept open – the US sanctions list does not include, for example, the names of the foreign ministers of North Korea, Belarus or Venezuela. Meetings of politicians and diplomats are also incidental rather than part of regular consultations. As a result, the countries’ mutual diplomatic activity has been severely limited. Professional contacts between the military and the intelligence services occur once in a while. During the August 2018 meeting in Geneva, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and US National Security Assistant John Bolton agreed to make such contacts more regular. There is still no information on how well that agreement is being implemented. Yet, bilateral committees and working groups have virtually halted their activities. Negotiations are mostly focused on problems at hand rather than the potential for developing relations.

Finally, and most importantly, the actions of both sides vis-à-vis each other are becoming much less predictable. The probability of unexpected moves and turns is very high. Some politicians in Russia suggest that unpredictability or the willingness to play against the rules once seen as universally

accepted is a powerful feature of Russian foreign policy (Frolov, 2015). This view is not universally shared. It seems that unpredictability is often the result of the two parties being unable – sometimes due to their mutual suspiciousness – to always correctly evaluate, nor calculate the moves and intentions of the other side. In addition, there is a much greater number of actors around the globe than there used to be during the era of bipolarity, and so they may all be playing their own games. As demonstrated in the Syrian conflict, among these actors some, instead of an improvement, would rather seek a complication of Russian–American relations for the sake of achieving their own narrow objectives.

Thus, although Russia's relations with the USA are not central to the modern world, much depends on them. The existing contradictions are serious enough, but not antagonistic. Their future pattern will in many respects be determined by subjective factors such as certain concrete steps on the part of the ruling classes in the respective countries. Right now, it is quite difficult to predict what those will be, but it will not be a confrontation of the highest intensity – a Cool War most likely. This will no doubt be reflected in the ways for seeking solutions to both global problems and regional conflicts.

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The Russian–American Cool War undoubtedly has an impact on many global problems and finding solutions to them.

The first in line is the current world order. It is broadly hoped among the higher strata of power in Russia that it will be somehow possible to reach with the USA (possibly with China's participation) a 'big deal', a sort of 'Yalta-2'. In that case, Russia would have the right to a 'second key' on par with the USA for most global and regional problems that it sees as being within the zone of its vital interests. Such views are widely held not only by the bureaucracy and military, whose members used to lament over their country's loss of status as being one of the two world superpowers, but also by business leaders, much of whose business has proven uncompetitive in international markets without direct state backing. The chances for a 'Yalta-2' have always been slim because the 21st century is not an era of geopolitics but of geoeconomics. The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act declaring Russia an adversary (Congress, 2017) reduces those chances to near-zero – in 1945 in Yalta the talks went on between the allies with the anti-Hitler coalition, not adversaries. Others in the Russian political class would prefer to see a softer version, namely, a re-enactment of the 'Concert of Great Powers' at the Vienna Congress of 1815 where Russia enjoyed a major role. The chances for this scenario are also very slim – despite their differences, none of the participants of the Concert viewed the others as

rivals or adversaries. Most likely, Russia will continue the line of opposition to the USA, steering towards the creation of a multipolar world, and focus on developing co-operation with China so that the Russia-China duo could develop to become a counterweight to the USA.

Another challenging global problem of the 21st century is the terrorist threat. Russia and the USA in fact have co-operated in this area, e.g. in the autumn of 2001, when they were both part of the anti-terrorist coalition. Sometimes, it is even argued that a joint struggle against terrorism could prove to be exactly the lever needed to push their relations in a positive direction of development. Unfortunately, this is also hardly possible – US public papers place Russia among adversaries together with terrorism. That, just like the introduction of restrictive measures against Russia's intelligence services, is very telling. The USA wholeheartedly supported the British position on the "Skripal case" and imposed a range of sanctions against Russia (Federal Register, 2018). Most likely, the USA and Russia will co-operate on fighting very specific terrorists. For example, in December 2017, Vladimir Putin thanked Donald Trump for the CIA information that helped prevent a terrorist attack on the Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg (Telephone conversation..., 2017). Yet, Russian and US intelligence services, while working together in very specific instances – something that, it should be pointed out, was never the case during the Cold War, still view each other as rivals. Accordingly, their combined struggle against terrorism on all fronts is hardly possible.

Of course, the arms race lay at the heart of the Cold War. Still, in the 1970s and 1980s the two superpowers signed a series of arms control treaties and took initial steps towards disarmament. However, the mechanisms created at the time have lately shown cracks that keep on growing. At present, in Russia and the USA, the appetite for boosting military capabilities has taken over. Many in Russia believe the treaties signed during the 1980s and 1990s gave greater advantages to the USA and thus, in their opinion, it would be wise to repudiate them. Namely, Russia's current foreign policy attaches much less importance to those treaties than did the Soviet Union policy during the years of the Cold War. Recently, particularly after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, Russia has been implementing large arms programmes. Almost half of his Annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly that Putin delivered on 1 March 2018 was dedicated to issues of strengthening the armed forces and creating new types of weapons (Putin, 2018a).

While Obama advocated the gradual elimination of nuclear weapons and called for a "nuclear zero", the position taken by Trump is completely the opposite. Strengthening US military might is a logical continuation of his motto "America First!". The principle "preserve peace through strength" proclaimed by Ronald Reagan in 1983 has resurfaced in the US public

documents once again under Trump (National Security Strategy, 2017). In his State of the Union Address of 2018, Trump (2018) called for the end of all sequestering of the military budget and emphasised the role of nuclear weapons in strengthening the power of the USA.

The release of the Nuclear Posture Review, which includes the possibility of using atomic weapons in local conflicts, has sent ripples across Russia. The Russian leaders have laid blame directly on the USA for making preparations for such a conflict with Russia in Europe (Lavrov, 2018). Russia's Military Doctrine (2014) allows for the possibility to use atomic weapons exclusively in response to a nuclear attack on Russia and its allies or in an event of an aggression with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the Russian State is at stake. This approach was reconfirmed by Putin on 1 March 2018 (Putin, 2018a). Moreover, as President's spokesman Dmitry Peskov explained, it was in reference to the CSTO member states, not Syria, whose treaty with Russia contains no provision for an allied obligation (Interfax, 2018). At times though, more radical positions – to place nuclear weapons in Syria – are voiced. Today, it is hard to imagine a situation where Russia or the USA would risk a local nuclear conflict with each other although, unfortunately, one must not write off the possibility of a return to a policy of brinkmanship in regional conflicts, especially in Syria.

In 2002, the USA officially pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (1972) that Moscow had considered one of the pillars of the international security system. In Russia, as Putin stated, the move was viewed within the context of the USA being capable to deliver “the first disarming, disabling strike, even against nuclear power” (Meeting on implementing..., 2013). Earlier US assurances that its ABMD was intended to keep Iran and North Korea at bay had never been taken seriously in Moscow. Of late, Russia has focused on developing weapons capable of eluding US antimissile systems (Putin, 2018a). Most likely, no agreement on ABMD systems will be reached in the near future.

In 2010, Russia and the USA signed the Treaty for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. Yet, in his first telephone conversation with Putin, Trump announced that it was a “bad treaty” (Reuters, 2017). Still, on 5 February 2018, Russia and the USA announced the fulfilment of their treaty obligations. At the same time, the Russian Foreign Ministry queried some of the data provided by the USA (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Currently, the USA seeks to prolong the treaty for another 5 years after it expires in 2021 (Nuclear Posture Review, 2018: 73). Russia is also leaning in the same direction. Neither party is really interested in engaging in a strategic arms race. However, internal politics in either country could seriously challenge both the prolongation and signing of a new treaty.

Unfortunately, the chances of saving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987), once a symbol of ending the Cold War, are relatively small. An earlier version of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept (2008) had proposed to make the treaty globally binding since a few other countries had come to possess this class of missiles (Konceptciya vneshnej politiki..., 2008). In 2013, Putin cautiously questioned the rationale behind the treaty (Meeting on implementing..., 2013). To further complicate the matter, the USA has been accused of violating the treaty in so far as the elements of the ABMD developed by it in Romania could also be used to launch intermediate-range missiles (Putin, 2017). The USA, in turn, accuses Russia of violating it and developing missiles of this class (Nuclear Posture Review, 2018: 10). In the autumn of 2017, the US Congress authorised funding for a study on the possibility of deploying such missiles (Congress, 2018). In the meantime, the Administration announced sanctions against several Russian enterprises that, in America's judgement, were in violation of the treaty (Federal Register, 2017). There is a high chance the 1987 Treaty will cease to be effective, if not *de jure*, then *de facto*. In that case, the deployment of Russian and US intermediate-range missiles in both Europe and North-East Asia is quite likely.

In 2010, Russia announced its decision to withdraw from the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (1990, adapted in 1999) since most other countries had never ratified it. In the ensuing years, Russia significantly increased its military activity in the European part of the country. Following the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis (2014), NATO deployed several battalions in Poland and the Baltic states, where there had been none previously. Situations involving tension with Russian and NATO military aircraft arise regularly in the skies over the Baltic Sea. Nevertheless, the concentration of troops and armaments near the demarcation lines between Russia and NATO is incommensurable with those numbers in Central Europe during the Cold War. Yet, the situation remains complicated in view of the weakening of the monitoring and trust-building mechanisms. According to experts from the Munich Conference on Security, the likelihood of a conflict in Europe due to some accident or error has increased significantly (To the Brink, 2018: 32).

Russia and the USA are taking ever more diverging approaches regarding the issue of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Washington mostly stands for preservation of the status quo and against the emergence of any new nuclear states. In Russia, the range of opinions is wider – some politicians and experts believe that new emerging nuclear powers would weaken Russia's position in the world since the latter's nuclear arsenal is the only attribute of a superpower it possesses; others think the emergence of new nuclear powers would be a problem mostly for the USA, whereas for

Russia they present no danger. Lately, the latter view has been gaining in influence. They consider the situation surrounding the nuclear programmes of North Korea and Iran primarily through the lens of confrontation with the USA. In both instances, the situation has developed in a zig-zag fashion: In the Iranian case – from seeking compromises under Obama, to confrontation under Trump, whereas for North Korea the opposite is the case. Yet, even in the best of circumstances, the non-proliferation regime is going to erode gradually.

Cyberspace is becoming a major area of rivalry where fully-fledged information wars have been waged for several years now. There is a constant intertwining of facts and ‘fake news’, which cannot but affect various parts of the population. It is not without coincidence that the Oxford Dictionary announced ‘post-truth’ word of the year in 2016 (English Oxford Living Dictionaries), reflecting the extent to which it has become part of social life in many countries. Russia and the USA have repeatedly accused each other of using cyberspace for hostile purposes. Talks on the matter, although announced, are practically non-existent. The approaches taken by the parties are qualitatively different. Russia places the main emphasis on observing state sovereignty in the area of information, as well as on information security. The USA, while not denying the importance of information security, proceeds from the principles of prioritising human rights, including the right to obtain comprehensive information. Moreover, in the autumn of 2017 the first signs of countries flocking to blocs on issues of information security became traceable. Just prior to another BRICS summit, Russia called for co-operation among the BRICS countries in the area of global information, specifically to create universal rules for the responsible behaviour of the states in this area and the signing of an intergovernmental BRICS agreement on international information security (BRICS, 2017). Meanwhile, a report prepared for the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations stated that “the US government and NATO should lead the coalition of countries committed to mutual defense against cyberattacks, to include the establishment of rapid reaction team to defend allies under attack”. The report also called for the convening of a NATO summit so as to develop a common approach to interpreting Article 5 of the North Atlantic Pact on cyberattacks (The US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2018). NATO General Secretary Stoltenberg also described the possibility of the implication of Article 5 in the case of a cyberattack, but not automatically (Axios, 2018: 9). Thus, to a certain degree one may expect an intensification of confrontation in cyberspace, while in the medium term the emergence of blocs of countries that will share a common policy on cyberspace.

Up until recently, co-operation in the field of space exploration had progressed quite well. Neither sanctions nor restrictions have been imposed

there. Today, however, the situation is changing. The Trump Administration released a statement that it has no plans to extend the agreement on the International Space Station after 2024 and that the USA will carry out a space programme of its own (The Verge, 2018). Yet it is most alarming that a serious arms race could unfold in outer space. This creates fertile ground for the emergence of new serious threats and the growth of mutual suspicion.

Thus, although confrontation between Russia and the USA on global problems is significant, it is not dramatic. It is much less intense than it was during the Cold War, and currently there are no reasons for either its aggravation or mitigation. Still, the situation could become less predictable in case of the erosion of arms control treaties, which until now have been one of the cornerstones of strategic stability. There is a high probability of a new arms race, which would be more qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. But the greatest element of unpredictability lurks in cyberspace.

The cool war and regional conflicts

An important demonstration of the fact the Cold War had ended was that the USSR and the USA, joined by other countries, together sought ways to resolve numerous regional conflicts. That sort of mutual understanding generally survived into the post-Soviet period. The 2008 conflict was a turning point when, for the first time in two decades, the two powers came to support opposing sides in a conflict, with the USA backing Georgia and Russia standing behind South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both of which had proclaimed their independence. In the years that followed, the gaps in approaching matters were only becoming wider until around 2014–2015, when a confrontation between Russia and the USA recurred. It most vividly manifested itself in the post-Soviet space and in the Middle East.

There is a strong conviction in the higher echelons of power in Russia that it is the post-Soviet states that shall comprise the “region of Russia’s privileged interests” (Medvedev, 2008). It is exactly for this reason that Moscow has shown its displeasure over the rapprochement of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine with the West. Washington has always been critical about Russia’s attitude here (Biden, 2009). The standoff between the two integration projects – Eurasian and European – has been a major reason for the drastic aggravation of several old conflicts and emergence of new ones across the post-Soviet space (Gretskiy et al., 2014). The most difficult one is the situation around Ukraine. Notwithstanding the Minsk Agreements, there has been neither a complete ceasefire, nor a withdrawal of heavy military equipment. In December 2017, Putin spoke for US involvement in a settlement in the Donbas region (Putin, 2017). However, the nature of Russian-American meetings is that of preliminary consultations. Russia and the West

both agree that the UN should be part of the process. Yet, while Ukraine and the West propose a 'Kosovo' option with the UN administering and controlling the Ukrainian-Russian border, Russia insists on a 'Cyprus' variant with UN troops being present along the ceasefire line only and on the need to include Russian servicemen as part of the contingent (Pedanov, 2017). There is not even the slightest suggestion of common ground in sight on the issue of Crimea. Moscow believes the matter is not subject to discussion, whereas Washington insists it will never recognise Crimea as part of Russia.

Different approaches are seen in the positions of Russia and the USA on the situation in the Caucasus. Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and signed treaties with them, whereby their armed forces and police *de facto* became part of Russia's internal structure, while Russian military bases have appeared in their territories and it has also provided significant financial assistance to the republics. The USA fully supported Georgia, demanding that Russia withdraw its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The resumption of hostility is hardly possible now, but political tensions remain.

In Transnistria, the situation is more favourable. The likelihood of re-opening hostilities is virtually non-existent, economic ties are constantly being developed and political dialogue is gradually being established with, inter alia, the participation of mediators (Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE) and observers (USA and EU). Among the most contentious issues still on the agenda is the presence of the Russian contingent in Transnistria. The USA, the EU and Moldova are demanding its withdrawal, while Russia disagrees. Considerable effort will be required to bring about a complete settlement, but the overall situation invites a more optimistic view than most other cases.

Another important region in which Russia and the USA are facing each other off is the Middle East. Russia's involvement in the conflict began with its assistance to the government of Bashar Assad, which is viewed within the context of being the frontline in the fight against the 'colour revolutions'. Since 2015, Russian troops have been directly involved in military operations against ISIS and other opponents of Assad. The construction of Russian military bases in Syria (previously, there was only a naval service point remaining from the Soviet period) was a reflection of the desire not only to lend support to Assad, but to consolidate a permanent presence in the region. Negotiations with Egypt on permission for the Russian Air Force (RBK Politika, 2017) to use its airfields, with Sudan on using its military base on the Red Sea (Russia-Sudan Talks, 2017), and with Libyan Marshal Khalif Khaftar on the coordination of efforts with the troops in Eastern Libya (RIA Novosti, 2017) are all testimony to Moscow's desire to expand its sphere of influence to the maximum. Washington has fought against ISIS too, yet

Russia and the USA have failed to agree in earnest about the coordination of their efforts against a common enemy. It all boiled down to merely the coordination of measures to prevent accidental collisions. In February 2018, an armed clash occurred when supporters of Assad and a group of Russian mercenaries invaded the area of responsibility of the US-led coalition and were thoroughly defeated. Russia and the USA are trying in parallel to manage two separate peace processes, and in both instances with minimal success. The Russian pro-government press makes no secret of the fact that, after the defeat of ISIS, “a new strategy will be aimed at squeezing out the star-striped invaders” (Skorobogatyj, 2018). Since the US and Russian presence in Syria is likely to persist, tensions between their military are inevitable. One should not underestimate the likelihood of them clashing either by accident or as a result of being provoked by other actors, including non-state ones.

During the campaign in Syria, there has been a significant rapprochement between Russia and Iran, although their relations are still limited. Since the USA sees Iran as one of its bigger opponents, Moscow in many instances acts as its advocate. Russia’s support for Iran is clearly a huge irritant between Moscow and Washington. At the same time, Russia is not supportive of Iran’s claims for hegemony in the region and seeks to maintain good relations with other major actors, including Israel and Saudi Arabia which are at odds with Tehran, Turkey whose relations with NATO and the EU have seriously deteriorated, Egypt, etc. In every particular instance, Russia is pursuing its own objectives. For example, in negotiations with Riyadh, Moscow is focused on coordinating the policies that bear on oil prices (Meeting with Deputy Crown Prince, 2017). It is worth noting that Moscow is acting so as to distinguish its *modus operandi* from that of the USA with a view to contributing, if possible, to a reduction of America’s influence.

The situation in the Middle East relates closely to the developments in Afghanistan. Moscow is certainly fearful that destabilisation in Afghanistan could negatively impact on Central Asia. At the same time, Moscow is trying to initiate peace negotiations between the Kabul government and various opposition groups, including the Taliban, under its aegis.

Somewhat less intense is the Russian-American confrontation in the Balkans. Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept of 2016, unlike in 2013, makes no mention of the Balkans, but a certain interest in the region remains. This has to do with exporting gas (most Balkan countries are both buyers and conduits of Russian gas), foreign investment by Russian companies (they sometimes operate through third countries) and the presence of those Russians who own real estate there. It is important to Russia that several Balkan states are keeping dialogue open at the summit level (Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria) and do not join in the sanctions (Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina). One of Russian policy’s main aims here is to prevent the

further enlargement of NATO and the EU to ensure that at least some of those countries preserve the status of neutrality. Particular attention is paid to Serbia and Republic Srpska. Russia's primary concern is not so much about their military potential (which is not large) skewing the balance of power between Russia and the West, as much as about not letting the Balkans become a kind of backstage for the US missile defence systems in Romania and the West in a broader sense, particularly in the event of escalation of the Ukrainian conflict.

Further, in the long term one should not exclude the possibility of the intensification of Russian-American rivalry in the Arctic given that their interest in the region is growing steadily.

Thus, Russia and the USA are lending support to opposing sides in a fairly large number of regional conflicts, and that figure is rising. The greatest potential threat is with the conflicts in Eastern Ukraine and Syria whose settlement is hardly possible in the near future. The way those conflicts are developing and the state of Russian-American relations are closely intertwined: On one hand, the course of events in Eastern Ukraine and Syria will be affecting the dynamics of those relations, while on the other – settlement of those conflicts will barely be possible without a positive shift in relations between Moscow and Washington. The situation is such that neither Russia nor the USA can unilaterally bring about the resolution of conflicts, but they both have sufficient capabilities to block their counterpart's efforts. However, unlike during the Cold War, it is unclear whether Russia and the USA, even if they were to act in concert, would be able to resolve regional conflicts, particularly in the Middle East. Nowadays, regional conflicts are causing more trouble in Russia-US relations than global problems. Yet, most of them, to be sure, are peripheral to world politics.

What lies ahead: scenarios for the future

One may expect three scenarios for the development of Russian-American relations in the medium term – an optimistic one where a return to the easing of tensions and a turn towards partnership occurs, and two pessimistic scenarios, namely, continuation of the 'Cool War', or worse – a new round of the Cold War.

The first scenario, which would be a re-enactment of the turn between the USSR and the USA at the time of Gorbachev and Reagan, seems the least likely of the three. It was possible then because part of the higher Soviet echelons of power were acutely aware of the apparent failure of the Communist project, oriented themselves toward Western values, and no longer viewed the USA through adversarial lenses. They were convinced that the transition to privatisation and a market economy would benefit them significantly

more than the mere managing of state property, while also wishing for their country to break out of the isolation of a besieged fortress that it had been, so as to become part of the global community. An overwhelming majority of Soviet people also trusted the superiority of the Western societal model. The USA's influence, its 'soft power' over the Soviet people was incredibly potent. Today, the situation in Russia is absolutely different. The upper echelons are convinced about the superiority of authoritarianism over democracy, and that Russia has strengthened its positions in the world arena. According to Sergey Karaganov, a political expert in Moscow, "history has pushed Russia in the center of a new competitive struggle between the liberal-democratic and the authoritarian models of capitalism" (Karaganov, 2018) and it is exactly Russia that "has managed to catch the wave of history, which is about to put an end to the five centuries of Western dominance, and is moving full steam ahead" (Karaganov, 2017). In the eyes of those in power in Russia, the USA is an adversary that is aiming to dislodge them. Their possession of real estate, capital investments and personal relationships in the USA are an important, but not the only or main motive behind their thinking. The average citizen's sentiment is considerably less anti-American. The latest opinions polls even show a small rise in sympathy for the USA. Yet, overall, the influence of American 'soft power' on Russia today is not significant. Besides, the current policy of the Russian leadership, particularly on Crimea, has enjoyed such wide popular support that hardly any domestic political figure can ignore that. A very similar situation is observed in the USA - members of the establishment are single-minded about forcing Russia to cardinaly change its policy. In the circumstances, the optimistic scenario for the development of Russian-American relations has a truly minuscule chance of being realised.

Any future standoff between Russia and the USA will likely be about Russia's place in the world arena. The likelihood that the USA will agree on a "Yalta-2" with Russia is close to zero. Russia's parity with the USA in strategic nuclear capability does not help to redress its significant deficiencies in other areas, particularly in the economy, science, new technologies and innovations. This misbalance is unlikely to improve within the foreseeable future. Besides, in its confrontation with Russia, the USA enjoys the full support of almost all European countries and other allies around the globe. Not a single member state of the Eurasian Economic Union, the CSTO, SCO nor the BRICS has spoken up for Russia and against the USA. 'The Turn to the East' has allowed Russia to avoid complete isolation, but it has not been enough to compensate for the losses it has suffered in confrontation with the West. This feeling of frustration seen in the political class is reflected in the view that Russia "is about to enter upon a period of geopolitical loneliness for a century (perhaps, even two or three?)" (Sukrov, 2018).

In the near term, the USA is highly likely to conduct a policy of containment against Russia. Initially levied in a spontaneously chaotic manner, the sanctions are being slowly structured into a system and are becoming tougher all the time. The Russians are less sensitive to economic hardships than their counterparts in Europe and the USA, but there is good reason to believe, as they do in Washington, that cutting Russia off from Western technologies and innovations should significantly weaken it over the long term. The danger of lagging behind the leading states in 20–30 years was also pointed out by Putin (2018b) during his meeting with the academic community in St. Petersburg. Moscow has tried to resist the unfavourable balance of power although relations continue to worsen. This kind of logic is grounded on the assumption that, at some point, the USA will conclude that ‘business as usual’ corresponds to its national interests better than confrontation does. One cannot but recognise the fact that Russia’s policy has been witnessing a shift in emphasis lately. Moscow is bent on hitting the USA at its weakest and most vulnerable pressure points. It does so even when it cannot derive any benefit or even if it must pay a disproportionately high price. Russia is suggesting to its partners that they use only national currencies in the hope of decreasing the role of the US dollar in international trade, but with little response. There is also a view among the Russian establishment that the USA and the EU are headed for a break-up and that the common western front underpinning sanctioning is going to disintegrate. These high hopes received yet another boost in light of the dissent by European countries regarding Donald Trump’s decision to scrap the Iranian nuclear deal. Germany and several other European countries are also supporting the construction of “North Stream-2” despite American threats to impose sanctions on this project.

Of the two remaining scenarios mentioned regarding the development of Russian–American relations, the most likely seems to be a continuation of the Cool War along with various divergences for either an improvement or worsening of relations, rather than a second round of the Cold War. Moreover, whereas during the Cold War both the USA and the USSR aimed to crush the enemy to achieve total victory, today they have set a much less ambitious goal – to force their adversary to change its policy. The downfall of Russia would imply the strengthening of China, which is scarcely part of the planning in Washington. When Donald Trump makes statements about the possible return of Russia to the “Group of Seven” and so on, he is of course primarily seeking to prevent the rapprochement between Russia and China (CTV, 2018). Besides, as insightfully noted by Samuel Charap (2015: 5), “Russia lashes out at the United States and its allies”. On the other hand, a sense of fatigue is apparent in the general population. This leads one to conclude that neither mobilisation nor modernisation but inertia

seems to be the most likely course of Russian action. That, in turn, implies the continuing of tensions within strictly defined parameters. One should not overlook the fact that the leaders of both countries, when faced with alternatives which may be the result of either international or domestic factors, tend not to resort to the toughest measures. The American researcher Eric Shiraev was absolutely right to call the 'Kremlin List' "semi-sanctions" (Radio Svoboda, 2018). Therefore, the greatest number of acute confrontations should be expected to occur in the peripheral vectors of world politics, while both sides are likely to refrain from direct military action against each other. Unlike during the Cold War, neither of them is rejecting tactical co-operation when it suits their needs, including among the military and the intelligence. The biggest challenges and dangers lie in the fact that both sides are guided by some outdated notions of the past century, deeply mistrust each other, and have a smaller ability to manage situations that unfold in the course of confrontation, particularly in cyberspace. The latter offers exactly a fertile basis for surprises. Most significantly, there are quite a few governmental and non-governmental actors whose interest is to worsen Russian-American relations, and so provocations on their part are quite possible.

In the medium term, the potential to develop along the lines of the Cool War scenario would be depleted and the parties would have to face an uneasy choice. The decision as to which direction those relations should be headed in will depend on a several factors such as the balance of power between Russia and the USA, the overall situation of the world stage, the course of internal politics and socio-economic processes in both countries, including the will of the political classes to normalise relations with each other.

Conclusion

In over 200 years of their relations, Russia and the USA have never fought each other. Moreover, during World War I and II, they fought together as allies. In the entire history of their relations, Russia and the USA have done much more good than bad to each other. Yet, their confrontation during the Cold War had a remarkable impact on both their elites and peoples. Already during the initial stage of confrontation, it was quite obvious to most far-sighted analysts that ending the Cold War would not be easy. Thus, back in 1951, distinguished US diplomat and scholar George Kennan claimed that Russia, after the collapse of Communism, would not immediately become a nation with a socio-political system in place; instead, it would start on the path to evolution. His conviction was that the USA should exercise utmost caution (Kennan, 1951). Looking back at the past three decades, one would

have to admit that the USA and Russia have tried almost everything that Kennan cautioned against. One would also have to concede that the inertia of the Cold War, its lingering legacy, has proven more enduring than anyone could have imagined just a few years ago. The ongoing confrontation, although not as acute as during the Cold War, is less predictable, and will complicate international relations for many years to come. Still, putting an end to it will be neither quick nor easy.

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