

Reflections on Post-Cold War Order

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In the quarter century of the cold peace after 1989 none of the fundamental issues of European security and the management of global affairs was resolved.¹ As far as the 'victors' were concerned, there was not a problem. The despotic system of European communism had dissolved and its associated geopolitical power system had disintegrated, allowing the former 'captive states' to exercise their sovereign choice to align with the Atlantic community, while extending the sphere of freedom and democracy. If Russia did not like this, then that was its problem, and reflected Russia's failure to complete its democratic transformation and its ill-founded and intemperate claims to be a 'great power', a status warranted neither by its economic weight nor its social power. However, as far as Russia was concerned, a unique opportunity to reshape the European security system and the quality of international politics at the end of the Cold War has been squandered. With the end of the long-term contestation between the rival ideologies of revolutionary socialism and market capitalism the era of contesting blocs could have been transcended at the global level, while domestically there was the opportunity to create a new cross-class alliance for democracy, peace and development. Instead, the struggle for power, status and resources simply took new forms. This was another of the 'lost alternatives' that shapes our era.²

From cold peace to little cold war

Incommensurate views of European order meant that the continent entered a 25 years' crisis, which in recent years has turned from a cold peace to a 'little cold war'. The year 2014 is the turning point, bringing an end to the myths and illusions of the quarter century of the cold peace after 1989. The latter was the breakthrough year, with the first non-communist government since World War II returned to power in Poland and the Berlin Wall breached in November of that year. Gorbachev's reforms and the application of the New Political Thinking meant that by 1989 the Cold War as a

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the European Russian Forum at the European Parliament on 30 November 2015, and published in the subsequent collection of contributions.

² Stephen F. Cohen, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives: From Stalinism to the New Cold War* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2009), and in particular Chapter 7, 'Who Lost the Post-Soviet Peace?', pp. 162-198.

struggle between competing value systems was at an end.³ The European Communist order as a whole dissolved, followed soon after by the disintegration of the Soviet alliance system as a whole. But the Cold War ended in an asymmetrical manner, generating conflicts that by 2014 had become unmanageable.

The crisis in Ukraine, as well as the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, was a symptom of that deeper crisis rather than its cause. Since 2014 we have entered a new era of great power contestation and conflict. There are good reasons not to call this a 'new Cold War', since the basis of the confrontation is very different from the 45-year period between 1944 and 1989, lacking a consistent ideological basis and being rather more limited in geographical scope. Nevertheless, the new division of Europe is accompanied by intense propaganda from all sides, the uneasy management of nuclear confrontation, and by a struggle to recruit allies both regionally and globally, features that are certainly reminiscent of the first Cold War. Thus, taking into account the rather more limited character of the struggle today, there are grounds for calling it a 'little Cold War' – although of course it is too soon to tell whether it will remain 'little'. There is the constant danger that the current confrontation between Russia and its allies on the one side, and the ramified Atlantic system on the other, could spiral out of control, provoking consequences bigger than anything seen in the post-war years.

It was soon clear that the post-Cold War security system did not work to the satisfaction of all parties. As early as December 1994 at a security conference in Budapest the Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, talked of a 'cold peace'. Thereafter, Russia's sense of marginalisation only intensified, with the American president, Bill Clinton, announcing an era of NATO enlargement, a programme eagerly seized by most of the former communist countries in Eastern Europe and even some former Soviet states. NATO activism in the various struggles in the former Yugoslavia only intensified the growing popular and elite alienation between Russia and the Atlantic security system. In his early years in power Vladimir Putin tried to find a way of overcoming the growing confrontation, but in the end a series of events – America's unilateral abrogation of the ABM treaty, the unsanctioned invasion of Iraq, continued NATO enlargement to Russia's borders and the promise of ultimate membership to Georgia and Ukraine, plans to deploy a ballistic missile defence (BMD) in Eastern Europe, and what was perceived to be a revisionist programme of regime change – turned the gulf between Russia and the Atlantic system into a chasm.

It is easy to blame one side or the other, but even if one of the parties feels aggrieved – irrespective of the validity of their concerns – then we have a security problem. In this case substantive issues are in play, and the failure to address them provoked the Little Cold War. All the rest, including the Ukrainian imbroglio, the failure to ally over Syria, are symptoms of the deeper underlying crisis. Four key processes determined the onset of the cold peace and its subsequent evolution into the Little Cold War.

First, the turning point was the December 1989 Malta Summit, which brought Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and President George H. W. Bush together on two ships to decide the fate of Europe. The absence of a European leader is indicative of the way that Europe failed to gain a substantive independent political subjectivity in the post-Cold War. Once again, as at Yalta in February 1945, the great powers held the fate of Europe in their hands, but Malta registered the change in the diplomatic and strategic balance of power. Gorbachev understood that the Cold War stand-off

³ Archie Brown, 'The Gorbachev Revolution and the End of the Cold War', in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 3, *Endings* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chapter 10, pp. 224-266.

between the Soviet Union and the Western powers served to undermine the development of both. With the end of the Cold War, it seemed that a new era of peace was at hand, reinforced by the reunification of the European continent. Gorbachev envisaged that Russia would remain a great power, but now one that worked cooperatively with the West. Gorbachev went to Malta to formalise a politics of transcendence, but in the event the summit registered only a power shift within the framework of the politics of Yalta but with a reversed polarity. The opportunity for a common victory was squandered. Perceiving the decline of Soviet power, Bush seized the opportunity to strengthen US dominance, and the summit merely registered a power transition rather than transcendence. The conditions were created that ultimately exploded in Ukraine in 2014. The countries that had become the Soviet Union's unwilling allies later became the most enthusiastic supporters of Atlanticism, reintroducing a bloc politics that reinforced the alleged victory of the West. This only reinforced the asymmetrical end of the Cold War, which was accompanied by elements of Western triumphalism (despite enduring attempts to sweeten the bitter pill for Russia). For some these sweeteners, like the creation of the NATO-Russia Council, represented little more than appeasement and a failure to exploit Western victory.⁴

Second, the Malta agreements built on the Helsinki Final Act of August 1975, and these were codified in November 1990 in the 'Charter of Paris for a New Europe'. Helsinki had confirmed Yalta, above all the borders established in 1945 and the framework for the conduct of relations between the great powers, but at the same time Helsinki's 'third basket' of human rights commitments provided a mechanism for the transcendence of Yalta. The paradox is that that Helsinki established a particular method for Yalta's transcendence, which itself ultimately proved corrosive of post-Cold War international relationships. In his powerful study of the inter-war years, E. H. Carr argued that the mix of idealism and realism proved fatal, preventing the exercise of traditional diplomacy while inhibiting realistic appreciations of the power consequences of one's own actions. While the Soviet Union and Russia endorsed the principles inspiring the Charter of Paris, the perceived instrumental and selective application of these principles for geopolitical advantage by the dominant powers created a situation in which the normal diplomatic intercourse between nations was distorted by normative agendas. The endemic tension between 'regime transformers' and 'power balancers' was disrupted for a period and allowed regime transformers to predominate.⁵ This is not to suggest that values should be part of international relations, but this needs to be accompanied by the pursuit of mutual interests. There is no recorded case of an 'ethical foreign policy' being pursued consistently and universally by any state. Instead, the radicalisation of the democratisation and human rights agenda by the Atlantic powers provoked a range of defensive reactions in Russia, which in the end weakened the democratic impulse. The idea of 'sovereign democracy' was only one manifestation of the search for an autochthonous balance between adaptation to international norms and the search for some sort of authentic native tradition to sustain post-communist political order. The problem can be couched in various ways, but in general terms it is a variant of the enduring tension between Enlightenment universalism and nativist particularism.

The third determining factor maintaining the cold peace and its ultimate degeneration into the Little Cold War is the failure of Europe to assume an independent political subjectivity. Addressing the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on 6 July 1989, Gorbachev outlined his idea for a 'Common European

⁴ Garry Kasparov, with Mig Greengard, *Winter is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must be Stopped* (London, Atlantic Books, 2015).

⁵ James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: US Policy Toward Russia after the Cold War* (Washington, DC, Brookings Institution, 2003).

Home' and with that of a different vision for post-Cold War Europe. Now commonly described as 'Greater Europe', this is a programme for geopolitical and normative pluralism in Europe. Gorbachev argued eloquently and forcefully that different systems could coexist peacefully. In this speech and later Gorbachev argued for the transcendence of Yalta *and* Malta. He advocates a European international relations that encompasses the interests of both the small and great powers. This is a multipolar Europe with space for experimentation and diversity. Instead, the European Union (EU) effectively claimed to be the sole legitimate voice of Europe, although in partnership with the more specialised Council of Europe and OSCE. This is the Wider Europe project, which is part of the broader Atlantic community. This is a monist vision of Europe, which until recently has been unable to imagine any substantive alternative political, let alone ideational, community. Just as liberalism in the post-Cold War era finds it hard to accept alternatives to its own hegemony, and thus erodes its own liberality, so the Atlantic community has not been able to find an appropriate form of engagement with outsiders. The assumption is that the way that the problem of history has been resolved in one context is universally applicable to others. Even if a leadership in Russia were to accept this theoretical postulate (as it did to a large extent in the Yeltsin years), the fact that historical problems of territorial unity, political identity, security cooperation, economic modernisation and international integration have still not been resolved means that tensions, if not conflict, would inevitably be engendered.

The fourth factor in this far from definitive list is the failure to find an appropriate way for Russia and its neighbours to interact. There have been numerous attempts to give institutional form to Eurasian integration in the post-Cold War years, but only in Putin's third term did this become the priority, leading to the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union on 1 January 2015. The very essence of the cold peace was the endless struggle between the great powers (including the EU, even though the EU has long been in denial about the power consequences of its actions) for influence in post-Soviet Eurasia. The final straw from Russia's perspective was the perceived attempt to wrest Ukraine away from Moscow's economic and security sphere. While Zbigniew Brzezinski may not be a household name in the West, his argument in 1994 that 'It cannot be stressed strongly enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and the subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire' has become the mantra of the Russian elite, and not in the positive sense.⁶ Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014, including the reunification with Crimea and support for the insurgency in the Donbass, is perceived by the West to represent a violent challenge to the system of international law. However, from the Kremlin's perspective—and, it must be said, from the point of view of the great majority of Russian citizens—the struggle over Ukraine is considered to be a desperate last stand to defend not only Russia's interests but also that different vision of Europe's destiny enunciated by Gorbachev in the Cold War's dying days. Putin's Russia is a deeply conservative country at home, and in international affairs it claims to be defending a status quo threatened by what has come to be seen as the West's revisionism, manifested by the restless urge to remodel regimes in its own likeness while pushing its security system to Russia's borders. The Ukraine conflict is the child of the Cold Peace. Although there are profound internal contradictions in the Ukrainian model of state development, these would not have assumed such disastrous forms if the geopolitics of post-Cold War Europe had been sorted out earlier. Equally, although a fragile cease-fire is taking hold in Ukraine within the framework of the Minsk II agreement, no sustainable peace is possible unless the Minsk peace is embedded within a broader European and global settlement.

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'The Premature Partnership', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2, March-April 1994, p. 80.

We lived for forty-five years in a world shaped by Yalta, and then another twenty-five years in a world shaped by Malta. As the Ukraine crisis made painfully clear, fundamental questions of European security remained unresolved. The West lived in a world where time had stopped: the myth of its victory in the Cold War was considered the foundation of the contemporary international order. Gorbachev understood where all this was heading, and since his forced retirement in December 1991 he repeatedly lamented this outcome. In his speech of 8 November 2014, celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, he noted that 'instead of building new mechanisms and institutions of European security and pursuing a major demilitarization of European politics ... the West, and particularly the United States, declared victory in the Cold War'.⁷ It is for this reason that he broadly endorsed Putin's policies regarding Ukraine in 2014. The Cold Peace was always pregnant with conflict, and it now gave birth.

The politics of transcendence: towards a new European security system

If we want to chart a path toward stability in Europe, we must challenge the myths underlying the cold peace quarter century while understanding the dangers of the Little Cold War. Europe now faces the danger of the creation of a new iron curtain, now running from Narva on the Baltic to Mariupol on the Sea of Azov. On the one side would be a newly militant Atlantic community, reinforcing the EU's subsumption into this community while it faces existential threats to its existence. On the other side, Russia is already becoming part of various Eurasian integration projects, while Greater Asia is gaining in weight. Instead of a Greater Europe stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, it is Greater Asia ranging from Brest to Beijing that is gaining in weight. The stakes could not be higher. The foundations of European and global security need to be rethought.

To break out of the stalemate, a number of fundamental postulates need to be clarified and given both processual and institutional form. In terms of process, this means the resumption of dialogue and engagement. In institutional terms, this means the imaginative creation of bodies that can sustain and breathe new life into the 'new Europe' envisaged in 1990. We have to begin with the potential normative foundations of a revised European security order. Three fundamental principles can be regarded as foundational.

1) **The principle of equality.** Any engagement strategy based on a transformative dynamic of European international relations faces formidable challenges. Not least among them is the prevalent view among the Atlantic powers that Russia is not an equal in political terms (a similar pattern is now playing out with China). Of course, the power resources of the Atlantic alliance system, on the one side, and Russia and its allies on the other, are incommensurable. In nuclear terms, however, there is parity, and at the diplomatic level, Russia as a P5 member of the UNSC is as equal as the other four – something that certainly rankles in certain quarters. Yet the UN system, effectively a child of Yalta in 1945, enshrines geopolitical and ideological pluralism. Equality also presumes the political community in which it is instantiated, and certainly there can be no scope for the return of the bloc politics and heavy-handed imposition of spheres of influence of the Yalta period. However, part of the debate about equality must be about the indivisibility of security – the attempt to achieve security for one cannot be at the expense of the security concerns of the other. The cold peace eventually broke down

⁷ Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Speech for 25th Anniversary of the Fall of the Wall', 8 November 2014, Russia in Global Affairs, 12 November 2014; available at <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Gorbachevs-full-speech-during-the-celebrations-of-the-25th-Anniversary-of-the-Fall-of-the-Berlin-Wal>.

because of the intensifying security dilemma. The Atlantic powers are justified in arguing that NATO does not pose a security threat to Russia. Yet Russia is right to fear that what at is best in post-Cold War conditions is a benign organisation may in certain circumstances turn into a genuine threat, especially since several of its East European members nurture a culture of grievance and recrimination. What is required is a new mode of reconciliation, of the sort that so successfully brought France and Germany together after World War II.

2) **The principle of transcendence.** Gorbachev went to Malta in December 1989 believing that not only the Cold War but the very logic of great power conflict could be transcended. This remains a founding myth of post-Cold War order for Russia to this day. For the American side, however, all that happened was the registering of a power shift; with the initiative passing to the Western side. It is this from this incommensurate understanding (rival mythologies) of how the Cold War ended that the cold peace emerged and its recent aggravation to produce the Little Cold War. The cold peace years were based on the defence of the institutions and practices that had apparently allowed the West to triumph in the Cold War, and the impulse toward transcendence that had been so powerful in the late 1980s was stymied. Only now is this blockage on change being challenged, including by grass roots movements in a number of European countries and by the emergence of elites dissatisfied with the permanent tensions generated by the Atlanticist consensus.

3) **The principle of pluralism.** The cold peace was characterised by the tension between structural and systemic approaches to the conduct of post-Cold War international relations. The structural approach is realist, founded on geopolitical perceptions of threat and the need to defend a given territory. In other words, realism is about how separate particularities interact and create an international order based on the balance of interests and power. The systemic approach appeals to norms and values, and in its post-Cold War manifestations (as in the inter-war years) is based on the universalistic applications of norms and ideals. When these norms become radicalised, as they were in the 2000s in the form of the 'transdemocratic' agenda of 'regime change' through colour revolutions and military intervention, then the stage was set for conflict. The problem then becomes how to reconcile commitments to universal principles, which now lie at the basis of the UN system, and the particularities that make up that system. The challenge is to adapt the particular to the universal, and vice versa.

There is a fundamental tension between hegemonic and pluralist representations of global stability. In the cold peace years the United States contributed to the pacification of potential conflicts in both Europe and Asia. The overwhelming predominance of conventional power resources, accompanied by the liberal internationalist ideology and institutions of global governance, provided the framework for many states to develop and thrive in conditions of relative peace. But this was a Cold War peace – the cold peace described earlier – in both the Atlantic and Pacific regions. The American alliance system forged in the Cold War remains the bedrock of world order, but by definition this is a system based on the politics of inclusion and exclusion. The politics of transcendence is based on the principles of equality and pluralism.

What would a politics of transcendence look like?

First, there would need to be a review of threat perceptions, not only of the major powers but also of Russia's neighbours. The notion of threat needs not only to be contextualised but also 'historicised'. By historicised I mean the attempt to understand not only the immediate context but also the broader pattern of historical change and structure of international politics that focuses on a particular moment. Does Russia constitute a 'threat', to its neighbours and to the existing system of international law, as so forthrightly argued by its critics? My view is that Russia is far from being a revisionist power today – it is instead 'neo-revisionist'. By this I mean that it does not challenge the system of international law and governance (from which it has benefitted so much), but has become critical of the practices and their apparent abuse by 'hegemonic' powers. As far as Russia is concerned, it is the West that has become revisionist, not Russia. Equally, it is not the principles of international law and governance that Russia condemns but the practices that accompany their implementation.

Second, the nature of 'choice' in the post-Cold War geopolitical environment needs to be assessed. For some this has become a sacred shibboleth, but in some ways the debate mimics that over the quality of post-modern freedom. The idea that contemporary freedom entails the absence of constraint and instead opens up limitless 'options' is absurd, but one that has gained considerable currency today. To be free of constraints means no basis on which to choose. What were the choices available to countries after the disintegration of the original Yalta system? Helsinki first confirmed Yalta and then transcended it; but as Malta demonstrated, the transcendence was at most partial, and certainly did not give way to creative forms of engagement. Although geography does not define destiny, there are physical constraints to the construction of social reality.

Third, there needs to be an examination of what the 'West' has become. The 'West' has traditionally represented a civilisational complex, and thus comfortably embraces many countries that are geographically far from the West, notably Japan. Rather than speaking of the west, it may be more coherent when discussing European security to talk of an Atlantic community. This is a community that has not only survived but prospered, and today is assuming increasingly ramified features in the form of what I call the new Atlanticism. The Soviet Union has gone, and after 25 years in which NATO went out of area to avoid going out of business, the alliance is now back to do what it had been established to do, namely to 'contain' Russia. The revived Atlanticism is the intellectual framework for the new confrontation with Russia, and includes attempts to impose 'bloc discipline' of the Cold War type, especially when it comes to imposing sanctions as well as the accompanying propaganda efforts that at their worst reach McCarthyite proportions.

Fourth, and far from final, there needs to be the determined effort to find processes and institution that could shape a new politics of reconciliation. The current crisis was provoked not by the existence of different narratives and world views, but by their politicisation and the failure to find a mode of reconciliation to overcome their baleful consequences. This is the task facing us today.