



## 25 Years after the Fall of the Wall: A New Cold War in the Making?

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Twenty-five years ago, on 9 November 1989, the Berlin Wall showed its first cracks and soon fell. In the aftermath of this event, the German people united and as former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt put it, 'what belongs together will grow together'. The fall of the Wall and the unification of Germany - and by extension, Europe - was the most obvious symbol for the end of a conflict that had shaped German, European, and global politics for almost 45 years: the Cold War. All of a sudden, however, the phrase "Cold War" is being employed once again in 2014. Russia's aggressive foreign policy in Eastern Europe has currently revived fears (and perhaps in certain circles also hopes) about a new Cold War. This paper will first provide the historical background to the Cold War and its end and then, in a second section, address the question of whether we are really sliding back into another Cold War.

### A (very short) history of the Cold War and its end

When did the Cold War start? It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when it began. Was it at Potsdam in July and August 1945 when the Second World War alliance between the Soviet Union and the Western states of the US, Great Britain, and, to a less instrumental extent, France, vaporised? Was it in 1947 when US President Harry S. Truman pronounced his doctrine of aiding countries at risk of being taken over by Communism? Was it when the Marshall Plan was set up shortly thereafter to rebuild (Western) Europe and prevent it from drifting into the Soviet sphere of influence? Was it when the Soviets sealed off West Berlin and the Allies had to maintain an airlift for almost a year to prevent the city from starving? Was it when two German states were created on the territory of the former German Reich in 1949? Or was it, finally, when the two military alliances were formed (NATO in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955) that would confront each other until 1990? All of these events certainly mark important steps in the coming of the Cold War (and there are other important events outside of Europe). What is clear, however, is that the Cold War was about control in Germany, and Europe, but it was also about a confrontation of ideologies and political systems as well as about confronting armies and nuclear weapons. The Cold War that emerged in Germany and the 'Iron Curtain' that - as Winston Churchill so famously put it - 'descended across the continent' all the way 'from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic' was a consequence of the Second World War. At least as far as Europe was concerned, the Cold War would always remain intimately linked to Germany - which would have been its primary battle ground if it ever turned hot



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- and Berlin as its utter manifestation. It was in Berlin that Soviet tanks faced American tanks. It was in Berlin that a wall and a 'death zone' were built in 1961 to prevent a population from leaving a dictatorship that was brutal, repressive, and slowly but surely economically failing. Almost every state visitor to the Federal Republic of Germany would be taken to Berlin to see the Wall and it was most definitely a key point in the agenda of every visit of a US president to West Germany. The role of Berlin in the Cold War and its symbolic value for the 'free world' was probably never better articulated than in US President John F. Kennedy's speech in 1963 in which he declared the well-known words, 'ich bin ein Berliner'. More than two decades later it was once again in Berlin, in 1987, where US President Ronald Reagan made a famous statement when he urged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to 'tear down this wall'. No doubt, Berlin lay at the centre of the Cold War, and when the Wall finally fell in 1989, it was a benchmark event in its demise. Yet, the Cold War was most importantly a confrontation between two superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States of America. It was their struggle for ideological dominance and geopolitical leadership that would shape and frame the decades between 1945 and 1990. But determining the end of the conflict is just as difficult a task as finding its beginning. Was it in 1989, with the fall of the Wall? Did the Cold War end in 1990 with Germany's reunification? Or is 1991 the crucial year with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and, in fact, the Soviet Union? Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika certainly mattered, if only for their (unintended) consequences within the Soviet bloc. Reagan's hard-line policy towards the Soviet Union that aimed at overstressing Moscow's resources probably contributed to the demise too. The (at least legal) commitment of Eastern countries to human rights in the course of the Helsinki talks in the 1970s might have encouraged opponents in the Soviet bloc to voice criticism. The maintenance of European and German-German détente during the re-escalating Cold War - the Second Cold War - in the 1980s might have also helped in overcoming the division. Then again, Pope John Paul II's not very concealed support for reform in Poland may have contributed to the end of the Cold War. Protests in Poland organised by Lech Wałęsa and his Solidarność movement also had an impact. Other protest movements all over the Soviet bloc that mushroomed in the aftermath of the Polish strikes did too. And lastly, in East Germany the act of East Germans voting with their feet either through mass emigration via West German embassies or through the famous Monday demonstrations and protests around the 40th anniversary of the German Democratic Republic were certainly important factors in ending the Cold War. Gorbachev's refusal to use violence to suppress the protests in Eastern Europe - in contrast to Soviet military interventions in East Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Prague in 1968 - was instrumental in avoiding Tiananmen Square-like bloodbaths and probably one of his major historical achievements. But it was especially the skill and resolve of politicians in the West, most notably Reagan and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, that led to the end of German division, and by extension the Cold War. With 'Germany reunited, and Europe transformed'<sup>i</sup>, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, and Communism abandoned in the Soviet Union and its successor states, the Cold War was over. Both ideological and military confrontation had come to an end. Overcoming the mental Cold War would take much longer though.



## A new Cold War?

Despite 25 years of a post-Cold War era, scenarios that were long presumed dead have recently been revived and prophecies about a new Cold War have gained prominence. At the moment, tensions between Russia and the West are on the rise again. In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, the Russian government recently declared it would resume military air patrols to the borders of Canada and the US and NATO have noticed a higher intensity of patrols of Russian military aircraft in international airspace over the Baltic Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. In response, the Western alliance has committed more troops to the eastern member states and itself increased air patrols. Tensions are building up between Washington and Moscow as rhetoric in both capitals reminds the informed observer of the Cold War language that dominated the relationship between both countries for 45 years. After all, the Cold War was first and foremost a confrontation between the USA and the Soviet Union. But the fact that there are new tensions does not necessarily mean the world is drifting into a new Cold War. As a matter of fact there are two major differences between the current situation and the era between 1945 and 1990 aside from the fact that no Iron Curtain is even remotely reappearing in Europe.

### Ideology

Contrary to the Cold War, which was above all a clash of ideologies, nothing similar can be seen in current Russian-Western affairs. While Vladimir Putin consciously invokes certain continuities with the Soviet Union, an ideological reorientation towards Communism is definitely not on his agenda. Capitalism in Russia is more untamed than in even the most liberal Western countries and a development back towards Communism would certainly alienate the economic and oligarch elite from Putin. There are no traces of a new ideological confrontation. This being said, however, Russia is certainly implementing policies at the moment that aim at solidifying, securing, and if need be increasing its zone of influence. In order to do so, Moscow is focussing its interest on neighbouring countries such as Ukraine. In that sense, Russia's national interests are at odds with Western concepts of political development in Eastern Europe. If one were to attach to this policy some ideological continuities, one would have to look back further than 1945 to the 19th century. Back then, Russia was following pan-Slavic policies that would ensure Russia's influence on other Slavic countries and regions, with a view to aggrandizing and securing the Russian Empire. Putin's policy today shows some resemblance to that. On the other hand, one could also look at the time after the First World War and understand Moscow's policies as intending to build a 'cordon sanitaire' - or sanitary belt - around its borders that would prevent Russia from directly bordering NATO territory.

### Geopolitics

Russia today is in a considerably less fortunate global and geopolitical position than the Soviet Union was, especially in the early days of the Cold War. While the Soviet Union controlled all of Eastern and significant parts of Central Europe, this is not the case today. Current Russia is much smaller and weaker than the Soviet Union was and Moscow



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does not control a system of satellites states, which was characteristic of the former Warsaw Pact. Moreover, economically speaking, NATO is significantly stronger than Russia but Russia is intimately integrated into the global economic and financial system, which is also in stark contrast to the Cold War era, when the Soviet bloc had its own economic dimension. Add to this that the tensions at the moment are very much focussed on Ukraine and the limited scope of the conflict becomes apparent, in stark contrast to the global confrontation of the Cold War. Lastly, while the Soviet Union could exert some soft power because of its ideological global political role as a counterpart to the Capitalist West, no such position of power exists today.

These two factors, while not exhaustive, do point to considerable differences between the present and the Cold War era. The sheer fact that there are tensions today hence does not automatically mean a return to Cold War times.

### Conclusions

The relationship between the West and Russia is currently entering a phase of increased tensions and the cosy times of the immediate post-Cold War order are over. A new modus vivendi will have to be found, one that also accommodates Russian fears about encirclement. Consequently, while the current situation might superficially resemble the Cold War era, a closer examination reveals that there are many differences. The most obvious ones are the lack of any ideological clash as well as the absence of a permanent threat of war, which marked the Cold War years. Between the early 1950s and 1990 every crisis could potentially spiral into a nuclear confrontation within a matter of days. That is not the case today. Russia is pursuing a more aggressive foreign policy at the expense of neighbouring nations and in clear violation of international law. Yet this is still a localised conflict and not yet an indication of a bigger confrontation that would also involve a nuclear showdown. Therefore, prophetic forecasts of a new Cold War are not only inaccurate, they are outright dangerous as they try to superimpose concepts and responses of the past on a very different situation. Russia's actions today more closely resemble the geopolitics of the (very) long 19th century with its basic premises of balance of power and influence. Putin's Russia is trying to readjust an unfavourable balance of power in Europe in its favour and thus improve the country's influence as a regional actor. Lastly, this is also about Russia's perceptions about threatened national security by an ever-expanding NATO and EU. Tensions between Russia and the West might continue and new solutions to the current problems will have to be found. A return to Cold War thinking and strategy, however, is not only inept to cope with current crises, in the worst case it could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this is by far the most dangerous potential outcome of the current crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Which is the title of one of the first and still very important books on unification and the end of the Cold War, see Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft*, Harvard Univ PR. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ Pr, 1997).