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Why the US and Russia Are Fighting a New Cold War

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[bracketed numbers refer to slides in PowerPoint, filing separately]

The strains that have been put on the US-Russia relationship by the annexation of Crimea, the Snowden affair and alleged Kremlin hacking of last year's election lead many to conclude that a New Cold War began around the time Vladimir Putin reclaimed the presidency five years ago.

But the roots of the current animosity extend farther back, to a time before the Old Cold War ended.

It began in 1989 with the opening of the Berlin Wall [2] and the gradual defection of East Germany to the Western alliances that had been Moscow's adversaries for decades.

The opening of the Berlin Wall was celebrated worldwide as a victory for democracy and freedom. But in the zero-sum game mentality of the Old Cold War, it was perceived in the Kremlin as a loss of Soviet influence.

For 45 years after World War II, the Soviet Union had made the rules for life throughout the East bloc. But the reforms undertaken in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s by Mikhail Gorbachev [3] inspired citizens of other countries in the Soviet orbit to rebel against one-party rule and Kremlin domination.

Citizens of these eastern states were not allowed to travel to the West except on very limited and government-approved business.

Through peaceful protest [4], Hungarians won some relaxation of that policy in 1988. In a symbolic show of their new liberation, Hungarian political leaders joined their Austrian counterparts in cutting through the barbed wire [5] near the Hungarian town of Sopron on May 2, 1989. That would prove the starting shot in the race to flee communist repression throughout the region.

While they couldn't travel to the West, it was common for citizens of the Warsaw Pact states to travel to countries within the bloc for vacation. In the summer of 1989, record numbers of East Germans headed to Hungary with their camping equipment and after their holidays were over they escaped through the new hole in the Iron Curtain [6 – 7].

The last weeks of 1989 were truly euphoric, at least from the Western perspective. The East Germans' success in winning travel freedom and breaching the wall separating them from West Germany inspired pro-democracy revolutions across the East bloc.

Hungary had already prevailed in getting its communist leadership to agree to multiparty elections. The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia [8] surged just eight days after the Berlin Wall opened and forced the communist government in Prague to do the same. Bulgaria and Romania also overthrew dictatorial regimes by the end of 1989 and were on the path to competitive elections for new leadership.

From the view of the communist hardliners in Moscow, these were not joyous occasions. These were more parts of the Soviet empire lost to the other side.

As the campaign for reunifying Germany gained traction in early 1990, the wartime allies that had occupied the vanquished Nazi territory after World War II conducted what became known as the 2+4 talks. These

negotiations involved the two German states plus the four wartime allies – the Soviet Union and NATO members Britain, France and the United States.

Soviet agreement was necessary to allow German reunification because the Soviet Union retained authority over East Germany. But West Germany's membership in NATO was an obstacle for the Kremlin, as the Western military bloc has always been perceived in Moscow as a hostile force.

To ease Soviet fears about NATO encroachment into Warsaw Pact territory, the United States reportedly assured Gorbachev during the 2+4 talks that NATO would never deploy into East German territory. It was informally agreed that reunified Germany would be defended by its own national forces.

U.S. officials deny any such promise was made. But notes from the 2+4 talks that were declassified two years ago indicate that there was verbal assurance offered, though not included in the treaty paving the way for reunification [9].

As Eastern Europe was swept by liberating transformations, the Baltic states that had been seized by Stalin in 1940 began to get restive. They were seeing that independence, something viewed as unimaginable just a few months earlier, might be within their reach.

An anti-Soviet revolt began in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius [10] in early 1991. The protests initially provoked deployment of Soviet troops, but the crackdown was ineffectual and political strife was mounting in other Soviet republics as well.

Gorbachev was under pressure from hardliners in the Kremlin who watched with despair as their allies in Eastern Europe bailed one after the other. The Warsaw Pact disbanded in early 1991 after the

withdrawal of most of its member states. This loss of influence in the world was a major factor behind the coup against Gorbachev in August 1991 [11].

The putsch was defeated after just three days, mainly due to the defiant leadership of Boris Yeltsin [12] who led the charge against any rollback on the political reforms.

Gorbachev returned to the Kremlin from Crimea [13], where he had been detained while on vacation, but the Soviet empire was fracturing and everyone knew it. The Baltic states and Ukraine declared independence and went about organizing multiparty elections.

But unlike the triumphant atmosphere of the Eastern European revolutions, the citizens of the Soviet Union were beset by resistance and division. After 74 years of central rule from Moscow [14], the many ethnic groups were scattered far and wide. Huge Russian minorities lived in republics other than Russia and many didn't want to be separated politically from what they considered their motherland.

The coup against Gorbachev also sent shock waves through the newly independent states of Eastern Europe. These barely year-old democracies had weak economies and even weaker national defenses.

After the coup and the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, the Eastern Europe states became increasingly nervous about their security. They feared the hardliners in Moscow could use the army Russia inherited from the Soviet Union to crush their independence as they had in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

This was a pivotal point in the US-Russia relationship. As Moscow's former allies began looking to NATO to enhance their security, there was a sense of betrayal developing among Soviet and Russian officials

as plans emerged for NATO's expansion to protect East Europeans' independence.

Three years after German reunification, NATO announced itself open to any European countries that could meet alliance standards and values.

In March 1999, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic were admitted as new NATO members. A month later, seven other states from the East bloc were invited to participate in the process toward membership, including the three former Soviet Baltic states.

NATO's mission statement on enlargement declares that it poses no threat to anyone, that it's aimed at enhancing security in the new Europe. But it's important to look at this from Moscow's perspective to understand why it is at the heart of the current US-Russia tension. NATO is feared by Russians who see its encroachment as an attempt to finally defeat what is left of the Soviet Union.

By the time the Baltic states and all former Warsaw Pact allies were admitted to NATO in 2004, Vladimir Putin had succeeded Boris Yeltsin as president. Putin was a career KGB officer who witnessed the demise of communism in East Germany from his espionage post in Dresden. He saw first-hand how once the regime's authority had eroded, protesters went on a witch hunt to expose the crimes of the secret police.

After taking the Kremlin helm in 2000, Putin quickly harnessed Russians' resentment about their diminished world status. He vowed to rebuild Russia and portrayed the battle ahead as one against the West's aim of destroying Russia. And he has steadily fanned these sentiments over the past 16 years.

Putin responded to NATO's encroachment by strengthening his grip on what was left of a post-Soviet alliance through loyal proxies in Ukraine and the Caucasus states. He bolstered Russian forces in breakaway

regions of Georgia, where a brief war was fought in 2008 and Russia has retained power over those territories ever since.

Putin began coopting independent media early in his first administration. By the time of his 2011 campaign to return to the presidency, the Kremlin had control over most sources of news and information and could mold public opinion to its favor. Political opponents were discredited, then jailed, or disappeared, or killed. Demonstrators were beaten and dispersed. Democracy-advocating foreign NGOs were gradually driven out by false accusations of espionage, tax evasion and other means of official harassment.

The core U.S. values of promoting democracy and respect for human rights around the world is rejected by Russia as intrusive and unjustified. This is another fundamental point of contention in the U.S.-Russia relationship. U.S. officials insist that the Russian government abide by our standards of human rights while Moscow's view is that what goes on inside Russia's borders is none of our business.

Putin's return to power in 2012 was marked by an accelerating exchange of accusations and provocations. U.S. NGOs were accused of working for the political opposition and fomenting anti-Putin protests during the election campaign in late 2011. The U.S. Congress passed the Magnitsky Law to punish senior Russian officials thought to be responsible for the death of a corruption whistleblower in custody. In response, the Kremlin cancelled all pending and future adoptions of Russian orphans by American families. A fledgling gay rights movement in Russia was driven underground by a state-run media campaign portraying homosexuality as the result of American attempts to morally corrupt Russians.

The last straw for Putin was the popular rebellion in Ukraine at the end of 2013 [15]. The revolt toppled Kremlin-allied President Viktor Yanukovich, breaking Putin's grip on the government in Kiev.

Throughout the three-month uprising in Ukraine's major cities, Russian media cast the demonstrations as instigated by U.S. diplomats in Kiev. Russians were led to believe that Yanukovich was overthrown by a Western coup d'état, not by popular anger over his rejection of a path to eventual Ukrainian membership in the European Union. In the Kremlin's view, this was the West luring away a vital source of Russia's food and national security.

Much of Russia's military-industrial complex is based in Ukraine. The Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet [16] is based in Crimea, in the port of Sevastopol that Moscow had leased from Ukraine since the Soviet breakup under an agreement guaranteed through 2042.

A parade of mediators from the European Union and the United States intervened to assist the victorious opposition in seating a new government after Yanukovich's ouster. Putin saw this as the West swooping in to steal the last of the Soviet crown jewels that rightfully belonged to Russia.

This turning of Ukraine from Russia to the West, as Putin saw it, was what prompted him to send in Russian troops to occupy Crimea [17] and orchestrate a secession vote by the Russian majority population. Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, outraging Ukraine and drawing worldwide censure.

The Crimea land-grab and Russia's role in fomenting separatist rebellions in eastern Ukraine led to the EU and the United States imposing sanctions on Russia. Those sanctions worsened Russia's economic crisis brought on by a sharp fall in oil prices.

Russia's incursion into Ukraine was celebrated by the vast majority of Russians as rightful reaction to the encroachment of the West into the Kremlin's traditional sphere of influence. And it has made the Baltic states and Poland extremely nervous, given their history of vulnerability to occupation and domination.

NATO last year staged the biggest military exercises in its history in the new member states from the East bloc, [18] with more than 30,000 troops and thousands of tanks, guns and APCs brandishing the alliance's armored might on Russia's western flank.

NATO last month began deploying three battalions to shore up defenses in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland [19], to have the first response forces in place to repel any Russian invasion. NATO has also activated a missile defense system in Romania and plans a second one for Poland next year.

All this bulking up of NATO defenses has been played in Russia as the West's preparation for war.

The mounting NATO presence on Russia's border [20] contributes to this perception of the alliance as ill-intending and has prompted countermeasures. Russia recently added 10,000 troops to the western region bordering the Baltic states. The Kremlin has also begun deploying two new sophisticated missile systems in the Kaliningrad exclave between Lithuania and Poland.

Russian fighter jets have been buzzing NATO aircraft and warships in the Baltic Sea, often with their transponders turned off so the planes targeted for harassment don't know what's coming. But neither do air traffic controllers in the region, which raises fears of an accidental mid-air collision with a military jet or commercial airliner. Russian media claim NATO also engages in provocation of its ships and planes.

Russia late last year broke off talks with U.S. counterparts on nuclear nonproliferation issues of concern to both countries. The NATO-Russia Council hasn't met in three years because of the fallout from the Crimea annexation. And even though Putin [21] declined to retaliate when President Obama expelled 35 Russian diplomats from the U.S. in December, the situation is extremely tense.

There are virtually no active venues where Russian and U.S. officials and experts interact on a cooperative basis. We are in a heavily armed standoff with Russia that each government blames on the other.

President Trump [22] claims to trust Putin and to want a better relationship with Russia. But his diplomatic and security appointments are taking a tougher stance toward Russia, making clear that there will be no sanctions relief as long as Russia persists in violating Ukraine's sovereignty.

Trump also faces strong political opposition to his overtures to Moscow as the prevailing view of the Republican-controlled Congress is that Russia is a threat to U.S. security.

Only two months into his presidency, Trump is already hamstrung by accusations that his surrogates had illegal or inappropriate contact with Russian officials during the campaign. Investigation into potential collusion with Russian hacking has inflicted new strains on the relationship, further clouding the outlook for improvement.

With little short-term prospect of defusing tension and mistrust between the former superpowers, the question before Trump and Putin now isn't why their two nations find themselves in another Cold War but how to prevent it becoming a hot one.