A NEW COLD WAR? DISSECTING THE CAUSES OF HOSTILITY BETWEEN THE U.S. AND RUSSIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Cold War (1947-1991), relations between the United States and the Russian Federation have been volatile from moderately friendly to openly hostile. Each side has its own interpretations and biases with regards to geopolitical decisions about the other side. This Thesis explores explanations of the hostility and animosity between the U.S. and Russia in the post-Cold War era of the 21st century. It argues that regardless of the end of Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and the U.S. have once again begun to perceive one another as ideological and military antagonists. Relations between the two superpowers have been so low and rhetoric so hostile, especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, so as to suggest, as do Stephen F. Cohen (2007) and Noam Chomsky (2015), that the two sides are now engaged in a new Cold War. This Thesis investigates and evaluates contrasting perspectives of explaining the “New Cold War” phenomenon. Among other things, it argues that the ongoing crises in Ukraine and Syria, with the participation of the U.S. and Russia on opposing sides, allude to a new Cold War with corresponding military engagements in violent proxy conflicts and wars. This Thesis holds that the complex intricacies of the U.S.-Russian relationship involve rational, emotional and other motives and factors, including misunderstandings. It also explores the reasons why the U.S. and Russia have arrived to the New Cold War and how justified and appropriate, if at all, this term is. The findings of this research suggest that the U.S.-Russian hostility is rooted in misperceptions and misgivings on both sides of the confrontation. As a result, both sides, it is argued, have been squandering opportunities to align their national interests and build solid partnerships that would benefit the wellbeing of their respective populations and the global community.
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABM</td>
<td>Anti-Ballistic Missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>BMD</td>
<td>Ballistic Missile Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>Commonwealth of Independent States</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>Cable News Network</td>
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<td>CTBT</td>
<td>Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>EEU</td>
<td>Eurasian Economic Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>G8</td>
<td>Group of eight (political forum of world’s eight largest economies)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRC</td>
<td>NATO-Russia Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>OSCE</td>
<td>Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>SALT</td>
<td>Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>Union of Soviet Socialist Republics</td>
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<td>WWII</td>
<td>Second World War</td>
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

After the end of over forty-year-long Cold War (approximately 1947-1991), it was difficult to imagine that the peace between the U.S. and Russia, so struggled for, would be short-lived and elusive. The post-Cold War era—as was the Cold War, itself—has, in reality, not been so peaceful. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, wars and civil wars commenced in the former Eastern bloc territories, chiefly: Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994), the Yugoslavian/Balkan Wars (1991-2001), the First Chechen War (1994-1996) and Tajikistan’s Civil War (1992-1997).

Though the above by themselves did not signal the commencing of a new Cold War, the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing of targets in the former Yugoslavia (1999) and, later on, the U.S.-led invasions and continued occupations of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) appear to have driven a wedge between the U.S. and the Russia. More importantly, the NATO-led toppling of the Libyan dictator Qaddafi (2011), the expanding of NATO membership, and siding with a number of belligerent engagements on the part of the U.S. and Russia in differing sides of conflicts in the Middle East (Syria) and Europe (Ukraine), including the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, can be argued, testify to a new post-Cold War enmity and antagonism between the two superpowers. It thus seems not an exaggeration to call the U.S.-Russian relations in the 21st century, as told by scholars Stephen F. Cohen (2007; 2017a; 2017b) and Noam Chomsky (2015) as a “New Cold War.”

The growing vituperation and hostility between the two superpowers does not show any sign of desisting. Both sides believe the other is malevolent and is intent on
inflicting harm. The Ukraine Crisis, commenced in November 2013, became a watershed in the U.S.-Russian relations, with the Russian military intervention in Ukraine and, especially so, the annexation of Crimea being interpreted as acts of aggression and grave violation of international law (Myers 2014); U.S. President Barack Obama (2014) accused Vladimir Putin of violating Ukraine’s “sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Since the takeover of Crimea, the U.S. and its allies have continued to isolate and punish Russia with a broad range of sanctions, while Russia, in turn, has introduced countersanctions in response. On 24 March 2014, Russia was suspended from the Group of Eight (G8), a group of major industrialized countries, while negotiations over Russia’s entry into the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a prestigious club of 24 developed countries, were cancelled, and all military and economic cooperation under the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission were also brought to a standstill (Smale 2014; EEAS 2016; Schreck 2014).

Today, the U.S. and Russia are engaged in at least two armed proxy wars in Syria and Ukraine, and a frozen conflict in Georgia. The profound political disagreements between the two superpowers have induced a sort of retro-Cold War mentality among the political establishments of both states; however, the causation may in reality be the inverse. That is, retro-Cold War mentality, to begin with, has brought about or kept the old political schism between Russia and the U.S. Furthermore, status quo politics, mainstream media, and academia have played important roles in shaping the perception of the opposing party (Smith 2015a, 2015b). This Thesis, among other things, intends to consider in what ways both politics and the mainstream mass media in the U.S. and Russia have engaged in the building of hostility between the two superpowers.
Unlike today’s Russia, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had a completely different ideology and economic system from those in the U.S. That said, Russia has largely retained the Soviet military power and, given nuclear arms by way of an estimated 7,000 warheads and intercontinental ballistic missiles, is the largest nuclear power in the world and can destroy major U.S. urban centers within 30 minutes as we know it now. Nearly the same can be said about the U.S. and its capabilities to harm Russia. The two states together have an estimated 93 percent of the total existing nuclear weapons in the world, with the stocks held more-or-less equally between them (Kristensen 2017).

More importantly, not only have both sides retained the old Cold War stockpiles of nuclear weapons, but also the Cold War mentality and approach to one another, thus indicating that the New Cold War term can be a tenable shorthand to describe the unfolding intricacies of the U.S.-Russian relations (Cohen 2007, 2011; Chomsky 2015; Legvold 2016; RT 2015). The Russian prime minister and ex-president, Dmitry Medvedev (2016), appears to concur on this issue. Speaking at a security conference in Munich in 2016, he stated that the West and Russia are “rapidly rolling into a period of a new cold war.” Russia has the capability to greatly affect the global balance of power, a statement which held correct during the old Cold War as well. Although Russia has lost much of the political and economic influence of the Soviet Union, it still has the potential to impact and frustrate the U.S. security policy in many parts of the world, from Europe and the Middle East to East and South Asia as its military infrastructure and politics (if not economy) remain robust. In addition, Russia as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council plays a key role in proper functioning of international institutions and international law. Without Russia’s participation in solving global security issues, such as international
terrorism, pandemic diseases, and nuclear weapons non-proliferation, solutions to such problems are bound to be more demanding. Cohen concurs: “The road to American national security still runs through Moscow,” in that nearly all matters of global security of importance to the U.S. cannot be solved “without the full cooperation of whoever sits in the Kremlin, period, end of story[!]” (quoted in Smith 2015b).

**Research question**

The main research question of this study is thus as follows: Why are U.S.-Russian relations apparently at their historically lowest levels filled with hostility and animosity since the demise of the Soviet Union and end of Cold War? As a sub-question, I ask: Does this post-Cold War hostility between the U.S. and Russia qualify as a New Cold War? Though there are possibly numerous reasons why the U.S.-Russian relations have fallen so badly apart, it is important for this study to narrow down and focus on well-substantiated explanations, which meet the criteria of solid evidence and consistent, sound argumentation.

As with any complex phenomenon, there are many explanations of the growing hostility between the U.S. and Russia. An explanatory perspective of this Thesis comes from the political realism’s “balance-of-threat” theory within what Stephen Walt (1987) refers to as “defensive realism,” which emphasizes the point that states are more concerned about “threats” rather than “power.” Threats, according to defensive realism, are a “function of power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions” (vi). When looking at the Cold War, the balance-of-threat theory argues that despite the Soviet military might not having substantially declined in the last years of the Cold War, the U.S. and its allies profoundly changed their attitudes toward the Soviet Union as Mikhail Gorbachev
and Ronald Reagan successfully spearheaded an unprecedented process of détente. After Gorbachev reassured his Western counterparties of the Soviet leadership’s peaceful intentions and vowed to abstain from the interference in anticommunist nationalistic movements in Central and Eastern Europe, which soon after lead to the end of communist rule in the said region, the Soviet threat, in turn, unexpectedly diminished in the eyes of the West.

This subsiding Soviet threat caused a decline in military cooperation among the Soviet Union’s opponents: NATO members initiated “major reductions in defense spending,” and the U.S. planned to “withdraw a substantial portion of its armed forces from Europe” (Walt 1987, vi). The belief that the Soviet Union had become much less of a dangerous adversary, even a potential ally, explains the actions of NATO members. Thus, according to this theory, the perception of threats and intent, rather than pure military power alone, is what largely conditioned actions and reactions of states by the time of the end of Cold War.

This Thesis will thus provide an exploration and analysis of the Cold War and, more importantly, the so-called New Cold War. My hope in producing this work is that readers will have a better understanding of the deeply troubled U.S.-Russian relations, which is not only affecting the two states and their populations, but menacing the global order and peace, and, perhaps, encourage possible ways out of this quagmire.

In Chapter Two, I will explore the dynamics of the (old) Cold War from political and psychological perspectives. While political perspective implies rationality and realpolitik, psychological perspective refers to emotional and cognitive components. The Cold War ended almost three decades ago, thus providing sufficient time for social scientists to reflect on that era’s East-West/U.S.-Soviet struggle.
Chapter Three provides an analytical review of the New Cold War, including differences and similarities with the original Cold War. Understanding why and how the Cold War started, developed and ended will provide insights to explain the potential reality of the New Cold War, its mechanisms and idiosyncrasies. If a New Cold War is indeed at play, the Ukraine Crisis, having begun by end-2013, can be considered as a dramatic pinnacle for it, as there was a clear East-West discursive and divisive prelude to what eventually became an armed conflict. After the “annexation of Crimea” by Russia in 2014, it is hard to imagine that the U.S.-Russian relations will return to partnership and cooperation any time soon. While running for office, U.S. President Donald Trump had promised to normalize relations with Russia, but so far he has not delivered on his promises, which seem to solidify the point of unfeasibility to repair the ruined relations. It is worth remembering, however, that before the last leader of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, came to power, the notion of ending the Cold War seemed most improbable. It took “unprecedented steps” toward peace from Gorbachev and also the amenity of U.S. President Ronald Reagan in the mid- to late-1980s which eventually led to the two superpowers to declare that the Cold War was over and no longer relevant (Cohen 2011).

Finally, as part of my concluding remarks in Chapter Four, I will attempt to outline and share thoughts about possible solutions to end the current U.S.-Russian standoff, which is threatening the stability and peace of the Eurasian continent and beyond.

**Hypotheses**

This Thesis produces two hypotheses, both in line with the theoretical approach of the balance-of-threat theory:
**H$_1$:** After the end of Cold War and demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. downgraded its perception of Russia to a regional declining power, which, in turn, caused a lack of consideration and acceptance of Russian national interests in Europe and the post-Soviet republics.

**H$_2$:** Russia’s hostility toward the U.S. in the 21st century is a reaction to the assertive U.S. foreign policy, which Russia perceives as a growing threat to its national security. In the U.S., in turn, Russia’s hostile reaction (as exemplified in its annexation of Crimea) is perceived as an increasingly worrisome threat and security concern.

**Research design**

This study employs qualitative research as its key methodological approach. I will apply **discourse analysis** by examining and analysis of selective key official speeches and texts of political leaders of both Russia and the U.S. since the end of the Cold War, but especially in the 21st century, as means of understanding how the relations between the two states have been evolving within their respected constructed narratives. I expect discourse analysis to show how each side perceives and interprets its own and the opposite side’s foreign policy. This analysis will also show whether each side explains similarly or differently major events and issues of the past, which have led to what may be a New Cold War.

**Research significance**

American political scientists and policy makers tend to put responsibility for the breakdown of the U.S.-Russian relations on Russia, whereas Russian authorities and experts, in turn, tend to have the same attitude, blaming the U.S. counterparty. It goes without saying that sorts of nationalistic and ideological biases are involved in the analyses of both sides. I hope to compare and analyze the arguments of American and Russian sides and the resulting inferences in an attempt to provide a critical examination with as little personal bias as possible.
U.S.-Russian relations are, ostensibly, the most important interstate relations from the perspective of global security and realist balance of power. Menacing these relations could have disastrous effects on human civilization at large. Therefore, studies providing deeper insights and understanding of this relationship can be important in ultimately securing de-escalation and détente between the two camps, which is necessary as means of resolving grand issues, such as global warming, countering terrorism, and securing a peaceful Middle East. The existence of a persistent problem (such as a probable New Cold War) signals a lack of knowledge to solve the problem. If there is complete or at least increasing knowledge on how to solve a problem, then the problem can inevitably or potentially be solved. A problem of the ongoing hostility between Russia and the U.S. signals that both parties have insufficient knowledge on ways to progress their relations. This Thesis hopes to do its, albeit minor, share of resolving this problem.
CHAPTER TWO

THE COLD WAR, LESSONS LEARNT

“[A] political society does not live to conduct foreign policy; it would be more correct to say that it conducts foreign policy in order to live.” —George F. Kennan (quoted in Cooney 2007, 76)

It is rather delusional to assume that the political and psychological load accumulated over the forty-year experience of the Cold War could easily erase itself from the minds of people who had lived through it. Certainly, the Cold War’s legacy, though ending 26 years ago, still affects today’s world affairs. As Napoleon’s legacy had impacted France’s fate for many decades after he was gone, so the Cold War’s legacy appears to continue its impact on the U.S.-Russian relations for decades ahead.

The main feature of the Cold War was its bipolarity. The world was a political battlefield for two large, antagonistic superpowers: the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. For most of the Cold War period, the U.S. perceived the Soviet Union as a paramount, inescapable, existential threat. Today, the U.S. doesn’t have a threat of this category, as the world has become multi-colored and multi-polar, but Russia has also become a major security concern for the U.S. The same is true for today’s Russia in its perceptions of the U.S.

The literature on the Cold War is extensive and varies broadly; social scientists and historians continue to argue about the basics of the Cold War—when it started, which side was responsible for its development, why it endured, and causes of its end. This Chapter will delve into the origins and legacy of the Cold War, in addition to the lessons learnt by the U.S. and Russia of that experience relevant to today’s post-Cold War era.
Explaining the Cold War

The Cold War, as a rich-in-events and complex period, is an object of multiple explanations and approaches. I will focus on two prevalent narratives. The first narrative is put forth by Zbigniew Brzezinski (1972), whereby he contends that the Cold War is “more the product of lengthy and probably ineluctable historical forces and less as the result of human error and evil.” By “evil,” Brzezinski refers to realpolitik and “human nature” per political realism of international relations theory. “Two great powers,” claims Brzezinski, “differentiated by divergent centuries-long experience and separated by sharply differing ideological perspectives … could hardly avoid being plunged into a competitive relationship” (181).

The U.S. and the Soviet Union in profound ways contrasted in how political and economic decisions are assessed and made at different levels of government and society. Moreover, the two did not restrict themselves within their sovereign territories; they expanded their ideological and political influence far from their borders. As had the U.S. long before, “[b]y 1960 the Soviet Union had [also] expanded its reach into the Third World considerably” (Westad 2017, 539). Thus, these policies created a basis for proxy conflicts in countries of the Third World that were unwittingly involved in the power struggle of two giants. Westad (2007) posits that the Cold War was not Euro-centric (contrary to what many scholars claim) since European countries were divided into two blocs and the dominant systems of government in these countries remained relatively stable. It was rather the Third World which had become the actual battlefield of the Cold War, where peoples and governments haggled and fought on supposed ideological divides of communism and capitalism.
The second narrative claims that the Cold War was not about ideologies and winning hearts and minds of people of the rest of the world, but rather “containment,” whereby two superpowers struggled to contain and deter one another. Concerns of realpolitik overshadowed ideological and socio-economic bases—“the clash of political and economic systems mattered less than a simple, classical slugfest over power” (Legvold 2016, 129). This account advises a better explanation of the rise of a possible New Cold War despite the fact that Russia scrapped the communist-based ideology and socio-economic system. This account also allows the U.S. to assume that Russia wants to restore its previous (Soviet-like) political and military power; in turn, Russia may assume that the U.S. wants “to diminish Russia and put it in a box” to minimize its role at regional and global levels (130). For this narrative to remain strong requires an assumption that there are no crucial differences between politico-economic systems of Russia and the U.S. However, one could argue that the political system of Russia is increasingly drifts from a potential democracy as Vladimir Putin strengthens his authoritarian regime; political decision-making process in Russia thus profoundly differs from one in the U.S. According to Richard Haass (2016), Putin is “less constrained by bureaucracy and [Kremlin] colleagues than were his predecessors who oversaw the Soviet Union ... [as he] has ‘deinstitutionalized’ Russia and introduced a worrisome degree of personal rule” (133). It has been suggested, for example, that the decision to annex Crimea was taken by Putin without consultations with senior members of the Russian Duma (Parliament) or senior ministers of the government; he is said to have only consulted security chiefs (BBC 2015). This sort of decision making process is generally not practiced in the U.S. and other democracies.
Over the years of Putin’s rule as the president of the Russian Federation (2000-2008, 2012-present), the growing part of Russian economy, especially the so-called strategic area of economy such as energy resources, have moved under the control of the government or state-owned corporations. Today, the economic structure of Russia resembles more that of China, often “seen as pioneering authoritarian capitalism as an alternative to liberal capitalism” (Legvold 2016, 131). China has proved, against all liberal odds, that the model of authoritarian capitalism could be not only viable, but even successful; and the new Russia seems to agree and follow that model. Though Russia has not reached the level of censorship and central planning that China practices today.

The second narrative suggests that if the U.S. stops to counteract Russia’s efforts to restore its influence on neighboring countries (most importantly, on post-Soviet states), then the U.S. and Russia could upgrade their relations to a new level of common national interests such as issues of nuclear non-proliferation; global terrorism; the crises in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, and so on. However, others believe disagreements have roots in different realms and are of hostile origins. They believe that the U.S. and Russia genuinely see each other as enemies and cooperate reluctantly with ill intentions in mind. One of the most vocal speaker of anti-Russia group has been the U.S. Senator John McCain (2014), who calls Putin “an unreconstructed Russian imperialist and K.G.B. apparatchik” and argues that the U.S. does not perceive Russia as a rival, but that Russia does view the U.S. as one. McCain insists that “American presidents have sought to cooperate with Mr. Putin,” yet after the Ukraine Crisis, interests of the U.S. and Russia “do not converge much.” McCain intensified his criticism in an op-ed (2017) in USA Today, wherein he indicts Putin for many crimes: assisting “war crimes of the Assad regime,” interference in the 2016
U.S. presidential elections, “cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns to support [his] allies in European elections and [even intending to] destroy the European Union.” McCain unambiguously proclaims that “Putin’s Russia is our [i.e. America’s and presumably the West’s] adversary and moral opposite. It is committed to the destruction of the post-war, rule-based world order built on American leadership and the primacy of our political and economic values.” McCain believes Putin wishes a return to the past to a “world of competing great powers, where tactical alliances and rivalries are formed to serve the narrowest national interests”—all in all, a classic Cold Warish analysis.

**Security dilemma**

There has been no solid trust in the U.S.-Russian relations in much of the post-Cold War era and the demise of the Soviet Union appears not to have made much of a difference; suspicions have persisted and infected all dimensions of possibilities for cooperation. This view suggests that even if all crises between the U.S. and Russia are successfully solved, more crises are to come until genuine trust is built between them. In an environment of suspicions and mistrust, “security dilemma” forces thrive. Security dilemma is a situation when “a state, in fashioning security for itself, leaves other states unsure whether their own security thereby may not be endangered, leading them to beef up their own security efforts, thus ratcheting up the response of the first state” (Legvold 2016, 248). It is crucial for national leaders to understand the very real phenomenon of security dilemma because if they don’t, they are “more likely to behave in ways that set off spirals of conflict.” They will often “fail to see that in seeking to increase their own security, they may be menacing others,” and when others start menacing them, they will often attribute the threat to the others’ intention and hostility (Jervis 1994, 773).
Joseph Stalin (1952) was very distrustful and suspicious of capitalist states. He was confident that capitalism promotes imperialistic expansion and a new major war between the Soviet Union and the “imperialism” of capitalistic countries is inevitable. From Stalin until Mikhail Gorbachev, deep security dilemma concerns had been ingrained in Soviet leaderships, while similar concerns had been mirrored in American leaderships for decades since the formation of the USSR. It is no wonder that in the post-Cold War era both Russian and American leaders have found it difficult to repudiate these concerns and suspicions of security dilemma. Through the lens of these concerns and suspicions, Putin might interpret the U.S. and NATO expansion of military bases around Russia’s territory as hostile military actions (Itzkovitz Shifrinson 2016), and to view the U.S. political and financial support of NGOs and oppositional parties in Russia as attempts to challenge Putin’s authority. For the U.S. to disprove Putin’s suspicions is near to impossible as it is near to impossible to disprove conspiracy theories.

**How the Cold War started**

It is important to understand why the Cold War started in the first place. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that after WWII, the two military superpowers with conflicting ideologies and incompatible views on the world political order would start a mutual struggle. However, it is a mistake to underestimate a personal contribution of Stalin in initiation of the Cold War; his “worldview that regarded capitalist states as implacably hostile, may have been incapable of being reassured” (Legvold 2016, 134). His military might and Marxist-Leninist ideology were an increasing threat to the U.S. and its allies—reciprocally, they were a threat to Stalin. The Cold War thus “escalated from the Berlin Blockade in 1948 through the Korean War (1950-53) to the end of the Stalin era in 1953” (73). Stalin and the succeeding Soviet leaders believed in genuine
proletarian international revolutions, they “never meant to bind their hands” in assisting where possible revolutionary forces in the Third World (172).

Each side of the Cold War wanted to be prepared for the “worst case” scenario—an outright war between the two superpowers. However, the ensuing preparations for the war only confirmed the other side’s worst suspicions, setting off military armament rivalry into a cold, not hot, war. Robert Jervis (1994) demonstrates that psychology has a say in such situations: “Once one believes the other side is highly aggressive, empathy is both extremely difficult and likely to be seen as unnecessary since there will be pressure to base policy on ‘worst case’ assumptions” (771). In other words, each side, when felt threatened, had a cognitive difficulty to understand concerns and judgments of the other, thus escalating a spiral of intimidation. For example, the “U.S. thought that the Soviet Union would never dare place missiles in Cuba, and the USSR thought that doing so was both necessary for its security and would be tolerated by the U.S.” (771). Jervis’s research emphasizes the importance of a perceived threat, which was singled out in the balance-of-threat theory. The Soviet and U.S. decisions to act based upon their perception of threat, often rooted in worst suspicions and assumptions, were deeply flawed—they provoked for matching actions from the counterparty—making the whole scenario and decisions rather a self-fulfilling prophecy. These decisions might seem prudent in retrospect, but, in reality, they were based on mere self-fulfilling suspicions and assumptions that were, probably, second worst to a full-scale active war.

After the Second World War (WWII), Stalin had no intentions of “withdrawing” his armed forces from Europe (Gaddis 2005, 32). Europe had to be divided into two blocs: The Eastern bloc, dominated by the Soviet Union, and the Western, dominated by the U.S. Stalin naturally believed that a socialistic approach to
economy is superior to capitalism. And in the Soviet Union, after all, Stalin had achieved full employment and “forced a largely agrarian nation … to become a heavily industrialized [one]” (31). Therefore, Stalin was convinced that authoritarian communism is the future of all Europe and was willing to assist those people in Western Europe, who shared and supported his views.

The military and economic successes of the Soviet Union made postwar Europe easy to assume that “authoritarian communism [is] the wave of the future” (32). But after the end of WWII, the Soviet Union was exhausted and needed peace. Stalin thus shunned the prospect of another hot war, yet he was sufficiently assertive to achieve maximum benefits in postwar order for the Soviet Union from his American and British counterparts (Roberts 2005). In the next decades, however, relations between the West and East unfolded in the direction of increasing hostility, not cooperation. Having said that, one of the main reasons why the Cold War “stayed cold” and never escalated into a hot war or direct confrontation between the two superpowers was the existence of nuclear weapons (Haass 2016, 85). The enormous destruction capability of the atomic and hydrogen bombs made it pointless to attack first as the retaliation, of at least an equal damage, was certain, making it, arguably, a perfect deterrence weapon.

“Containment” as foreign policy

George Kennan, aka Mr. “X” (1947), the author of the famous containment doctrine, suggested that a “policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilante containment of Russian expansive tendencies” (575). He called the Soviet Union a “rival” and advised to continue “persistent pressure toward the disruption and weakening of all rival influence and rival power.” Kennan believed that the Soviet society had “deficiencies” and the containment policy would
“eventually weaken … [the] total potential” of the Soviet Union (581). And history may have shown Kennan to have been right.

It seems that today’s U.S. policy toward Russia is alike the containment doctrine of the Cold War era as the U.S. wants to weaken Russia through comprehensive and targeted sanctions and deterrence, hoping that Putin’s regime has deficiencies and is unstable in the long term. Kennan, however, had later reversed his position on the containment and criticized the U.S. foreign policy and the Cold War. He argued that the Soviet Union represented not a military threat and “had no intentions of rolling its tanks into Western Europe,” but rather political and economic threats—meaning the U.S. needed to increase its aid for Western Europe primarily in the realms of political and economic dimensions (Legvold 2016, 139). Kennan even expressed “frustration” with the creation of NATO, and believed that the focusing on the military threat of the Soviet Union would only increase the probability of an armed conflict between the East and West (140).

His views on NATO were similar in the post-Cold War era vis-à-vis Russia. In a New York Times op-ed, Kennan (1997) wrote that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold war era.” During his academic life, Kennan had vocally argued for the U.S. foreign policy change toward the Soviet Union (and then Russia), but Washington remained largely indifferent to his criticism. Ironically, Kennan considered the implementation of the containment policy, that he largely but inadvertently devised, as an abrogation of his considerations and suggestions (Kennan 1972).

During the Cold War, many countries, including the Soviet leaderships, considered the USSR as an equal power to the U.S. without which no global issue could be successfully resolved. As Andrei Gromyko (1981), the long-running Soviet
foreign minister, had put it, “no major international problem is being settled or can be settled today without Soviet participation” (13). However, Washington did not want to treat Moscow as an equal. And after the demise of the Soviet Union this attitude only deepened: “Russia should have no interests abroad except those determined by Washington” (Cohen 2011, 342).

The U.S. and the Soviet Union had built equal partnerships in nuclear arms and proliferation spheres but they failed to build a common framework of policies for the Third World. Washington did not want Moscow to “interfere with its diplomacy” in regions, which it perceived in the realm of the U.S. national interest, for instance, the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Legvold 2016, 147). Soviet leadership, in turn, beginning from Stalin, did not share this stance; they were rather driven by a moral imperative to assist revolutionaries in the Third World. Khrushchev explained this attitude as “I’m not an adventurer, but we must aid national liberation movements” (Taubman 2003, 354). These contrasting approaches of two superpowers threatened their whole partnership efforts, menacing the peace and stability of the relations between them.

Prominent features of the Cold War were its two major military alliances (NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization) and proxy confrontations in the Third World. After the successful implementation and results of the Marshal Plan (the U.S.-funded European Recovery Program), on a farm smaller scale, the U.S. practiced similar military, economic and financial assistance programs for countries of the Third World, where the possibility of a communist revolution existed. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union counteracted this policy by providing assistance to revolutionary political forces. For most of the Cold War, the U.S. administrations paid little attention to domestic policies and affairs of the recipient-countries, but, more
importantly, to “foreign policy orientation” and whether they were “sufficiently anti-
Communist” (Haas 2016, 71). Needless to say that millions among the average
citizenry of Third World states suffered from this U.S.-Soviet confrontation and the
consequent left and right political repressions and “hot” wars which affected their
countries in the Cold War years.

**Causes of USSR’s demise**

The end of the Cold War is often, rightly or wrongly, associated and coupled with the
end of the Soviet Union. So why did the Soviet Union end? Many political scientists
and economists believe that the Soviet political and economic system “was deeply and
structurally flawed,” that it was an unsustainable system based on fear, collectivi-
ization, unreasonably large military budget, and “an economy ruled much more by
political than by market forces” (Haas 2016, 91). But if the Soviet political-economic
system was so bad, then it is rather puzzling how the Soviet Union had achieved
exceptional military arms, advanced industry, medicine and sciences.

Cohen (2011) argues that despite Gorbachev having inherited a country full of
social and economic problems, these problems by themselves did not threaten the
integrity of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Gorbachev was confident that the Soviet
people were in favor of radical reforms to enhance their standards of living. He
thought that the more open government and free press with the minimum of
censorship would improve governance, decrease social tensions, and even have a
positive effect on the economy. He was, however, hesitant to introduce mechanisms
of free markets and unrestricted private property rights because he was worried about
an ensuing growing income inequality, and worried that much of the said policies
went against his ingrained socialist convictions. He and his advisers were “more
interested less in Western [economic] ideas than in Western aid.” In fact, “[t]he Soviet
Union repeatedly asked [even begged towards the end] for financial assistance” from the West, but a Marshall Plan-style economic package “which many Soviet officials hoped never materialized” (Miller 2016, 19).

Indeed, Gorbachev had faith in the ideas of socialism and democracy, but was dubious, or at least reluctant, about the need for a larger role of market mechanisms in the Soviet economy. Although Gorbachev’s *glasnost* had many constructive socio-political effects, as a result of him not being able and willing to address the economic component of reforms, his policies also had detrimental consequences on the Soviet Union. One of the unintended consequences of *glasnost* was the rise of nationalism in all Soviet republics. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the largest republic and backbone of the USSR, led by an ambitious politician, Boris Yeltsin, did not escape the growing nationalism bug, either. Yeltsin wanted to be the head of the sovereign independent Russian Federation and deprive Gorbachev of the all power. He led the protest against the State Committee of Emergency (aka “gang of eight”), who in August 1991 had staged a coup or putsch, led by high ranking hard-liners against Gorbachev’s foreign and domestic policies. After the coup failed, Yeltsin overshadowed Gorbachev’s political leadership, and the process of the disintegration of the Soviet Union accelerated (Cohen 2011).

On 8 December 1991, Yeltsin, as the head of RSFSR, signed, without having legal authority to do so, the Belovezha Accords along with the heads of the Belarusian and Ukrainian still Soviet Republics, what formalized and declared the dissolution of the Soviet Union and establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in its place. On 25 December 1991, Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, transferred to Yeltsin the launch codes for nuclear weapons and signed the decree that officially terminated the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. In his
farewell address on 25 December 1991, printed in *The New York Times* (1991) the following day, Gorbachev said:

“We had a lot of everything—land, oil and gas, other natural resources—and there was intellect and talent in abundance. However, we were living much worse than people in the industrialized countries were living and we were increasingly lagging behind them. The reason was obvious even then. This country was suffocating in the shackles of the bureaucratic command system. Doomed to cater to ideology, and suffer and carry the onerous burden of the arms race, it found itself at the breaking point.”

In the same message, he also said: “An end has been put to the ‘Cold War’, the arms race and the insane militarization of our country, which crippled our economy, distorted our thinking and undermined our morals. The threat of a world war is no more” (Gorbachev 1995, xxxviii). Today, those words may sound somewhat naïve and misjudged.

Cohen (2011) emphasizes the role of agency in the dissolution of USSR, arguing that, counterfactually speaking, without unique political roles and contributions of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, the Soviet Union would not have collapsed; its political-economic system would have eventually likely been partially reformed, and its political status and influence in the world would have largely been upheld. Gorbachev was the only person in the Communist Party establishment who was willing to reform the Soviet state, and he was even radicalized further in favor of reforms when faced with opposition in the Party. Indeed, “not all national leaders would have followed the path that Gorbachev did” (Jervis 1994, 776); in this sense, undoubtedly, he was a “historically fateful personality” (Breslauer 2002, 269). Cohen’s account of the end of the Soviet Union and Cold War thus puts the emphasis on political leaders, rather than ideologies or a faceless establishment. He also decouples and advises not to conflate the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Cohen’s account, when taken into the new era, also conveys that Putin and Trump
play crucial roles in transforming what may be the New Cold War into less grievous and less precarious one or ending it altogether.

Despite consistent explanations and ostensible consensus of why the Soviet Union collapsed, in actuality, there is no consensus whatsoever; the debate over the reasons is far from settled. In retrospect, it appears as the disintegration of the Soviet Union was inevitable and obvious—what is referred to as “hindsight bias” (Cohen 2011, 175). However, before the demise, virtually no serious scholar, expert or institution had predicted this historical event or at least its timing (Aron 2011). It is also a matter of debate whether the collapse of the Soviet Union has benefitted the U.S. Those (particularly political realists) who believe that for the U.S., losses from the Soviet Union’s demise outweighed benefits argue that the balance of power, important for world peace and stability, between the U.S. and the Soviet Union (so called “bipolarity”), ceased to exist (Haass 2016, 93).

Cohen (2010), in turn, argues that the “American triumphalism” narrative after the disintegration of the Soviet Union prevailed in the U.S. and, ostensibly, led to the U.S. foreign policy that inspired a New Cold War. However, Mark Kramer (2014), a political scientist at Harvard University, argues that “stability during the Cold War was often non-existent” to begin with. The Cold War era was filled with crises: the confrontations over “Turkey and Iran right after WWII, the Berlin Blockade of 1948-49, the Korean War, the Quemoy and Matsu crises of the 1950s, and the Cuban missile crisis, which brought the world close to nuclear war,” among other incidences. Nevertheless, it is still arguable whether the world benefitted or not from the end of the Cold War, i.e. the elimination of the communist/socialist alternative and the ensuing predominance of one superpower (the U.S.) and its agenda of democracy, neoliberalism, and perpetual capitalism for all states and nations, a sort of “end of
history” plan and scenario, a political concept developed by Francis Fukuyama (1992).

For Fukuyama, the triumph of Western liberal democracy over authoritarianism, and capitalism (free markets) over central planning was an inevitable predictable outcome of historical process as liberal democracy and capitalism are more powerful, rational and just forces. For Cohen (2011), on the other hand, the demise of the Soviet Union was “a tragic mistake” by way of the loss of “a familiar state and a secure way of life” for millions of Soviet people and the end of perestroika (reforms), which became “a ‘lost chance’ for democracy” (285).

**From enmity to amity?**

Although the Soviet Union is long gone, Putin and many Russians have retained a cherished belief that Russia (as the successor of the Soviet Union) should be “treated with respect as a superpower,” even an equal to the U.S. (Haldevang 2017). Putin (2015) has described the demise of the Soviet Union “as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” However, most Russians did not resist—even cheered—the dismantling of the USSR. This was out of “deference, indifference, hope, or fear.”

At the same time, Gorbachev lost his support base among Russians, and as the Belovezha Accords (which dismantled the USSR on 8 December 1991) had already been signed, Yeltsin and his “co-abolitionists” declared that the Soviet Union was “immediately being replaced” by the CIS, which “strongly resembled the ‘soft’ union ... proposed by both Gorbachev and Yeltsin” (Cohen 2011, 258). Despite their hopes, however, in reality, in the post-Soviet Russia of 1990s, the majority of Russians lived through poverty and malfunction of state institutions, a traumatic experience, which led most Russians to shift their perception of the abolition of the Soviet Union from one of “triumph” to a “tragic mistake” (285).
Today, Moscow and Washington cannot agree on how to perceive one another. Washington wants to treat Russia according to its economic size—one-twelfth the size of that of the U.S.—whereas, Russia wants to be perceived and treated according to its military nuclear capability on par with the U.S., though Russia’s military budget is nine times smaller than the U.S. defense spending (IMF 2017; SIPRI 2017). This discordance of perceptions and treatment causes a broad range of tensions and provides the foundation for the what have become escalated *de facto* proxy wars in Syria and Ukraine (and potentially Afghanistan); it also damages long-term partnership in other less controversial, but, ostensibly, more important spheres such as global climate change and nuclear non-proliferation.

Gorbachev’s key foreign policy decisions were crucial for ending the Cold War: “major disarmament concessions to the United States, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern and Central Europe, the reunification of Germany on Western terms, and support for the American war against Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait” (Cohen 2011, 222). Putin, however, is unlikely to follow this sort of path in order to end a New Cold War. He believes (as many Russians do) that Gorbachev’s appeasement policy vis-à-vis the U.S. was fallacious and disastrous for the geopolitical influence of the Soviet Union. Unlike what some in Washington may think, Putin is not paranoiac about restoration of the Soviet influence, but he is willing to be tough and take risks of confrontation with the West when it comes to Russia’s national interests primarily in, but not restricted to, the post-Soviet republics.

During the Cold War era, both Soviet and American leaderships had understood that they are stuck in a spiral of mutual mistrust and arms race. John Kennedy, in his commencement address at American University in 1963, said that “both [countries are] caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion
Thus, Kennedy admitted that the military contest was irrational and could lead to undesirable outcomes. Having said that, it is also important to mention that the Cold War also had an ironic positive side: It “greatly expanded support for an enormous range of scientific research” from basic science to space exploration to engineering new technologies (Needell 2013, 3). Many discoveries and inventions of the Cold War’s technological rivalry were, in later years, commercialized and introduced to consumer and business markets. The Internet, what later became the World Wide Web, is one such example of a Cold War-inspired technology.

When the original Cold War ended is a matter of debate among political scientists and historians. Those who believe that the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet regime may also hold the idea that what may be a New Cold War will also end when the political regime of Putin ends and Russia becomes a genuine liberal Western-leaning democracy; they believe Putin’s goal is “to damage American confidence and to undermine the Western alliances—diplomatic, financial, and military—that have shaped the postwar world” (Osnos 2017). Others, who believe that the Cold War ended during Gorbachev’s government (among them Stephen F. Cohen), argue that the removal of Putin from Kremlin is not a key to resolving the New Cold War’s enmity. The beginning and continuation of the Cold War was a positive feedback loop (a spiral) of animosity between two superpowers; similarly, the ending of the Cold War, as initiated by Gorbachev, rooted in a spiral of friendly, pro-peace political steps from the Soviet Union toward the U.S. and its allies. This is an argument which social and political “constructivists,” such as Alexander Wendt (1992) and Daniel Thomas (2005), would agree with, that ideas, such as the need for
peace and human rights, “trumped geopolitics and economics in resolving the Cold War” (Cambanis 2015).

John L. Gaddis (2005) argues that Reagan and Gorbachev personally greatly contributed to the ending of the Cold War to the point where both sides started to view each other as partners. Both, despite criticism and warnings inside their respective countries were bold enough to make historical decisions which renewed and reset the U.S.-Soviet relations—with the finest relations between them enjoyed during the last few years of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev’s remarkable leadership abilities substantially transformed foreign and defense policies of the Soviet Union within a mere two years in 1986-1987 (Zubok 2003; English 2000; Brown 2012; Chernyaev 2000; Matlock 2004). He wanted to decrease the role of the military and military-industrial complex in Soviet politics and economy, instead, refocusing elites’ and people’s attention and efforts on political and economic reforms (what is known as perestroika), but also on the practice of open consultative governance and free speech (aka glasnost). After the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe which had revealed many problems of the Soviet system, Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost “began in earnest” (Economist 2016). His sweeping radical and unexpected reforms in domestic and foreign affairs were embraced and often reciprocated in Washington.

Today, however, neither Moscow nor Washington anticipates policy reforms from the other side; neither is willing to make a first unambiguous step toward détente. Gorbachev’s radical reforms were a reaction for the stagnating Soviet economy and people’s demands for better life. Today, although Russia’s economy noticeably suffers from the sanctions imposed by the Western states and massive fall in oil prices since 2014, the Russian economy has, nonetheless, stabilized, with the World Bank (2017) even predicting a “moderate growth rate” of an average annual
rate of around 1.4 percent over 2017-2019 (33). Thus, it is not reasonable to expect from Putin any significant concessions or reforms, which would be acknowledged and reciprocated by the U.S. Nonetheless, Putin wants a lifting of the sanctions and is even accused of supporting and interfering in favor of political candidates for elections in major Western states (including the U.S.), who advocate inefficiency of the sanctions and their eventual cancellation (Thiessen 2017).

The Cold War’s legacy

Although the Cold War ended, the mentality and way of thinking it produced could not be eliminated overnight and, I argue, remains strong to this day. The paradigm of the Cold War has continued and is alive in the minds of American and Russian peoples and in the mentality and actions of their leaders and foreign policy bureaucracies. Americans and Russians through polls and elections express and reinforce the Cold War fears in their elected leaders; in turn, political leaders through public speeches, seeking to resonate with the people, reinforce the same old Cold War fears; thus, both sides consistently advance to further polarized views and attitudes.

Russians and many former Soviet peoples had to live through the humiliation of poverty and political weakness in 1990s; they felt deceived and betrayed by the West when little help was offered when hostilities had subsided. The falling standards of living of 1990s made a minority of Russians “likely to see an anti-Russian conspiracy,” while many were “quick to attribute events to the concerted efforts of others, if not a conspiracy” (Jervis 1994, 775). Had Russia successfully and relatively smoothly transformed into a liberal democracy with a well-functioning market economy as did the Central European and Baltic states, perhaps, Russia would have been much more friendly to the U.S. and mitigated the U.S-Russian disagreements, resulting in a constructive strategic partnership. Had the U.S., in turn, provided
efficient and generous economic and financial aid for Soviet Union, then Russia in 1990s and not neglected its interests in neighboring post-Soviet states, Russia would have seen in the U.S. a reliable truthful partner—again the results would have been drastically different from today’s. These steps would have destroyed for both sides the “enemy image” remaining from the Soviet period.

Gorbachev doubted and criticized the Soviet foreign and defense policies, what had been a virtual self-criticism. Once he was convinced in the fallaciousness of the Soviet foreign policy, he made resolute decisions to end the hostility with the U.S. After the demise of the Soviet Union and Gorbachev’s retirement, self-criticism in Kremlin and the White House has been virtually non-existent. Although Donald Trump as a presidential candidate promised to change the U.S. attitude and normalize relations with Russia, his efforts as a new president have not yet produced visible or promising results. In turn, Putin, after overcoming economic difficulties caused by the Western sanctions, after the armed involvements in Syria and Ukraine, has very few reasons to appease Washington, not to mention, reputational risks for himself of weakness in the eyes of Russian citizenry and other observers. So far neither side has the will or pressing reasons to break the continuing cycle of mistrust.

**Post-Cold War inertia and setbacks**

After the end of Cold War Washington and its allies showed a strong inertia in adapting to a new post-Cold War reality. The Warsaw Treaty Organization, the Soviet Union-led political and military alliance with the Eastern bloc, had disintegrated on 1 July 1991. Its counterpart, NATO, however, continued to exist and adopted a new Strategic Concept in 1991. Although NATO reduced its military forces, its structure, institutions and military capabilities remained largely untouched and intact. Another Cold War leftover from the American side was the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment
that denied Russia (the Soviet Union’s successor) a trading status of most-favored-nation, what had originally been introduced as a sanction for the Soviet restrictions on Jewish immigration. Though the said Amendment was eventually repealed, in 2012 it was instead replaced with the Magnitsky Act, an anti-corruption U.S. law against Russian officials responsible for the death of Russian accountant Sergey Magnitsky in a Moscow prison in 2009 as a likely result of neglect and abuse (Downing 2012).

In Russia, the 1990s were a disaster for the military: Many military personnel, formations and units were “demoralized” and reduced, military “arms and equipment [were] unmaintained and rusting”; overall, Russia’s Armed Forces’ combat capability seriously deteriorated (Legvold 2016, 172). Many Russian politicians were upset that NATO remained intact and fomented “mistrust” of the West (175); they believed that after the end of the Cold War and thus any possibility of a Soviet attack on NATO members having been removed, NATO’s self-dissolution would have proven the benign intentions of the West vis-à-vis Russia. Deep mistrust of the U.S. among Russians solidified after the unanticipated plight of 1990s; the rise of oligarchs, who privatized enormous state property for extremely cheap prices, often with the encouragement and overseeing of Western-dominated international financial institutions; the preservation and enlargement of NATO; and the bombing of Serbia (a Slavic ally-nation in the eyes of Russians). These mistrusts were inflamed by plenty of politicians, who capitalized on the Russian people’s disillusionment with the West, becoming the nouveau riche billionaires who dominated the country’s domestic economy, exploiting its natural resources and funneling cash to offshore accounts.

By 1996, the plight of Russia was so grave that Gennady Zuganov, leader of Russia’s Communist Party, was the most supported politician and imminent (next) Russian president. Only with the unprecedented, unconditional support (practically
propaganda) of national TV media, controlled by Russian oligarchs and the government was Yeltsin able to boost his approval rating from dismal initially-predicted five percent to a final 54 percent of the vote and was re-elected for the second presidential term (Ostrovsky 2015).
CHAPTER THREE

YES, THERE IS A “NEW COLD WAR”

“The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.”—Niels Bohr
(quoted in Rozental 1967, 328)

Is it justified to label the U.S-Russian confrontation as a New Cold War? Are there geopolitical and ideological resemblances between the Cold War and New Cold War? The U.S.-Russian struggle does not have the geographical and political scope of the original Cold War, yet the Cold War ignited just prior to a geographically small but major crisis over the Berlin Blockade in 1948-1949. Cohen (2007) argues that “antagonisms between Washington’s ‘democracy-promotion’ policies and Moscow’s self-described ‘sovereign democracy’ have become intensely ideological” and contemporary Russia’s “non-Communist system is scarcely like the American one.” In recent years, Russia has positioned itself domestically and internationally as a “non-European civilization,” leading a so called “Russian World” (Onyszkiewicz 2015). Cohen (2007) emphasizes that dispute over whether there really is a New Cold War or not is not merely academic. The failure of the U.S. policymakers to recognize the severity of woeful relationship with Russia increases the risk of squandering an already weak but still viable opportunity for the U.S.-Russian partnership created by Gorbachev and Reagan. Yet, the majority of those, who admit the tragic state of relations between the two superpowers, blame the outcome “solely on Putin’s domestic and foreign policies.” Controversially, critics as Cohen claim, the blame should have been put on policies of American administrations since President Bill Clinton. For years, there has also existed a psychological complexity—“feelings of
betrayal and mistrust on both sides.” Cohen posits that the underlying cause of the New Cold War is an abasing American triumphalism as the “winner” of the Cold War, “the belief that Russia, diminished and weakened by its loss of the Soviet Union, had no choice but to bend to America’s will.”

On 10 July 1991, Yeltsin had become the president of a newly independent state, a successor of the Soviet Union—the Russian Federation. In February 1992, Yeltsin had a very warm and promising official meeting with George H. W. Bush. The two presidents had signed a declaration proclaiming that: “Russia and the United States do not regard each other as potential adversaries. From now on, the relationship will be characterized by friendship and partnership founded on mutual trust and respect and a common commitment to democracy and economic freedom” (AP 1992). Indeed, in those early 1990s, there was no harbinger of coming sour relations between Russia and the West. Fast-forward a quarter century and in 2016, at the Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club in Sochi, Russia, Putin’s rhetoric vis-à-vis the West and U.S. was quite different from the declarations of Yeltsin during his first presidential term. He accused the West in the demonization of him and Russia and in demonstrating “no desire to resolve the real international problems in the world today.” He called NATO an outdated organization reluctant to adapt to new realities, and complained that Russia sees “constant attempts [by the West] to turn the OSCE, a crucial mechanism for ensuring common European and also trans-Atlantic security, into an instrument in the service of someone’s foreign policy interests,” leading to what he said was the “hollowing out” of “this very important organization.” He resented that Western establishment and media have been defaming Russia by an incessant referral to a “Russian military threat,” suggesting that “this is a profitable business ... used to pump new money into defence budgets at home, get allies to bend
to a single superpower’s interests, expand NATO and bring its infrastructure, military units and arms closer to our borders” (Putin 2016).

At the same meeting in Sochi, Putin reiterated Russia’s official position on nuclear weapons: “Nuclear weapons are a deterrent and a factor of ensuring peace and security worldwide,” he said. “It is impossible to consider them as a factor in any potential aggression, because it is impossible, and it would probably mean the end of our civilisation.” Furthermore, he said that “possession of nuclear arms by leading countries was one of the reasons why the world has not experienced a major armed conflict in the more than 70 years since the end of WWII. But [that] it is important to observe non-proliferation of both nuclear arms and their delivery vehicles.” He further reminded those present that “when our US partners unilaterally walked out of the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty … we [were] compelled to upgrade the complex of our assault systems … but whether we like it or not, in this way we both escalated the arms race even in this area” (Putin 2016).

Washington, in turn, ascribes the downward spiral of the U.S.-Russian relations to Russia and, in particular, Vladimir Putin’s character. In 2015, Obama offered a disconcerting judgment of the Russian leadership, claiming that Putin “has a foot very much in the Soviet past …[and that] he looks at problems through this Cold War lens.” Obama mentioned that years of serving with the KGB, the key Soviet security agency, were Putin’s “formative experiences” and summarized Putin’s rule as missing “opportunities for Russia to diversify its economy, to strengthen its relationship with its neighbors, to represent something different than the old Soviet style aggression.” While the U.S. is involved in its longest war in its history thousands of kilometers away from its mainland, and while it has been selling and funnelling arms to Saudi Arabia and Syria, Obama remarked in the same interview that “if
Russia is doing badly, the concern is that they revert to old expansionist ideas that really shouldn’t have any application in the 21st century” (Obama 2015). Washington’s account of the New Cold War thus does not indicate the responsibility of the American foreign policy or NATO enlargement as causes of the hostility, but rather points an accusatory finger directly at Kremlin and misjudgments of Putin.

How did the two superpowers arrive at such low levels of disapproval and discontent of the other side given their promising relations in early 1990s? Russia discarded its communist-based ideology and shifted to a capitalist economy based on free market forces of supply and demand and private property. For much of the initial post-Cold War era, Russia has not been a geostrategic rival to the U.S. and has had no conflict with U.S. vital national interests if one were to define these interests as those over which the U.S. is willing to go to war for. Another definition of U.S. vital interests could be the ensuring physical security of American people in the world; again, by this definition, Russia does not appear to threaten the security of Americans. Conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and Syria may be of importance for Washington, but can be argued that they are not threats to the U.S. vital interests. Then why has the hostility taken so bitter forms, we may ask? This Thesis argues that after the initial euphoria of the end of the Cold War, Moscow and Washington began to gradually and consistently build Cold War-like animosities against each other, a process which peaked and became blatant by come the Ukraine Crisis by 2013-2014.

The conflict in Ukraine (to be discussed further below) was a crucial factor in the U.S.-Russian, as by that time deeply opposing, relations. Throughout the U.S.-Russian relations from the early Yeltsin presidency in the immediate post-Cold War era, the two sides have failed, claims Robert Legvold (2016), to “place the relationship on a self-sustaining basis, ever to find sturdy ground on which to build a
progressively more fruitful relationship.” Legvold claims that “[n]othing has been more striking or frustrating about the US–Russian relations over the last quarter century than the law-like rise and fall of expectations” (155).

**Peculiarities of the New Cold War**

Cohen (2017b) argues that the New Cold War is more dangerous than the previous or original Cold War. He believes “today’s American-Russian confrontation is developing in unprecedented ways—and the U.S. political-media establishment seems not to care.” Cohen presents six arguments as to why the New Cold War is more perilous than its predecessor. First is NATO and the epicenter of confrontations (Ukraine), which is on Russia’s borders, stir growing concerns for Russia. Second, the U.S. and Russia back opposite sides of the Syrian conflict, thus there is always a risk of unintended lethal accidents involving American or Russian troops. [One could add Afghanistan to the list of today’s U.S.-Russia proxy wars. According to the top U.S. General John Nicholson, Russia is providing military support to the Taliban (Gibbons-Neff 2017)]. Third, unlike the U.S.-Soviet relations, which after the Cuban-missile crisis in 1962 had an overall tendency toward cooperation, today’s U.S.-Russian hostility seems only rising. Forth, Putin has been demonized by the Western political-media establishment for years, which did not happen to Soviet leaders. Russia has been “so Putinized,” says Cohen, to the level when it obstructs acknowledgement that Russia has “legitimate national interests at home or abroad.”

Fifth is “Russiagate” or the alleged indictments for Russia’s interference in U.S. elections, from Trump campaign collusion with Putin to Kremlin’s manipulations of social media to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Russiagate has paralyzed Trump’s administration efforts to normalize relations with Russia. Any attempts by Trump in possible accommodations with Russia are interpreted as
confirmation of the collusion, while supporters for return to normalized and constructive cooperation with Russia are labeled as Kremlin’s propagandists. And the sixth reason as to why the New Cold War is more dangerous than the previous, according to Cohen, is that today there are very few dissenting voices in mainstream U.S. media and politics (and one could argue in Russia media and politics, as well) against a runaway animus toward Russia (and the U.S.). Without a “robust public debate,” destructive policies are likely to persist, claims Cohen.

Cohen (2017b) further develops his argument by adding three new circumstances as to why the confrontation and sanctions against Russia is futile, even counterproductive. First, the Russian economy has significantly recovered in the last two years as it has “vast natural, human and territorial resources.” This could signify that despite any sanctions against Russia, that the New Cold War can potentially last for a long time. Second, Russia has “emerging allies from the list of the so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and there is also “growing rapprochement between NATO member Turkey and Russia.” Third, an economically and militarily rising China is currently Russia’s “political, economic and potentially military partner.” Cohen claims that an atmosphere of “hysteria” over Russia has prevented the U.S. to face and properly address “three gravest threats to American national security—international terrorism, nuclear proliferation and cyber-attacks,” any one of which “could inadvertently trigger nuclear war.” These threats cannot be successfully neutralized without Russia’s participation as, according to Cohen, delusive “American triumphalism since the end of the Soviet Union” continues to obstruct adequate attention to and tackle such actual national security threats.

Cohen (2012) laments that in the U.S. “there is virtually no critical discussion, certainly no debate, about American policy toward Russia.” This lack of serious
debate among politicians and media is “in sharp contrast to fierce debates over Russia policy that took place in Congress, the national media, academia, think tanks and even at grassroots levels in the 1970s and 1980s.” By this view, Washington has taken a counterproductive and irrational position to put virtually all blame on Moscow for the historic failure to establish a U.S.-Russian partnership. Washington’s triumphalist posture towards Russia has “produced a winner-take-all diplomatic approach,” which among other things, assumes “that Russia’s interests abroad are less legitimate than America’s.” This, Cohen claims, is a form of “double-standard in relations with Moscow.” For example, while keeping and expanding the U.S. “sphere of military and political influence around Russia, Washington adamantly denounces Moscow’s quest for any zone of security, even on its own borders.”

The U.S. has also based its negotiations on vital issues with Russia on the premise that “Moscow should make all major concessions while Washington makes none.” According to Cohen (2012), Moscow has not had a “single meaningful concession” in a manner of reciprocity “from the United States since 1992.” Furthermore, there has been an assumption by the U.S. that Russia’s political sovereignty is less important than American sovereignty. Washington, says Cohen, “has pursued intrusive ‘democracy-promotion’ measures that flagrantly trespass on Moscow’s internal affairs.” An example being with the American Vice President Joe Biden “lobbying in Moscow against Putin’s return to the Russian presidency, and with the new U.S. ambassador’s profoundly ill-timed meeting with leaders of Moscow’s street protests.” Putting blame on Putin for anti-Americanism in Russia, misses an important point, according to Cohen: “[T]wenty years of American military and diplomatic policies have convinced a large part of Russia’s political class (and intelligentsia) that Washington’s intentions are aggressive, aggrandizing and
deceitful—anything but those of a partner.” Perhaps, the American electorate, at least a large portion of it, thinks differently about Russia than Washington politicians and U.S. mainstream media. The public voted for Donald Trump in 2016, who had during his campaign vowed to end the hostility with Russia and “get along” with Putin (Crowley 2017).

Cohen refers to the former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot’s memoir, The Russia Hand, which basically conveys that “all the official talk about eternal friendship and partnership was malarkey” during the Clinton administration (Smith 2015a). The U.S. does not want to acknowledge the legitimate national interests of Russia as a great power. If the U.S. admitted that Russia had a justified claim for the absence of NATO bases in neighbor countries, then NATO expansion should have “ended in Eastern Germany, as the Russians were promised,” claims Cohen. Yeltsin had been willing to cooperate and conceded to Washington throughout his presidential terms “until the Serbian war,” i.e. the NATO-led bombings of Yugoslavia. By the time of that war and NATO’s commencing of its plans to expand to the east, Kremlin became convinced that “Washington had a certain agenda.” Perhaps, his eventual alienation from the U.S. was one of the reasons why Yeltsin, a staunch anti-communist, appointed Putin, with a background in the KGB, as his successor.

Cohen points out that in the post-Cold War, Washington has failed to understand an important principle that both Reagan and Gorbachev agreed upon: “Security had to be mutual” (Smith 2015b). Their attempt to end the Cold War was successful because they built the U.S.-Soviet relationship on this principle, the negligence of which can bring about the condition of security dilemma: One side’s arms build-up provokes the other sides’ arms build-up, one side’s expansion and
unilateralism provokes the other side’s expansion and unilateralism. This principle is easily deduced from Walt’s (1987) balance-of-threat theory: If a state enhances its security and concurrently appearing as a more dangerous state, then this state quite predictably will face counteractions from other states. Another inference from the theory applicable to the U.S. foreign policy is that unilateral measures of a state to enhance security without concurrence of counterparts in the long-term will be counterbalanced and often cancelled out. The overarching trend of deterioration of the U.S.-Russian relations is well explained from the structural realism perspective. As Kenneth Waltz (2000) put it: “Victory in war, however, often brings lasting enmities. Magnanimity in victory is rare. Winners of wars, facing few impediments to the exercise of their wills, often act in ways that create future enemies” (37).

**Specifics of declining relations**

One could start to show the first stage of decline of the U.S.-Russian relations from Yeltsin’s first term presidency (1991-1996). Newly independent Russia had many problems from the possibility of famine to freezing houses during winters to pro-independence movements of republics within the Russian Federation. Yeltsin needed Washington’s support to survive. For George H. W. Bush (Bush Sr.), Yeltsin’s success “was seen as important, but [1991] was an election year, the U.S. economy was in recession, and there was resistance in both the administration and Congress to investing heavily in his success” (Legvold 2016, 161). Bush Sr. was nonetheless focused on how to deal with the vast Soviet nuclear arsenal spread across four post-Soviet independent, yet unstable states. Most of the nuclear arsenal remained in Russia, but in Kazakhstan, for example, the quantity of nuclear weapons nearly equaled the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. Falling standards of living of Russians threatened Yeltsin’s presidency and his reforms. The U.S. did provide food
aid to avoid people’s starvation in winters of 1991 and 1992, and also commenced
technical assistance, that is to say, American experts sent by Washington provided
consultancy on how to build “democratic institutions and a functioning market” (163).

It is a puzzle why after the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. with its huge
political and financial resources failed to harness a unique opportunity to establish
solid democratic institutions in Russia. Constantine C. Menges (1996) argues that the
U.S. assistance provided to newly independent Russia was mismanaged and
inefficiently allocated by the U.S. itself and international agencies. After the fall of
communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, there was “bipartisan
consensus” in the U.S. that new post-communist countries need vast financial and
technical aid for smooth transition to “democracy and free market institutions” (538).
President Clinton, before the first summit meeting with Yeltsin in 1993,
acknowledged that the security of the U.S. is linked to “the success of democracy and
reform in Russia” (539) and that helping to establish strong democratic and free
market institutions was a “preeminent strategic priority” for the U.S. (540).

Menges (1996) highlights five major mistakes made by the U.S. vis-à-vis aid
management during 1991-1995: First was the “failure among the most senior [U.S.]
leaders” to deliberately prioritize the most efficient “kinds of assistance needed to
help the post-Communist countries,” including Russia, to build democratic
institutions (551). The second mistake was the failure to identify and timely support
“genuinely pro-democratic leaders and groups” (552), while the third mistake was a
“misguided and often implicit economic determinism about the transition process”
(554). The assistance to a large extent was allocated for macroeconomic stabilization
and privatization initiatives, in line with the neoliberal principles of the Chicago
school of economics or “Washington consensus.” According to Nobel Laureate
economist Joseph Stiglitz (2002), such assistance involved devastating economic “shock therapy,” an economic stabilization policy “strongly advocated by U.S. Treasury and the [International Monetary Fund]” (141). The U.S. had wrongly assumed that “increased economic pluralism and prosperity in Russia … would necessarily lead to political liberalization and ultimately to genuine democracy” (Menges 1996, 554). However, there are many cases when decades of economic growth in a country do not necessarily bring genuine democracy.

The fourth mistake was the decision to provide assistance through the IMF and other international agencies that did not have adequate expertise and local knowledge to successfully transform Russia into democracy. The fifth mistake was a failure of the U.S. to effectively and efficiently administer its assistance to Russia. There was a lack of strategic planning on what purposes and mode of allocating the assistance. The management of the U.S. assistance “may one day be considered one of the greatest and most costly failures in contemporary history,” writes Menges, as the U.S. lacked “sufficient strategic insight, sense of purpose, timeliness, and effectiveness, to help fragile, weak, emerging pro-democratic groups and institutions consolidate and fundamentally change the political culture of Russia” (551).

The Clinton administration to a large extent continued Bush Sr.’s administration’s policy vis-à-vis Russia and Yeltsin, who was considered a democrat and pro-Western. Clinton believed—rightly so—that Russia had a key role and influence in democratization of post-Soviet countries, most importantly, as a “role model.” Russia was regarded as “key to outcomes throughout the former Soviet Union” (Legvold 2016, 164). It was assumed that a democratic Russia will make its post-Soviet neighbors more likely to become democratic as well; whereas the rise of authoritarianism in Russia would be imitated in neighboring post-Soviet states. These
assumptions could be regarded as quite truthful; the decline of democracy in Russia was followed by similar declines in many post-Soviet republics. A stable and prospering Russia, in turn, would imply a safer world for all states and region. However, if chaos and havoc were allowed in Russia, it would mean that the disastrous scenario of Yugoslavia’s disintegration—which involved “ethnic cleansing”—might be repeated in Russia, a country “spanning eleven time zones with an armed arsenal of nuclear weapons that [was then and] is still very vast” (Clinton 1993).

One of the serious threats to the U.S.-Russian partnership was “the destructive interaction between Russia’s heavy-handed behavior in the post-Soviet space and the [U.S.] contested role there” (Legvold 2016, 172). Early misgivings appeared in the way Russia closed its military facilities and withdrew its troops from the three Baltic states. Russian administration delayed and lingered the withdrawal of the Russian troops in Estonia to the point when Washington had to threaten to “cut off all American credits to Russia unless” it met the agreed deadline (Stanley 1994). Yeltsin and his administration from the beginning had been reluctant to “set about rectifying history and striving to build a relationship with these and other new neighbors inspiring comity rather than fear” (Legvold 2016, 174)—a scenario which is true today as well.

The other strike to the relationship came from the Balkans. By 1993, in Bosnia, a full-blown war was ongoing, supported by the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević on the side of Bosnian Serbs. The U.S.’ position was an immediate ceasefire in Bosnia, followed by punishment of the Yugoslavian and Bosnian Serbs’ leaderships for war crimes against civilians. Russia disagreed with the U.S. position as it perceived the conflicts in Yugoslavia as Milošević’s struggle for the country’s
integrity. Moreover, Russian establishment and public at large sympathized with and supported Yugoslavia and its leadership as a Slavic and Orthodox Christian brother-nation (Zolotov 1999).

Other problems arose from the decision of the Russian government to “sell cryogenic technology to the Indian space agency, a violation of the Missile Technology Control Regime of which Russia was a part,” in addition to “eagerness of Rosatom [Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation] to supply Iran with a light water nuclear reactor” and, by late 1994, Russia’s war in Chechnya (Legvold 2016, 181). Despite these problems, the two sides were able to accommodate one another and find acceptable compromises.

This period had some accomplishments as well: “[A] radically advanced strategic nuclear arms control agreement, the de-nuclearization of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, and the Cooperative Threat Reduction program to safely reduce and secure nuclear weapons in Russia” (182). At that period and stage of the U.S.-Russian relations, the two powers were still motivated to embrace and continue the progress regardless of how limited such a progress was. However, fateful and detrimental decisions lay ahead.

**NATO enlargement**

The decision to enlarge NATO and add to the alliance the former Warsaw Pact states of Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic in the late 1990s had been poisoning the U.S.–Russian relations from the outset. Yeltsin’s administration did not hide its apprehension with the talks on NATO enlargement but had little leverage to change the tendency. After NATO’s decision, the trajectory of the post-Cold War development of the U.S.-Russian relations was diverted to an unpredictable insidious area. This decision had both its critics and defenders. On one side, Kennan had
predicted in his 1997 op-ed for the *New York Times* that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold war era.” He also noted that this decision may “inflame the nationalist, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies” in Russia and “have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy to restore the atmosphere of the cold war [*sic.*] in East–West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

Defenders of the NATO enlargement plan argued that this decision allowed for the ensuring of security and stability in Central Europe, and strengthening strategic partnership between this region and the alliance. Anne Applebaum (2014), among the enlargement proponents, argues that the Eastern expansion has, in reality, been slow, cautious, and consistently reassuring Russia—“no NATO bases were placed in the new member states, and until 2013 no exercises were conducted there.” They also thought that the Eastern expansion “was never intended as a threat to Russia,” but was made “for bringing democracy and economic reform to ... new members” (Legvold 2016, 189). It is rather unsettling, but after eighteen years of the original NATO enlargement to the East, both sides could claim that they were right in their analysis. Despite high rhetoric of cooperation and partnership the U.S., Western European states and Russia have never “truly tried to build the [avowed] comprehensive, integrated European security system” (190). While NATO enlargement ensured security for some countries, it endangered security for other non-NATO East European states, most notably Ukraine. The U.S., the EU and Russia have failed to build on their ideal or rhetoric of a broader Euro-Atlantic security community from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

In January 1994 in Brussels, Bill Clinton made it clear that NATO enlargement is inevitable, announcing: “Only NATO has the military forces, the
integrated command, the broad legitimacy and the habits of cooperation that are essential to draw in new participants and respond to new challenges.” He highlighted NATO’s Partnership for Peace Program, claiming that it “will advance a process of evolution for NATO’s formal enlargement” and “looks to the day when NATO will take on new members who assume the Alliance’s full responsibilities.” Critics had argued, however, that there could have been an alternative way of building security in Europe. Among other things, there was no consensus within the Clinton administration, with his Secretary of Defense William Perry having resisted the idea of an early expansion of NATO and argued for “strengthening the NATO-Russia relationship” through development of Partnership for Peace program, instead (Goldgeier 2003, 195). General John Shalikashvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (born to Georgian and Polish parents in Poland), also opposed the enlargement arguing that “the short-term domestic political costs of a ‘Russia-first’ policy were well worth the longer-term benefits of not redividing Europe” (195). Nevertheless, the final decision was to proceed with the NATO enlargement and continue to build partnership between NATO and Russia, which by then had become an even stronger challenge. Today, it can be argued that Perry and Shalikashvili were right in their concerns. NATO’s expansion has made the European states between NATO and Russia less secure and, given the Ukraine Crisis, has become a stumbling block to Euro-Atlantic security and a central axis of spiral for the New Cold War.

Cohen (2017b) argues that NATO enlargement made less secure not only states between NATO and Russia but also NATO members, themselves. The expansion certified a violation of two promises given to Moscow: In 1990, the Bush administration promised Gorbachev verbally that in exchange for the Soviet concurrence with a reunified Germany in NATO, “the alliance would ‘not expand one
inch to the east.’” The second broken promise is “unfolding today as NATO builds up permanent land, sea, and air forces near Russian territory, along with missile-defense installations.” The latest state accepted into NATO was Montenegro on 5 June 2017. As for Ukraine and Georgia, NATO officials have repeatedly said that the alliance is open for new members. NATO is a “powerful political-ideological-lobbying institution—perhaps [even] the world’s most powerful corporation.” It successfully lobbies its interests in governments of member-states, media and academia.

Cohen (2017b) proposes to examine NATO activities since the end of Cold War to understand whether NATO increases security for its members or rather decreases. NATO’s military campaigns in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, for example, may have encouraged secessionist movements in other regions of Europe. It also encouraged NATO members to engage in risky engagements in the Middle East and North Africa. NATO was not involved in the 2003 U.S.-led Iraq War, as two of its key partners, France and Germany, resisted such a plan, an invasion which proved to be a disastrous mistake, leading to “expanding organized terrorism, including the Islamic State, and not only in the Middle East.” But a similar scenario played out for the 2011 military intervention in Libya, in which case NATO fully participated. According to Alan Kuperman (2013), NATO’s intervention “greatly exacerbated humanitarian suffering and security threats in Libya and its neighbors” (134). NATO’s promise of membership for Georgia instigated the Georgian-Russian animosity, which culminated in a war of 2008. Russia’s concerns over the Ukraine’s possible accession to NATO (and also potential EU membership) were an underlying cause of Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine and the Crimea annexation, thus today’s Ukraine Crisis. Another case is a military campaign in Afghanistan, which was “initially a NATO war effort but now the longest (and perhaps most un-winnable)
war in American history.” Cohen points out that “NATO’s incessant, ubiquitous media saturation and lobbying in Western capitals, particularly in the [U.S.], has been a major driving force behind the new Cold War and its rampant Russophobia.” Meanwhile, NATO’s vast resources have had little help in addressing genuine international crises as the rise of terrorism in the Middle East, the “Arab Spring” and Syria war-caused refugee crisis, and nuclear proliferation. NATO also has internal problems as “the growing alliance between NATO member Turkey and Russia” and an “emerging anti-NATO alliance centering around Russia, China, and Iran—itself a result of NATO’s 20-year expansion,” so claims Cohen.

Cohen (2017b) also attends to counter-arguments of NATO enlargement proponents. A main counter-argument is that East European and Baltic countries had to join NATO because they were concerned about a growing threat from post-Soviet Russia. However, in the 1990s, Russia was very weak, “a threat only to itself.” Even if a threat existed, it should have been attended otherwise, for instance, “acting on Gorbachev’s proposed ‘Common European Home’—that is, [constructing] a security agreement including all of Europe and Russia.” NATO expansion supporters often claim that “every qualified nation has a ‘right’ to NATO membership if it wishes to join.” However, NATO is a security organization and its main “criterion for membership should be whether or not membership enhances the security of its members.”

For Cohen (2017b), it has been clear from the outset that NATO expansion has not enhanced international security. He argues that the so called “Putin’s aggression” against the West has been in fact Moscow’s reactions to the U.S. and NATO policies in the first place. NATO encirclement of Russia had predictable negative consequences on Russia’s domestic politics such as the debilitation of democratic
institutions and upsurge of anti-Western political rhetoric. Cohen’s arguments support Walt’s theoretical point that “perception” of a threat matters far greater than the “actuality” of the threat. Even if we assume that NATO had no unfriendly implicit intentions toward Russia, it does not weaken Cohen’s arguments since Russia’s perception of the NATO threat has triggered a chain reaction, not necessarily the threat itself. Cohen’s argument sounds valid that NATO cannot keep expanding and concurrently ignoring Russia’s perception of that expansion. Either NATO has to fully reassure Russia that the expansion cannot be against Russia or stop the process. Otherwise, NATO and the U.S. should not be surprised with Russia’s further hostile reactions, according to Cohen.

Richard Sakwa (2015) provides a different perspective on the NATO expansion predicament. He outlines the U.S.-Russian relations since 1989 as “cold peace,” adding that “none of the fundamental issues of European security and the management of global affairs was resolved” largely because Western “victors” felt “there was not a problem.” Post-Soviet Russia’s claims for a “great power” status were “ill-founded and intemperate” permitted “neither by its economic weight nor its social power.” With the end of the Cold War, rivalry between two hostile blocs, a new all-encompassing alliance for “democracy, peace and development” could have been embraced, but “instead, the struggle for power, status and resources simply took new forms.” The Ukraine and Georgia crises were “symptoms” of a deeper long-term crisis between the U.S. and Russia transformed from the Cold War rivalry into often disguised insidious forms. The Ukraine Crisis is a new level of this rivalry, yet Sakwa avoids using the term “New Cold War” to describe the U.S-Russian hostility due to a lack of “geographical scope” and “ideological basis,” and thus refers to it as a “little Cold War” with a caveat that it might escalate from “little,” acknowledging that the
U.S.-Russian confrontation with their respective allies could “spiral out of control, provoking consequences bigger than anything seen in the post-war years.”

For Sakwa (2015), as early as December 1994, it had become clear that the “post-Cold War security system did not work to the satisfaction of all parties,” when Russian President Yeltsin had brought up the issue of “cold peace” at the 1994 OSCE Summit in Budapest in an indirect reference to NATO’s expansion plans. Yeltsin had also said: “We are concerned about the changes that are taking place in NATO. What is this going to mean for Russia? NATO was created during the Cold War. Why sow the seeds of mistrust? After all, we are no longer enemies; we are all partners now” (Kempster and Murphy 1994). Russia’s “sense of marginalization only intensified” with the first post-Cold War NATO enlargement in 1999 and, later, “continued NATO enlargement to Russia’s borders [with] promise of ultimate membership to Georgia and Ukraine,” NATO military interventions in Yugoslavia, the U.S. unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, 2003 Iraq invasion, “plans to deploy a ballistic missile defence (BMD) in Eastern Europe,” and alleged Western encouragement of color revolutions (Sakwa 2015).

The U.S. arguments have been that all these activities are not intentioned against Russia. Nevertheless, Sakwa puts the predicament of the U.S.-Russian enmity differently in that “if one of the parties feels aggrieved—irrespective of the validity of their concerns—then we have a security problem.” He outlines a number of processes which transformed the cold peace into the “little Cold War.” One is the 1989 Malta Summit, which, as to Gorbachev’s hopes, would declare an end of the Cold War and “formalize a politics of transcendence,” but instead “registered only a power shift within the framework of the politics of Yalta but with a reversed polarity.” The new balance of power burst in 2014 in Ukraine when Russia was willing to challenge it.
In line with Walt’s balance-of-threat theory, Sakwa calls for the reconsideration of “threat perceptions, not only of the major powers but also of Russia’s neighbours.” He believes Russia is not a “threat” to its “neighbours and to the existing system of international law,” but that it is rather a “neo-revisionist” power. By this, Sakwa means that Russia does not “challenge the system of international law and governance,” but rather finds fault with the “practices and their apparent abuse by ‘hegemonic’ powers.” Moreover, Russia believes that “it is the West that has become revisionist, not Russia,” herself.

Legvold (2016), however, argues that Russia is also responsible for the breakdown of strategic security building in the whole of Europe. Yeltsin’s policy of “derogating [neighbor states’] sovereignty and featuring sticks over carrots” was unsettling for those states. According to Legvold,

“[Yeltsin failed] to establish Russia as a trustworthy security partner, not merely for NATO, but for all those states located between NATO and Russia; … [H]ad Russia from the beginning invested heavily in softening the hardened views of Eastern Europeans and the new post-Soviet States and labored earnestly to build a constructive, respectful relationship with them, the pressure to enlarge NATO would have been less, and the thought of doing so, absent in Washington and Brussels in 1991, would likely have remained so” (295).

Yevgeny Primakov, Russia’s foreign minister during 1996-1998 and prime minister in 1998-1999, had begun to emphasize a multipolar world where Russia, China and India play bigger roles and counterbalance the U.S. In 1998, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright expressed her concern over increasingly diverging Russian foreign policy, noting that “there are many voices in Russia, who want to shift the emphasis in Russia’s interaction with America and our allies from one of partnership, to one of assertiveness, opposition, and defiance for its own sake” (Albright 1998). This was at a time when the Kosovo crisis had seriously battered the U.S.-Russian relationship, with Russia having strongly condemned the military
campaign against Milošević. Yeltsin had protested to the U.S. and NATO engagement in the former Yugoslavia, announcing that “Russia is deeply upset by NATO's military action against sovereign Yugoslavia” and that it considers such actions as “nothing more than open aggression” (BBC 1999).

**The George W. Bush era**

U.S. President George W. Bush (Bush Jr.) came to office with a different attitude toward Russia than his predecessors. Details of this attitude was described by Bush’s soon-to-be National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice (2000) in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, wherein she accepted that Russia is “important for international peace,” but that “Moscow is determined to assert itself in the world and often does so in ways that are at once haphazard and threatening to American interests.” A Russia expert and professor of political science, Rice acknowledged the flaws of democracy in Russia, stating that “with the exceptions of the Communist Party, political parties are weak and the balance of political power is so strongly in favor of the president that he often rules simply by decree.” She continued with her criticism specifying that “the Clinton administration’s embrace of Yeltsin and those who were thought to be reformers around him has failed,” and that American “support for democracy and economic reform” under the Clinton years had become support for the person of Yeltsin. “His agenda became the American agenda,” wrote Rice.

Bush Jr.’s eight-year presidency (2000-2008) will be remembered for its steep rise and fall of the U.S.-Russian relations in the 21st century. After the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the U.S. Pentagon, Putin was the first to call President Bush to express his condolences and offer help in the subsequent military campaign against Al-Qaeda and Taliban. Putin promised that Russia would do a number of things: One, “share intelligence” with the U.S.; two,
open Russia’s “airspace for flights providing humanitarian assistance”; three, persuade Russia’s Central Asian allies “to provide similar kinds of airspace access to American flights” bound for and leaving Afghanistan; four, “participate in international search and rescue efforts”; and five, “increase assistance to the [Afghan] Northern Alliance” (ironically made up of former Mujahideen who had defeated Soviet troops in Afghanistan) who had been fighting the fundamentalist Taliban regime in the post-Cold War era (McFaul 2001).

As a pragmatic leader, after the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. decision to invade Afghanistan, Putin decided to side with Washington despite objections from some Russian politicians and Kremlin national security officials. In return for this support, Russia gained a number of key strategic benefits of an improved U.S.-Russian relations via the signing of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, from which Bush Jr. had initially abstained; a promise of greater role for Russia in NATO relations; completion of full membership process in G8 group of industrialized states; and a “promise of becoming an alternate energy supplier to the West” (CNN 2002; Arms Control Association 2006). That said, Russia was quite disappointed when the Bush administration discarded the ABM Treaty in December 2001. Still, in May 2002, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was established, and in following years, this council provided a solid platform for consultations and closer cooperation between the U.S. and Russia. After the commencing of the Ukraine Crisis, however, all cooperation between NATO and Russia was suspended including the NRC (NATO 2017).

Putin had expressed full support for the U.S. after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and tolerated the American military bases in Central Asia (in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan). In November 2001, in Washington, Putin (2001) reported a very fruitful beginning in
all aspects of the U.S.-Russia bilateral cooperation, declaring: “We are willing to
dismantle, once and for all, the legacy of the Cold War and begin fashioning a
strategic partnership for the long-term.” He furthermore added: “We strongly believe
that success is already ... predetermined by our common willingness to cooperate
actively and constructively.”

As opposed to the U.S. war in Afghanistan, which was backed by Russia, the
war in Iraq, commenced in March 2003, was from the start considered as an
unnecessary and precarious campaign, which could destabilize the whole Middle East.
Moreover, Putin had become convinced that the U.S. “too often and too recklessly
permitted itself to intervene with military force whenever and wherever it pleased,
while paying little attention to the views and concerns of others” (Legvold 2016, 207).
The Iraq War sent a clear signal to the world that “putting preventive war at the heart
of U.S. national-security policy made the world’s most powerful country seem eager
to use force—at times and places of its own choosing—whether or not a genuine
threat of attack was actually present” (Walt 2006, 659). The Iraq War also provided a
dangerous precedent, meaning that a preventive war “could be equally legitimate for
China, India, Pakistan, Syria, Russia, or any other country that concluded it could
improve its strategic position by using force against a weaker adversary” (660).

In the first years of his presidency, Putin began to strengthen top-down control
of government. This included stricter political control of the opposition, NGOs and
media. The Bush (Jr.) administration began publicly expressing concerns over these
issues. Putin, in turn, was unnerved with the U.S. interference in Russian domestic
affairs and referred to the concept of “sovereign democracy” as means of justifying
Kremlin’s increasing hardline position in its domestic affairs (Legvold 2016, 209).
Pressuring the political opposition and NGOs was also due to perceptions—right or
wrong—of U.S. interference and political engineering in inducing regime change in the post-Soviet space.

From 2003 to 2005 there were three “color revolutions” in post-Soviet republics of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. All three were rebellions apparently against pervasive corruption and nepotism at all levels and branches of government, including manipulated elections. As one result, unlike their predecessors, the new leaders of Georgia and Ukraine wanted more independent pro-Western rather than pro-Russian foreign policies. Moscow perceived these regime changes “not as a pot that boiled over on its own but as the handiwork of agents from the outside” (210). Over the years, Putin and the people close to him have become convinced that the U.S. “had not simply stumbled into Iraq, Libya, and Syria but had been pursuing a conscious, systematic strategy of regime change as a means of achieving larger strategic objectives.” The 2014 revolution in Ukraine “was the latest and boldest” case with Kremlin feeling itself “as the target” (211).

The 2007 Munich Security Conference was a crucial point of the U.S.-Russian relations. Putin gave a very denunciatory speech attacking the U.S. and the “unipolar world that had been proposed after the Cold War.” He resented Western “ideological stereotypes, double standards and other typical aspects of Cold War bloc thinking” and argued that the U.S. has a “disdain for the basic principles of international law” and the results of its foreign policy were harmful, with “unilateral and frequently illegitimate actions ... not [having] resolved any problems.... [but rather] caused new human tragedies and created new centers of tension” (Putin 2007). In a 2007 interview for Time magazine, Putin openly expressed that the West does not treat him and Russia as an equal, claiming that Russians are perceived by the West as a “little bit savage still or they just climbed down from the trees, you know, and probably
need to have their hair brushed and their beards trimmed.” Despite Putin’s criticisms of the U.S. “illegal” wars of the 21st century, in August 2008, Russia sent its troops into Georgia to occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and to then recognize these regions as independent states. The Bush presidency ended with the sharp Georgian crisis.

**Medvedev’s approach**

The Obama administration had attempted to restore the U.S.-Russian relationship and “reset” it—albeit using a wrong Russian word (“передрузка” meaning “overload”, rather than “перезагрузка” meaning “restart”) to do so. Obama, during his first term, had to deal with Russia’s new president, Dmitri Medvedev. Both of them were optimistic about the future of bilateral relationship, having outlined a new agenda that ranged from reviving impeded strategic arms control efforts to commencing a rigorous dialogue on European security, and from finding new solutions to “mutual energy security to addressing a host of concrete issues,” such as Russia’s membership in the World Trade Organization, “a fissile material cutoff treaty, and ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty” (Legvold 2016, 216). By the end of Medvedev’s presidential term, however, little progress was made on these issues.

The two sides initiated working groups under the U.S.-Russian Bilateral Presidential Commission, and the Obama administration prioritized objectives related to the nuclear issues to be accomplished out of the relationship, that is, prolonging the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) and tightening UN sanctions on Iran with Russia’s support. Medvedev, however, wanted modernization and diversification of Russia’s economy away from its overreliance on oil and gas income as a topic of cooperation. In a July 2010 speech to Russian ambassadors, Medvedev (2010) emphasized that Russia needs “special modernization alliances” with Germany,
France, Italy, the EU “in general,” and the U.S., but he also added that “collaboration with our partners in the CIS remains our overriding priority.” Medvedev also expressed disappointment that his initiative of European Security Treaty, new security agreement between the U.S., Europe and CIS members, was rejected by Western counterparts, but also hoped that “the remnants of the Cold War [was] a thing of the past.”

Before the 2008 war in Georgia, Medvedev called for a new conference on European security with an allusion to the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Probably, he had hoped that a new conference on European security would bring a reconsideration of “the division of Europe.” Medvedev appears to have been seeking “recognition of the [CIS], the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and other arrangements that link Moscow to a number of post-Soviet states” as an area of Moscow’s sphere of influence (Sestanovich 2008, 26).

In 2011, the U.S.-backed intervention in Libya and toppling of Qaddafi was condemned by Putin (who was then the Russian prime minister), but not by President Medvedev. Medvedev’s Russia did not veto a U.S.-backed Security Council resolution in favor of military intervention in Libya, but Putin compared the resolution to a “medieval call to the crusades” (quoted in Osnos 2017). Minutes after his capture, Qaddafi was lynched in the streets by a crowd of rebels and Libya was plunged into a civil war. The following U.S. campaign against Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war was perceived as another reckless decision without considering the disastrous consequences. Given these events and the Ukrainian revolution in 2014, Putin had become convinced that the U.S. actions are not “a matter of poor policy choices, but in pursuit of a conscious strategy—hence, making it a distinct, grave, and direct threat to Russia” (Legvold 2016, 227).
The Obama administration, in turn, had been convinced that Russia was intent to foment “trouble wherever it promised to create problems for the [U.S.] or, in the Syrian case, seeking short-term gains with no regard for the Assad regime’s role in a barbarous war.” The Russian military intervention in the Syrian war in September 2015 signals to the world that Russia wants to regain a status of global superpower, what also counteracts U.S. foreign policy in the region. Kremlin explains its military actions against Assad’s opponents as mere attempts to protect Russia’s national interests and fight terrorism. Kremlin proposes that the Syrian leader Assad was accused of war crimes by the U.S. without solid “evidence” and that the U.S.-led Western alliance had no legitimate right to force him to resign (Weaver 2017).

**Why did Russia intervene in Ukraine?**

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and military actions in Donbass, southeastern Ukraine, were a watershed and history-changing event in the West-Russia relations. It is a challenge to explain what calculations and considerations were behind Russia’s decision to intervene militarily in Ukraine. The dual fears of losing a historical partner to the West (by way of an eventual EU membership for Ukraine) and potentially seeing NATO’s reach approaching Russia’s border (through eventual membership of Ukraine) may have been the triggers.

From 2007 on, Putin had started pushing forward a Russia-led customs union with a perspective of full integration into Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with framework rules similar to the EU. Despite stumbling blocks, such as a sharp drop in oil prices affecting Russia and other petroleum-dependent members of this new Union, today, the EEU member states include Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. The EEU aims at consolidation not only of economic ties of the state-members but of geopolitical affiliation as well. Ukraine as a European post-
Soviet state had to decide whether to prefer the EU or the EEU. Putin wanted Ukraine to make a choice, as Ukraine’s equal cooperation both with EU and EEU was unacceptable. Ukraine led negotiations both with EU on the Association Agreement, which would provide it with preferential trading rights, and also with Russia on terms for joining EEU. By November 2013, the EU deal was settled and was only in need of signatures, at which point Putin was reluctant to accept the “loss” of Ukraine and offered generous financial assistance for Ukraine luring the leadership to make the “right” decision. After being persuaded by the prospect of Russia’s generous financial support, Ukraine’s President Victor Yanukovych decided to reject the Association Agreement. This provoked large public protests in capital city Kiev’s central square (“Maidan”). The violent suppression of the mostly youthful protesters further exacerbated tensions, eventually leading to Yanukovych’s fleeing Ukraine to safety in Russia in February 2014, followed by taking over of a new government in Ukraine.

Legvold (2016) argues that understanding decisions of Putin and his inner circle on Ukraine lies within “the miasma of anger and suspicion” that has been collecting for years. After Putin had been convinced that the new leadership, who took over power in Kiev, was anti-Russia, pro-EU, thus pro-NATO, he decided to react militarily. The Crimea annexation seems to be a separate decision, when Putin decided to eliminate a risk of “losing strategic control over its vital bridgehead on the Black Sea” (252). Emotional joy of Russian nationalistic public about “Crimea is ours” rather followed than preceded the annexation. American and European leaders were struck with bold actions of Russia to annex a region of Ukraine, the integrity and security of which were guaranteed by Russia, the U.S. and Britain in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances.
After the Crimea events, Russia had become a challenge and a threat for the Western bloc, not a hope and opportunity. Putin did not stop on Crimea and supported separatism in Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine. Supporting such separatism ensured “keeping the new government in Kiev and its Western sponsors off balance” (257). The Ukraine Crisis triggered the New Cold War ethos. The American and European leaderships concluded that Putin’s Russia “was not simply a difficult partner but now an unpredictable threat and, unless compelled to change course, capable of wrecking the post-Cold War European security order” (258). Moscow, however, saw the events in a profoundly different way. For Putin, violence in Ukraine was the “final proof that the [U.S.] was bent on marginalizing Russia, pushing it back into a geopolitical cage and transforming the countries on its border into bulwarks of U.S. influence” (359). Moreover, Putin believed that U.S. involvement in the Ukrainian predicament was not only a menace to Russia’s national security but an existential threat to the Russian leadership itself.

Richard Haass (2016) posits that Russia was deeply concerned about growing EU-Ukraine ties “at the expense of Russia’s ties with and influence over Ukraine” and possibility of Ukraine’s potential entering into NATO (182). Putin was discontented with that the “world was watching events in Ukraine more than the expensive Olympics he was staging in Sochi,” and in particular, “the precedent of a mob ousting an authoritarian leader in a country so close to his own” (183). Next there was an upsurge of protests in Crimea, a region of Ukraine with an ethnic Russian majority.

Crimea had been a part of Russia from 1783 and was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 by the then USSR Premier Khrushchev. Historians do not have a solid explanation as to why Khrushchev made this decision. One of many theories suggests that he did it out of agricultural concerns for Crimea,
possibly wanting “to make the Ukrainian leadership responsible for farming the peninsula” (Zygar 2016, 558). The other theory is that Khrushchev lobbied the transfer of Crimea as a means to gain support of Ukrainian political elites in a complex struggle for power consolidation under his leadership (Kramer 2014). Local Crimeans quickly gained control over the peninsula and within weeks Crimea had become a part of the Russian Federation through a referendum passed by an overwhelming majority of Crimea’s population on 16 March 2014. In 2008, 2013 and 2014, Putin had already articulated a security doctrine, which, among other things, declared that it was Russia’s right to intervene on behalf of ethnic Russians where they were under threat (Putin 2008, 2014; Government of Russia 2013). The Russian foreign policy, as such, is concerned with protection of the rights and interests of not only Russian citizens, but also “compatriots” defined as “constantly living abroad, but having historical, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and spiritual ties with Russia, trying to preserve their Russian authenticity and having a need to maintain contacts and cooperation with Russia” (Grigas 2016, 78).

After the Crimea annexation, instability spread to the Eastern Ukraine, a region with significant proportions of ethnic Russians, though not a majority. There, instability exploded into violent clashes between the Ukrainian government forces and local militias supported by Russia. An armistice and political agreement was achieved and signed by Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany in February 2015—known as “the Minsk II Agreement”—but it has never been “fully implemented, with each side blaming the other for not observing one or more of its parts” (Haass 2016, 87). Haass argues that the Ukraine Crisis “reintroduced a military dimension to Europe that many observers thought had vanished with the end of Cold War. And it weakened the global norm that military force should not be used to change borders” (87).
There is also the issue of sanctions over the Crimea annexation, which came into place at a time of global oil glut. The Russian economy’s weakness is its heavy dependence on oil and gas tied to the price of energy—what has been referred to in similar cases of resource-dependent economies as the “rentier state” predicament (Mahdavy 1970) or “Dutch disease” (Romer 1985). This dependence of Russia on gas and oil as its chief source of revenue is a leverage that the West has not hesitated to exploit. As the oil price declined in 2015, the “Russian economy shrank along with it” (Haass 2016, 90). Therefore, the predicament for Putin is whether he “will decide to do what it takes to improve his country’s relations with the outside world (so as to ease sanctions) and even introduce some reform,” or rather boost “confrontational foreign policy in an effort to tap into the population’s nationalism and distract from multiple problems at home” (90).

The sanctions introduced by the Western states on Russia have damaged their own economies as well, especially those of European states, which had more economic ties with Russia than has the U.S. Why should European states bear such costs over Ukraine, which is of a lesser trade and economic partner for Europe compared to Russia? Apart from punishing Russia for violation of international law and territorial integrity of Ukraine, in line with the balance-of-threat theory, the EU’s fears over Russia as a military aggressive threat have contributed to the decision to impose comprehensive sanctions which are also detrimental to its own member states. Russia, in turn, has repeatedly announced that Europe’s fears are unjustified and injudicious to dismiss this factor in the Russian-Western relations.

Did Russia have a strategic plan to annex Crimea long before the Ukraine Crisis? Probably it did not because from a strategic point, the annexation can be argued was a mistake. The annexation and the following support of separatism in
Donbass made Ukraine hostile and antagonistic to Russia. If Russia’s strategic goal was to estrange Ukraine from the EU and the U.S., then it failed. Crimea aside, Ukraine, on the whole, has never been so anti-Russia as it is now and it will take years to reconcile the two sides.

Conspiracy theories at play

Nikolai Patrushev, the head of Russia’s National Security Council, is close to Putin and a member of his inner circle. I argue that his interview with Rossiiskaya Gazeta newspaper in October 2014 demonstrates the mental framework, perception of threats and values of Putin and his inner circle. In other words, it shows how the Kremlin understands and makes sense of the world, in general, and the U.S.-Russian relations, in particular. Patrushev believes the U.S. has never stopped being hostile and has been continuing its Cold War-like containment policy toward Russia since the demise of the Soviet Union. He charges that the U.S. did not dismantle NATO after the Warsaw Pact Treaty ceased to exist, but that, moreover, NATO has expanded and increased its troop numbers and armed forces. The latter is not factual because NATO and the U.S., a core and largest NATO member, have been decreasing their troops since Reagan declared the end of Cold War. The U.S. military forces in Europe were decreased from a high of 440,000 in 1957 to an all-time low of around 67,000 in 2015 (Soesanto 2016; Harress 2014). Indeed, reliable data shows that U.S. troop deployment, as well, has been in an “outright decline” not only in Europe but globally since the 1950s (Kane 2016).

In the same interview, Patrushev blamed the U.S. for the collapse of the Soviet Union by carrying out Brzezinski’s strategy of harming the Soviet Union by exerting pressure on its weaknesses. He does not mention that the Soviet Union was a highly centralized totalitarian state, which may have had many internal, not merely external,
political and economic factors as causes of its collapse. Patrushev seems convinced that today’s U.S. animosity toward Russia has roots in the U.S desire to control vast natural resources of Russia. He claims that the Ukraine Crisis is a result of the “systemic activities” of the U.S. State Department, not a result of Ukrainian people’s rebellion against massive corruption and nepotism. Patrushev, therefore, does not believe in people’s resentment as a main cause of color revolutions and the Arab Spring, but rather accentuates on external manipulative forces of Western origins. He claims that Ukrainians were preached and indoctrinated in a mythology of “European values,” by which he probably means principles of democracy and human rights. Clearly, Patrushev believes in conspiracy theories against Russia and it is not an overstatement to suggest that so does Putin.

Another member of Putin’s inner circle is Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister since 2014 (and prior to that, Russia’s UN representative since 1994). In November 2014, Lavrov reiterated Patrushev’s belief that revolutions in post-Soviet and Arab states were a result of the U.S. deliberate foreign policy. He said that the U.S. strategy is “aimed not so much at defeating the enemy militarily as at changing the regimes in the states that pursue a policy Washington does not like.” Lavrov also repeated another Patrushev’s position that the “West unequivocally demonstrates that it does not merely seek to change Russian policy (which in itself is illusory), but it seeks to change the regime—and practically nobody denies this” (Lavrov 2014).

Talk shows and analytical programs on international political issues on all three Russia’s nation-wide coverage TV channels are plentiful with what can be described as “conspiracy theories” against Russia. Two TV channels are owned and controlled by the Russian government, while the third is owned by the state-controlled energy company Gazprom. This dominance and control of information and news is
why critics claim “independent reporting has suffered” in Russia (BBC 2012). State-controlled newspapers and radio stations are also openly anti-American and flavored with conspiracy theories. According to Mikhail Zygar (2016), conspiracy theories play an important role in political life in Russia, and with regard to supposed ubiquitous U.S. hands in backing regime change in the region, it may “not the first time in Russia that a historical myth had influenced [the country’s foreign and domestic policies]” (732).

Going back in history, at the end of the 19th century a document titled The Protocols of the Elders of Zion appeared in tsarist Russia, what was “allegedly stolen from the personal files of the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, and [which] supposedly outlined a Jewish plot for global domination.” The document was ultimately determined to be a fake, but contributed to the “pogroms of Jews in Russia and was reprinted in the [U.S.] and (in huge quantities) in Nazi Germany.” In similar fashion, fake secret documents of “former CIA director Allen Dulles’s plan to ‘morally corrupt Soviet society’ made the rounds in 1990s Russia and became a tenet of post-Soviet anti-Americanism and neo-imperialism” (Zygar 2016, 733).

Zygar entertains the idea that, perhaps, the anti-Western attitudes of Russian political elite are “not paranoia but shrewdness” (734). The Russian elite know its electorate and indulge them with narratives they want to hear. The elite base its legitimacy and support in “the broad masses, who love conspiracy theories and dislike America.” Moreover, Kremlin propagandists know that if they “do not offer television viewers a simple and plausible answer to pressing geopolitical issues, the people will draw their own (far worse) conclusions”; however, such inferences about the political elite can “in itself” be considered “a conspiracy theory” (735). There is no evidence that Putin and his inner circle are “so crafty.” Most probably, the Russian leadership
largely believes in their own propaganda and commentary. Furthermore, Zygar contends that Putin has not had strong personal anti-Westernism or retro-Cold War agenda in his mind throughout his presidential terms, but has rather wanted to anticipate and fulfill wishes of Russian political elites and electorate to remain popular and stay in power. If this is the case, I contend then that the New Cold War, probably, will not diminish with Putin’s resignation as long as a Russian political leader wants popularity and high approval ratings.

Legvold (2016) notes that nearly all senior Russian analysts and officials he spoke with, whether supporters or critics of Putin, agree that the Kremlin’s perception of the U.S. as a conniving, regime-changing force aimed at Putin’s regime “had become [a] conviction.” The same sources often stress that this conviction makes the battle over Ukraine very important for Putin because the next logical aim of a supposed American conspiracy after Ukraine would be Russia. Perhaps, Kremlin has become a victim of its own propaganda. Anti-Western propaganda has been boosting Putin’s popularity and when the Ukraine Crisis burst out, Putin had no choice but to act and take over Crimea—a symbol of Russian military might and domination in the Black Sea. It can thus be argued that Kremlin’s propaganda made it unacceptable for Russian people and elites a prospect of Ukraine joining NATO. The Obama administration acquiesced that Putin identified the U.S. foreign policy in dark hostile colors. Obama also admitted the difficulty of altering Putin’s beliefs and concluded that “as long as he remained in power, [there would be] little that the two countries could accomplish together” (265).

**The Trump phenomenon**

Donald Trump has on numerous occasions said that the U.S. foreign policy keeps failing and serves the “interests of global elites and other states” (Payne 2017, 1). As
part of that failure, he has been critical of the discordant relationship of the U.S. with Russia, a relationship which he promised to improve if he were to be elected. This is a formidable task, not because of Putin’s attitude, allegedly open for constructive discussion and cooperation, but rather the attitudes within the political establishment in Washington and the U.S. mainstream media. In light of recent accusations of Trump’s collusion with Kremlin and Kremlin’s possible interference in influencing the results of the U.S. presidential election, any favorable attempts to improve relations with Russia will be interpreted by opponents of Trump as a confirmation of accusations against him, which will consequently affect his approval rating within the U.S. and complicate his further domestic and foreign policies agendas. That said, it does not seem that Trump has intentions to appease Putin, but he does not intend to escalate unfriendly relations further, either.

Overall, it appears that the improvement of U.S.-Russian relations under a Trump administration will be severely limited and obstructed. Trump understands and clearly signals to his support base that the downfall of the U.S.-Russia relations is not in American national interest and could even negatively affect U.S. national security. He appears to believe that Russia is not a declining power and should be consulted with on important security issues in various regions of the world when these security issues coincide with Russia’s interests. However, the U.S. political establishment’s perspective on Russia differs from Trump’s as the establishment presumes that Russia has severely damaged the post-Cold War balance of power and security configuration and neglected international law by its annexation of Crimea (Collinson 2017).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. did not reconsider profoundly its foreign policy toward Russia, justifying its lack of change by protection of American national interests. However, a more plausible answer is the mistrust of
Russia—as the successor to the USSR—that “runs deep in a U.S. establishment that in many ways reflects the concerns and priorities of the Cold War.” It is no surprise, therefore, that the U.S.-Russia relations have not improved much since the end of the old Cold War (Mankoff 2010). The disappointing state of current U.S.-Russian relationship is hard to blame on one side only, but since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has been in a proactive position of power and dominance and Russia has been rather a reactive weak actor. Hence, based on this scenario and setting, it is reasonable to say that the U.S. bears most of the responsibility for the terrible results of bilateral relations. Trump claims to want to stop the deterioration of relations with Russia and seek a breakthrough in the relations, but considering the inclinations to unpredictable behavior of both Trump and Putin, it is hard to predict a positive result whatsoever of their interaction.

Trump’s unpredictability vis-à-vis U.S. foreign policy is both a weakness and strength. It is a weakness for U.S. allies as they are having a hard time predicting and adjusting their posture with the U.S. foreign policy, but on the other hand, it is a strength as an unpredictable incoherent behavior of Trump makes U.S. opponents more cautious and less assertive in their own actions; they cannot determine whether the U.S. is a growing threat or not. Trump positioned himself as an isolationist during his presidential campaign, but once he assumed office, he changed and through his administration confirmed the U.S. military commitments in Europe, Middle East and Asia. If anything, Trump has turned out to be not an isolationist, but a unilateralist. He said he will abandon NATO, but in practice, upon winning the presidency, he confirmed U.S. commitments to NATO, although he kept the pressure on NATO allies to increase their military spending. His prompt reaction of cruise missile strikes to an alleged chemical attack on militias and civilians, including children, by Assad’s
regime in Syria, sent a clear signal of his decisiveness to punish unacceptable war crimes. Previously, Obama’s “red line” rhetoric of condemnation of Assad’s war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons, had not produce any direct U.S. military actions against Assad’s government. Trump’s strike, therefore, was the first direct Western military strike against Assad’s regime during the six-year long civil war in Syria—albeit, a proxy war against Assad has been in existence and an undetermined part of the anti-Assad militia forces in Syria are aided and abetted by the U.S. and the West.

With regards to North Korea, Trump’s very aggressive rhetoric against Kim Jong Un and its nuclear program has resulted in prudent attempts to solve the problem with the potential help of China. Trump has put mild pressures on Beijing and Moscow to isolate the regime in North Korea and force it to discontinue its nuclear and missile program. Trump (2016) has also claimed to increase the U.S. military budget and asserts that U.S. “military dominance must be unquestioned.” So far, his actions with regards to the U.S. foreign policy show his resoluteness to uphold the U.S. status as a global unparalleled superpower—at least militarily. Even if he does not manage to overcome the constraints and criticism of U.S. mainstream politics and media on his attempts to reconcile with Putin, he will not be an easy politician for Russia to deal with under the New Cold War.

An alternative path

Today, the path to normalized relations between the U.S. and Russia is hard to visualize. The leaderships of both countries are not willing to accommodate each other. Miscommunication and misperceptions are rampant on both sides. Both have returned to the Cold War mental framework and there is hardly any sign of its ending. To start a constructive dialogue, Russia needs to alter the perception of the U.S. as a
threat, at least to accept that the U.S. neither desires nor takes specific actions to threaten Russia’s national security or change the regime in Russia, whereas, the U.S., in turn, should pay closer attention and take into account Russia’s opinions and national interests, including its historical geostrategic sphere of interest (including Ukraine and Central Asia). In short, there remains a gap between Russia’s political and military power and the U.S. perception of its importance and influence.

The events in Ukraine, Georgia, Syria, and Afghanistan and alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections show that ignoring or downplaying Russia’s interests stirs reactions from a formidable Russia. A good example of the U.S. disregard to Russia is George W. Bush’s unilateral decision to withdraw from ABM Treaty in 2001. This decision may have had its own realist or neoconservative logic but it provoked in Russia a perception of greater U.S. threat and tensions in the U.S.-Russian relations. Russia strongly objected to the U.S. withdrawal and argued that the development of anti-ballistic missiles provokes an arms race in defensive and offensive nuclear capabilities, creating an illusion of security for the U.S. and a false sense of impunity that the U.S. may attack first without suffering retaliation (Stone 2017). Both sides need to understand that adversarial beliefs are deeply rooted in them, remaining in their political culture from 45 years of Cold War. Remembering how the Cold War ended, that is, that even a small unilateral concession by leaders creates a spiral of accommodations and goodwill, is a beacon to find ways out of the New Cold War quagmire.

Both the U.S. and Russia need, what can be labeled, a “Gorbachev-like heretical approach,” which would bring to a halt orthodox policies and outlooks that have produced the New Cold War. A Gorbachevian constructivist approach and the use of “altercasting” (Wendt 1992, 422) can be straightforward and simple: abolish
the decades-long animosity through diplomacy and accommodations. Since the U.S. as a stronger superpower has been dominating the U.S.-Russian relations, a Gorbachev approach on part of the U.S. would be more efficient and fruitful. If the U.S. starts the détente path, Russia would most likely meet it halfway. It appears that both sides overstate and dramatize one another as threats. However, even if one side acknowledges that a fear of threat plays an untenable harmful role in the U.S.-Russian relationship, then this side can take steps to assure the other of a need to downgrade the fear, thus commencing a magnanimous spiral of de-escalation and reconciliation.
“And so there was no single cause for war, but it happened simply because it had to happen.” —Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1869 (quoted in Bidney 1997, 165)

The purpose of this Thesis was to answer the question: *Why are the U.S.-Russian relations apparently at their historically lowest level filled with hostility and animosity since the demise of the Soviet Union and end of Cold War?* I have argued that to understand this question and also whether there is a “New Cold War” at play, one needs to understand the (old) Cold War, its origins and components. As argued in Chapter Two, there are two major explanations of the Cold War’s origins. One explanation accounts for the Cold War as a result of an ideological and political-economic contest between the two superpowers and their respective camps rather than pure considerations of *realpolitik*. This contest was particularly conspicuous in the Third World, in some cases leading to bloody proxy not “cold” but “hot” wars such as the Korean War (1950-1953) and Vietnam (1954-1975), which together may have taken as many as five million lives (Guenter 1978; CNN 2017). The actual battlefield of the Cold War was thus not the European countries divided between two blocs, in which, despite occasional internal and international flare-ups (such as the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956 and 1968, respectively), their systems of governments and socioeconomics remained relatively stable.

This research also argued that today’s hostility between the U.S. and Russia can justifiably be labeled as the “New Cold War.” Although today’s U.S.-Russian confrontation does not match the ideological and geographical scope of the original
Cold War; it is important to note that the Cold War started from a relatively small crisis over the Berlin Blockade in 1948-1949. Ideologically, as well, the U.S. understanding of democracy and Russia’s “sovereign democracy” are increasingly different approaches. Among other things, Russia has positioned itself as a non-European civilization, leading the so called “Russian World.”

The other explanation for the (old) Cold War’s origins suggests that realpolitik and the struggle for power appeared more important among all other factors, including ideology and economics. This account, I argued, provides a better account for the emergence of New Cold War, as well, taking into consideration the fact that Russia discarded the political and ideological system of communism and its associated centrally-planned socio-economic system. This account allows for the assumption that Russia wants to restore its politico-economic and military power on par with the Soviet Union, whereas the U.S. continues its containment policy toward Russia to prevent the rise of Russia’s influence in Europe, Middle East and other parts of the globe and to minimize its role therein. This explanation also suggests that if the U.S. stops its post-Cold War de facto containment policy of Russia and, instead, even accommodate some of its legitimate (real and perceived) security needs, then both nations could more easily find common grounds and potentially advance their relationship along their respective national interests.

Importantly, though the Soviet Union has long been dissolved, Russia has remained convicted that it should be treated with respect as an equal (formidable) international player. Three decades earlier, Gorbachev had played a crucial role in ending the old Cold War through important disarmament concessions to ease and even cease the arms race and mistrust; he commenced a spiral of goodwill and reconciliation, and found reciprocity with his U.S. counterpart, Reagan. However,
today’s leadership in Kremlin is unlikely to go along a path of concessions, as it will be perceived as a form of appeasement and weakness by the Russian leadership and much of the country’s population. Shortly after the end of old Cold War, another historical event unraveled, the demise of the Soviet Union, in which Gorbachev and Yeltsin made decisive and fateful contributions—unwillingly and willingly, respectively. Both the end of Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union show that strong personalities with determination play a huge role in historical processes. This suggests that today’s leaders of the U.S. and Russia potentially have the capability to end the New Cold War despite entrenched antagonism in their mainstream politics and media.

Within few years after the end of the Cold War a new spiral of disagreements and misgivings between the U.S. and Russia started to evolve. Yeltsin needed U.S. aid and support to stay in power and counteract anti-American, largely communist forces in Russia, yet NATO enlargement and NATO-led military campaigns in Yugoslavia estranged Yeltsin from the U.S. It appears that the political and emotional burdens accumulated over the long Cold War period had persisted and successfully came back, nearly in full. Yet after the end of old Cold War was declared, there was a unique, albeit, short period of time when the U.S. influence was so great over Russian leadership that it could have put Russia on a different development path, one of democracy, transparency and stronger commitments to human rights. That opportunity is long gone, at least for now.

The original Cold War was salient for its bipolarity, mutual containment and nuclear deterrence. Whereas in the post-Cold War (aka the New Cold War era) the U.S.-Russian relations are rather notable for its tendency towards presumed unipolarity on part of the U.S. and containment of Russia; but mutual nuclear
deterrence has remained virtually intact. During the Cold War, both belligerent powers perceived one another as an ineluctable existential threat. Today, given the ongoing U.S. engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and the constant threat of terrorism, Russia is only one of many security concerns for the U.S.; and the U.S. is not considered as the greatest threat by Russia, either. However, hostile political rhetoric has nonetheless been intensifying in both nations and could soar further out of control.

The 2014 Crimea annexation by Russia and its military intervention in Eastern Ukraine were a turning point in the U.S.-Russian strained relations, from these events onward, the commencing of New Cold War was declared by a number of politicians and prominent academics. The West perceived the Crimea annexation as a blatant violation of international law and territorial integrity of Ukraine, which Russia guaranteed in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances. Russia, in turn, perceived and justified the annexation as an act of “historical justice” since Crimea was part of Russia for nearly 200 years and was unreasonably transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by Khrushchev’s allegedly unilateral decision. Russia also argues that the population of Crimea has an ethnic Russian majority and voted, through a referendum, to join the Russian Federation.

The U.S. leadership, as seen by Barack Obama’s account for the U.S.-Russian animosity, is emblematic of the U.S. establishment attitude toward Russia. When looking at the deteriorating U.S.-Russian relations, Obama did not admit the responsibility of the U.S. foreign policy and NATO enlargement as causes for the emergence of the New Cold War; he rather adverted to the character of Putin and his misjudgments. And though the sanctions introduced by the Western states have damaged the Russian economy, they have also hurt the European economies, as well,
which, unlike the U.S., have had vast economic ties with Russia. The West wanted to punish Russia for the violations of international law and territorial integrity of Ukraine, yet in accordance with the balance-of-threat theory, it was primarily Western fears over Russia as a military danger which played an important role in its cost-benefit calculation towards the imposition of sanctions. Since then, Russia has repeatedly declared that the West’s fears are baseless to dismiss this proposition in the Russian-Western relations.

Furthermore, this Thesis showed that the U.S. and Russia dramatize one another as a threat. The old Cold War ended when one side, Gorbachev’s Soviet Union, acknowledged that the arms race and war-mongering were no longer justified. Similarly, with regards to the New Cold War, if either side were to admit that a fear of threat is insidiously harmful to the U.S.-Russian relationship, then the dynamics of the relations would likely improve.

To address the research question of this Thesis, I suggested two hypotheses. The first, that of the post-Cold War downgrading of Russia as a formidable player and ignoring its national interests, failed to be disproven in that it posits that the U.S. triumphalism, after the demise of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact Treaty organization, put forward an assertive foreign policy, which disregarded Russian national interests in Europe and post-Soviet republics. This disregard inspired new waves of anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism in Russia, which were harnessed and manipulated by the Russian political elite to its benefit. The U.S.-Russian hostility is a result of a gap between Russia’s political and military power and the Western perception of Russia as a regional allegedly declining power that has to behave accordingly. As Russia has been restoring its economic and political power in 2000s, the U.S. assertive foreign policy started to increasingly unsettle Russia. Putin believes
the concessions made by the Gorbachev’s Soviet Union and Yeltsin’s Russia were not appreciated by the U.S. and rather encouraged American triumphalism and unilaterism, instead.

The second hypothesis, that of viewing the actions of each side (such as the expansion of NATO by the U.S. and the intervention of Russia in Ukraine) as threats and security concerns, also failed to be disproven in that it suggests that the U.S.-Russian animus has been a result of reactions of a politically and economically strengthening Russia (at least prior to nose-diving oil and gas prices in 2014) to the American foreign policy, which Russia has continued to perceive as a growing threat. Russia’s stance has been not only due to the U.S. actions, but also to Russia’s domestic political engineering with roots in the Kremlin. Most likely, the Russia political elites believe in the propaganda they preach, thus pushing the U.S.-Russian complicated relations in deeper realms of peoples’ mentality and psyches, while sidelining judicious, rational approaches to the bilateral relations. The mainstream public discourse on the U.S.-Russian relations is not much better in the U.S., where Putin is constantly demonized and allegedly represents an existential threat to the North Atlantic security community and is bent to inflict damage to the Western institutions of democracy and human rights. Such fears do not allow the U.S. and Russia to build a relationship based on principles of partnership and mutual respect, to align their national interests and consolidate their efforts for addressing genuine global threats such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism.

The U.S. and Russia’s preoccupation with each other puts blinders on them and prevents seeing the bigger picture of the importance of human progress, its continuation and ending human sufferings. It appears the U.S. and Russia do not see the enormous potential of their cooperation in advancing the human civilization in
such areas as space exploration and colonization of other planets, nuclear energy further development to provide clean and cheap energy, elimination of diseases, poverty, war, global warming and even aging. In a predicament of continuing human population growth and constant demands for betterment of standards of living, a lack of or sluggish progress would result in growing social tensions and could potentially disrupt the rather fragile institutions of democracy, human rights and rule of law—the cornerstones of modernity. It thus appears that so far, the U.S.-Russian relations have been subdued to politics of dominance rather than politics of responsibility.

When accepting his Nobel Peace Prize 1990, Gorbachev (1991) said: “I am an optimist and I believe that together we shall be able now to make the right historical choice ... [to] make the current extremely difficult transition to a peaceful world order.” As with the old Cold War, positive changes can also occur today if there is a will on either side.
REFERENCES


