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U.S.–Russia Relations in the Last 30 Years: From a Rapprochement to a Meltdown

Victoria V. Orlova

The Cold War Paradigm

The Cold War paradigm has served as a conventional blueprint for U.S.–Russian relations based on a long-term confrontation. The polarised relationship between Moscow and Washington has turned out to be an alternative to the bipolar world order. There is neither the Iron Curtain nor a clash of ideologies, but patterns of the Cold War still affect global politics, and a gap between old adversaries is growing exponentially, destabilising a bilateral political process. In recent years, U.S.–Russia relations have progressively deteriorated. NATO expansion, the Ukraine crisis, the Syria campaign, allegations of Russia's meddling in the U.S. presidential election have become turning points in the complex geopolitical play of world powers.

Over the last three decades, U.S.–Russian relations have developed in the context of tectonic shifts in world politics, economy, technology and communications. In contrast with the bipolar system, a rapidly

V. V. Orlova (✉)

Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

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changing multipolar world is chaotic and unpredictable. The United States and Russia, obsessed with a spiralling confrontation, are unlikely to secure the international order. The reasons for this confrontation are straightforward: Russia rejects American supremacy and U.S. unilateral policy associated with interventions, proxy wars and democracy promotion campaigns, especially in the post-Soviet space; the United States refuses to consider Russia as a major power, diminishes its status and condemns Russia for its geopolitical ambitions (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019). A sophisticated matrix of U.S.–Russian relations cannot be interpreted without a deep understanding of historical context, national interests and geopolitical strategies of both countries.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, relations between the United States and Russia have been defined by the specifics of strategic rivalry. During the Cold War, the main areas of competition included control over geopolitical spheres of influence, a conventional and nuclear arms race and space exploration as well. After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union began to struggle for global influence as the leaders of polar blocs representing capitalist and communist ideologies. The Cold War dichotomy involved the Western Bloc controlled by the United States and the Eastern Bloc supervised by the Soviet Union. The bipolar world order attained the equilibrium due to the balanced system of confrontation based on nuclear parity and the policy of deterrence and containment.

In terms of the bipolar system, the world order was balanced and predictable enough except some events when a nuclear catastrophe seemed imminent as it happened during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Despite an explicit threat of mutual destruction of the United States and the Soviet Union, the Cold War was regarded as the era of strategic stability provided by bilateral arms control. Both the United States and the Soviet Union pursued a military buildup and developed the strategic military alliances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, to protect the Western and Eastern camps. “The confrontation helped cement a world dominated by Superpowers, a world in which might and violence—or the threat of violence—were the yardsticks of international relations...” (Westad, 2017, “World making”, para. 2). After World War II, security dilemma, based on fear of military power of a rival, defined a rapid transformation of the

United States and the Soviet Union when both states turned into superpowers with political, military and ideological arsenals. Former anti-fascist allies became uncompromising adversaries in a struggle for global influence and leadership. Zbigniew Brzezinski (1992) noted, “Geopolitically the struggle, in the first instance, was for control over the Eurasian landmass and, eventually, even for global preponderance. Each side understood that either the successful ejection of the one from the western and eastern fringes of Eurasia or the effective containment of the other would ultimately determine the geostrategic outcome of the contest”.

The United States, except for the period of the Great Depression from 1929 to the late 1930s, remained a wealthy, stable and relatively invulnerable nation. After World War II, which devastated and destructed the Soviet Union, Europe, and much of Asia, the territory of the United States was intact, so America had a definite competitive advantage. Pursuing geopolitical and economic leadership, the United States supported Western Europe, launching the Marshall Plan and transferring to Europe more than 12 billion dollars (Westad, 2017, “Europe’s asymmetries”, para. 51). It was a solid investment in the consolidation of the West to counter the Eastern Bloc and the main adversary—the Soviet Union. Brzezinski (1998, p. 3) stated that “[i]n the course of a single century, America has transformed itself—and has also been transformed by international dynamics—from a country relatively isolated in the Western Hemisphere into a power of unprecedented worldwide reach and grasp”. In contrast with the United States, throughout the twentieth century, Russia suffered heavy casualties during the revolution, the civil war, Stalin’s repressions and world wars. The Second World War turned out to be the most devastating for the Soviet Union, taking at least 27 million lives. Every time Russia had to rise from the ashes. After World War II, the Soviet Union managed to restore the country and strengthened the communist empire. The competition with the United States was a strong stimulus for Soviet progress and expansion. As *The Economist* (“Not a Cold War”, 2007) notes, “For much of the 20th century, the chief object of Russian admiration and revulsion has been the United States—the country that, with its combinations of fissiparous diversity and fierce patriotism, insularity and messianic sense of destiny, Russia arguably most resembles”.

Exceptionalism and messianism have become the main driving forces for the national identities of both states. Throughout history, America remained monolithic in its ideology, whereas Russia had to revise the system of values and ideology to find new pathways for building its national identity. Nevertheless, Russia is a messianic nation, and Russian messianism, associated with heroic sacrifice and patriotism, has been a leitmotif in Russia's history and consciousness. After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union transformed into "supercharged empires with a growing sense of international mission" (Westad, 2017, "Starting points", para. 1) and claimed their exceptional right to decide the world's fate, taking responsibility for world order. This right in the context of the Cold War became a catalyst for the confrontation between superpowers and a determining factor in foreign policy as well.

The equilibrium of the bipolar system was based on nuclear parity: a massive nuclear arsenal as a primary means of deterrence equalised the strength of both states. "Deterrence by nuclear threat was one way that each superpower tried to prevent the other from gaining advantage and hence upsetting the balance of power between them" (Nye & Welch, 2017, p. 147). In terms of security dilemma, a growing nuclear arsenal is regarded as a competitive tool for retaining the status of a great world power. After the end of the Cold War, nuclear security has remained a critical issue on the agenda of world leaders, highlighting a threat of a nuclear conflict between the United States and Russia: "[t]wo sides remain locked into the threat of mutually assured destruction (MAD), with short decision times in the event of a military escalation, accident, or misperception" (Kuchins, 2016, p. 4).

American–Soviet relations developed in accordance with a complex scenario based on sophisticated strategies of U.S. and Soviet leaders, politicians and scholars. Apart from deterrence aimed at preventing an armed conflict, a geopolitical palette included a policy of containment to control the expansionism of a rival state, *détente* for a relaxation of strained relations as well as strategies of rollback and proxy conflicts to manage military conflicts, intelligence operations and regime change in strategically important states and regions. George F. Kennan (1947), an American diplomat and a Cold War strategist, elaborated a policy of "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies" that was

extrapolated to the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. Containment turned out to be a long-term strategy used by the United States against the Soviet Union to restrict communism's expansion. Another architect of the Cold War, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was one of the most influential political figures affecting foreign policy of many American presidents and specialised in hawkish strategies against the Soviet Union. His credo was the strategic deterioration of American relations with the Soviet Union, and he contributed significant efforts to destroy the communist camp (Brzezinski, Scowcroft, & Ignatius, 2008, p. 20). Apart from the policy aiming at the disintegration of the Soviet empire, Brzezinski proposed sophisticated geopolitical schemes including a strategy of U.S. military and financial support of Afghan *mujahedeen* during the Soviet–Afghan War, challenging the Soviet military operation in Afghanistan (Garfinkle, 2008).

In the last thirty years, there were five main periods remarkable for dramatic events in U.S.–Russia relations: 1989–1991—from a breakthrough in Soviet–American relations to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc; 1992–1999—from the Yeltsin–Clinton rapprochement to NATO expansion and the Serbia bombing; 2000–2007—from the U.S.–Russian partnership in the war on terror to the Munich speech of Vladimir Putin, blaming the U.S.-led world order; 2008–2013—from the Russo–Georgian war to the Syria policy; 2014–present—from the Ukraine crisis to accusations of Russia's meddling in the U.S. presidential election. Interestingly, there was a steady pattern in U.S.–Russia relations: a new U.S. administration that came to power usually assessed the relationship with Russia as disastrous and tried to find pathways to a rapprochement. However, results of any reset were predetermined: affected by disruptive circumstances, seemingly promising relations, after a short period of mutual understanding, quickly turned into a deep frustrating crisis, and, in the end, almost collapsed (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019).

The Fall of the Soviet Empire

The period from 1989 to 1991 was a time of tectonic shifts: the fall of communism in Europe, the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the collapse of the Soviet Union. There have been several turning points

in international affairs, dramatically changing the world order, but, undoubtedly, the demise of the Soviet Union as an ideological, political and military adversary of the United States is one of the most dramatic events in modern history. Historically, it was the second meltdown of Russia in the twentieth century—the first one happened in 1917, after the Russian revolution, which led to the destruction of the Tsar Empire and the oppression of the Russian Orthodox Church. Despite many conventional explanations, it was unclear how the Soviet Union could break up so quickly. Perhaps, the effect of “imperial overstretch” turned out to be profound and irreversible; or the massive military buildup significantly weakened the economy of the Soviet Union; or the decline of communism ideology deeply affected a rigid political system (Nye & Welch, 2017, p. 173). Besides, American long-term geopolitical and military strategies, along with soft power tools, contributed to the Soviet Union’s erosion and collapse.

Undoubtedly, the central figure of the Soviet makeover was Mikhail Gorbachev. His liberal policy of new thinking, *glasnost* and *perestroika* resulted in deep transformations inside the U.S.S.R. and the Soviet bloc. As Engdahl (2009, p. 3) noted, “The Cold War ostensibly ended with Mikhail Gorbachev’s decision in November 1989 not to order Soviet tanks to East Germany to block the growing nonviolent anti-government candlelight protest movement and let the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the ‘Iron Curtain’ dividing Eastern from Western Europe, fall down”. Indeed, Gorbachev brought about a revolution in U.S.–Soviet relations, impressing American leaders, Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, with his ideas and intentions of changing the U.S.S.R and the world. As a result of remarkable progress in the U.S.–Soviet relationship, American and Soviet leaders reached agreements of historical importance—the INF Treaty on the elimination of intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles in 1987 and START I—Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in 1991.

Despite innovative approaches to domestic politics, Gorbachev did not cope with a deep crisis inside the country. Being an idealist, inspired by Western social democratic ideas, Gorbachev believed in the Soviet Union’s democratisation. He did not expect that his liberal reforms “snowballed into a revolution” (Nye & Welch, 2017, p. 174). Besides,

economic problems were crucial. The exhausted Soviet economy was about to collapse: it “had been literally bled to the bone in order to feed an endless arms race with its arch-rival and Cold War opponent” (Engdahl, 2009, p. v). The United States did not support the dying Soviet Union when Gorbachev appealed to Western partners for economic assistance at the G7 summit in 1991 (Sachs, 2018, p. 70). When irreversible political and economic transformations reached a peak, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist.

After the Soviet Union’s collapse, Russia needed to solve issues of national identity and the dilemma of its diminishing status. Russia underwent tremendous transformations, including total changes in ideology, politics, economy, social life and culture. Political and economic instability had inevitably led to the loss of Russia’s influence in geopolitically vital regions. The status dilemma in the destroyed Soviet empire was acute, given that “Russia’s national identity is deeply rooted in its sense of being a great power” (Kuchins, 2016, p. 14). For reborn Russia, it has been an essential task to restore the status and the standing on the world scene to be able to protect national interests and provide state security.

NATO Expansion

After the end of the Cold War, U.S.–Russia relations developed in the context of U.S. dominance and unipolarity. Experiencing devastating consequences of the Soviet meltdown, both politically and economically, Russia tried to adjust its broken system to new conditions. The Clinton administration promised to support Russia and enhance the bilateral partnership. The United States provided Russia with funds for democratic and market reforms; however, these measures turned out to be insufficient. Despite warm relations between U.S. and Russian presidents, Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, a rapprochement was affected by political turmoil and the harmful effects of economic shock therapy in Russia.

Seeking for the integration with the West, Russia signed agreements with the European Union, became a member of the Council of Europe,

joined G8, and, as it seemed, these steps strengthened Russia's position in the world. Despite many challenges, westernisation was an essential part of Russian foreign policy, and the American factor remained critical in shaping Russia's political priorities. "The Cold War legacy of bipolarity is the main reason for the ingrained Western-centrism of Russian foreign policy; Russia's ruling elite grew up during an era when Moscow and Washington largely directed the fate of the world" (Mankoff, 2009, p. 16). In 1993–1996, Moscow and Washington tackled many problems, including issues concerned with weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and regional conflicts. However, as Robert Legvold (2007, p. 5) noted, "Russian policy had lost the simple positive dynamism inherited from the Gorbachev years". In the second half of the 1990s, the idea of strategic partnership with the United States faded, and Russia began to focus on multipolarity, considering relations with China and India as promising and beneficial.

The U.S. policy towards Russia had remained controversial: The United States pursued NATO enlargement and, in 1997, invited the first group of former Soviet allies—Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary—to join the Northern Alliance. It became a turning point in U.S.–Russia relations, although the United States tried to tread softly. "In order to reassure the Russians that enlargement is not a military threat, NATO declares that it has 'no intention, no plan and no reason' to deploy nuclear weapons, or to station permanently 'substantial combat forces' on the territory of new members" ("A new European order", 1997). Nevertheless, the negotiations on NATO enlargement, initiated by Madeleine Albright, then U.S. secretary of state, inevitably led to a chill in relations between Moscow and Washington. In Western mass media, the decision on NATO expansion was regarded as a significant geopolitical failure of Russia which "admitted that several countries once in its sphere of influence could join what had been for a half-century a hostile coalition, the West's NATO alliance" ("A new European order", 1997).

The United States ignored Moscow's concerns over NATO's threats to Russian national security. In terms of Germany reunification, U.S. state secretary James Baker promised Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand "not one inch eastward" ("Gorbachev was promised",

2017). Western leaders also guaranteed that they would not promote NATO expansion “ensuring a non-aligned buffer zone between NATO’s eastern border and Russia” (McCgwire, 1998). But those promises were quickly forgotten. The United States offered Russia a special status in NATO; however, it was just an appeasing step to mitigate Russia’s frustration. Russia did not receive any credentials and power, so it was not able to affect NATO’s decisions.

Although U.S. policymakers consider NATO enlargement as “the principal instrument of U.S. security policy in Europe and Eurasia” (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019), it remains a highly controversial issue. A key turning point in this regard occurred in 1999, when NATO’s decision to bomb Yugoslavia without a U.N. Security Council mandate in order to resolve the Kosovo crisis, led to a deep crisis in relations between Moscow and Washington. The Clinton administration supposed that the Moscow reaction would be angry given that, historically, Russia maintained geopolitical interests in the Balkans and had close ties with Serbs. When in April 1999, Al Gore, the American vice president, informed Yevgeny Primakov, the Russian prime minister, who was en route to Washington, about the bombing of Yugoslavia, Primakov had ordered his pilots to make a U-turn in the sky over the Atlantic Ocean and return to Moscow (Broder, 1999). There were fears that the Serbia bombing could lead to “a wider conflict in Europe or even a third world war” (“A new Cold War?”, 1999). The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia signalled Moscow that the United States could act unilaterally, ignoring any rules (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019).

Expanding NATO, the United States showed Russia that it remained a potential adversary, not a partner. At the same time, former Soviet republics and states-satellites, gripped by fear of possible Russia’s expansion, tended to seek for protection of the West, particularly, the NATO membership. Apart from Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary, which became NATO’s members, there were three waves of NATO enlargement: Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined NATO in 2004, Albania and Croatia—in 2009, Montenegro—in 2017. George F. Kennan (1997) warned about NATO expansion that it “would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era” because it could “inflame the nationalistic,

anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking”. Indeed, it was NATO expansion that made Russia reassert its military and geopolitical strength and led to the resurgence of Russia’s power. Dmitri Trenin (2016, p. 27), director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, remarked that “over the years Russia had drawn a number of red lines to its partners, which they chose to ignore. Finally, this provoked Moscow’s pushback”.

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia became a turning point in American–Russian relations. Symbolically, the U-turn of the Russian aeroplane in the sky over the Atlantic Ocean meant growing estrangement between the United States and Russia. The rapprochement evaporated, and mentions of a new cold war appeared in the media. Continuing to fortify its positions, the United States relished the period of unipolarity and sought for global supremacy, whereas Russia, trying to integrate with the West, found out that its interests were ignored by the West. Andrew Kuchins (2016, p. 13) pointed out that the Soviet Union’s demise dramatically changed U.S.–Russian relations: “Before the [Soviet Union’s] collapse, the United States was negotiating with a weakening but equal partner that had a shared vision of transforming European and global security. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union..., Russia and its neighbours became ‘a project’ for Washington. This was a dramatic paradigm shift for the relationship...”

This “paradigm shift” inevitably affected Russia’s foreign policy and geopolitical priorities when the new Russian leader appeared on the world stage. Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has changed dramatically, reviving after a decade of severe economic and political crisis. Lost in the transition to democracy, Russia needed to restore its status and reputation after a volatile period of the 1990s (Graham, 2017). This task became the highest priority for the Russian president who intended to achieve stability and reinvent Russia’s foreign policy. It was challenging, given that during the Putin era, U.S.–Russia relations developed under the presidency of four U.S. leaders: Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

The War on Terror

At the beginning of the new millennium, on 11 September 2001, the unprecedented terrorist attacks on the United States that destroyed the World Trade Center and the west side of the Pentagon became offensive symbols of the new age. Vladimir Putin was the first world leader who expressed his support and offered assistance to the American president, George W. Bush. In that dramatic moment, Russia and the United States found common ground for cooperation. In 2002, in terms of Russia's renewed partnership with the United States, the NATO-Russia Council was created that allowed both nations to coordinate intelligence and military activities. It seemed that acting together against a common threat, the United States and Russia could establish a long-term strategic partnership, but it did not happen (Tsygankov, 2009, p. 3–6). The war on terror resulted in extensive military campaigns: the U.S.-led counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan and the Iraq war. As for the counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan, Russia entirely supported America, providing military bases in Central Asia and intelligence assistance. However, the next U.S. initiative—the invasion of Iraq in 2003 without the resolution of the U.N. Security Council—provoked Moscow's negative reaction. The Iraq war resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, multiple terrorist attacks as well as the rapid expansion of terrorist organisations and radical Islamist groups. As Angela Stent (2014, p. 82) stated, "U.S.-Russian relations began to fray as two issues became particularly contentious: the use of military force to effect regime change and the legitimacy of undertaking military intervention without United Nations sanction". When it became clear that the United States provided the faulty evidence of Hussein's weapons of mass destructions as the rationale for the war, it had led to a deep crisis of trust. Other explanations of the United States, such as protection of human rights and democracy promotion in Iraq only strengthened Moscow's scepticism.

In the 2000s, terrorism threats were acute in Russia; however, the United States did not support Russia as it was expected in terms of joint counterterrorism activities (Graham, 2017). Russia experienced several terrorist attacks, including the most devastating

incidents—the Moscow theatre hostage crisis in October 2002 and the Beslan school massacre in September 2004. After the Beslan tragedy, the Russian leader took measures on enhancing the Kremlin's power. Blaming some “foreign powers” for their exploitation of terrorists against Russia (Trenin, 2014), Vladimir Putin decided to concentrate power to hold Russia's regions under strict control as well as to tackle security issues in the North Caucasus. The Bush administration criticised anti-democratic trends in Russia, including the elimination of direct gubernatorial elections that led to an erosion of political pluralism.

During the Bush presidency, Russia was annoyed by growing American influence in the post-Soviet space. In 2004, seven countries, including the three Baltic states, joined NATO. Besides, the so-called colour revolutions—in Georgia (the Rose revolution) in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 (the Orange revolution) and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (the Tulip revolution)—intensified Russia's suspicions about U.S. covert intentions to impose rules of their game in Russia's zones of influence. Moreover, after the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, which was a guarantee of strategic stability for Russia, George W. Bush announced that the United States would deploy a missile defence system in Poland and Czech. Not surprisingly, these geopolitical and military ambitions made Moscow reassess U.S. foreign policy.

On 10 February 2007, Vladimir Putin, in his speech at the Munich Security Conference, outlined the main issues of U.S. foreign policy and criticised the U.S.-led unipolar order: “It is world in which there is one master, one sovereign... [T]his is pernicious not only for all those within this system but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within” (Putin, 2007). The Russian leader highlighted the most controversial Washington initiatives such as the deployment of the anti-missile defence system in Europe and NATO enlargement. “I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?” (Putin, 2007). It was a decisive moment for the Russian leader who intended to stand up for his

vision of international affairs, Russia's foreign policy and further developments in relations with the United States. As Angela Stent (2014, p. 136) noted, "While Washington appeared to be floundering, Russia for the first time in fifteen years began to project the image of a rising power". The Munich speech deeply impressed U.S. and Western policymakers, and, not surprisingly, comments in Western media were mostly unfavourable. "After the rushed, giddy embrace of American ideas in the 1990s, the anti-Western impulse has again become increasingly conspicuous during the presidency of Vladimir Putin", wrote *the Economist* ("Not a Cold War", 2007). Indeed, this "anti-Western impulse" has turned into an essential element of Russia's foreign policy.

U.S. interference in Russia's spheres of influence, including former Soviet republics and satellites, has been one of the most challenging issues in Moscow's relations with Washington. At the same time, Russia did not manage to use soft power tools enough to change its standing in the post-Soviet space, especially in former Soviet republics seeking for their national identities outside Russia's influence. Russia was perceived as the Soviet Union's successor with expansionist ambitions, so its image in post-Soviet countries remained controversial. The United States took into account this controversy and used it in its interests, offering military protection to some former Soviet republics, understanding that such initiatives were unacceptable for Moscow. When, in 2008, U.S. officials began to promote the possible NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, not surprisingly, they crossed Russia's red line (Sachs, 2018, p. 73). In the context of U.S. plans to deploy missile bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, further NATO's eastward promotion for Georgia and Ukraine seemed like an aggressive action against Russia. Later, Thomas Graham (2017) admitted that "there was a great deal of unease about the United States trying to insert itself into Georgia by undermining Russia's own presence". That is why the Georgian–Ossetian conflict in August 2008 turned out to be a serious geopolitical challenge. In response to this conflict, Russia launched a military operation against Georgia, and this short but intense war ended with Georgia's defeat. In a moment, Russia was blamed by the West as the main culprit. When Russia recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it caused a fierce reaction of the United States,

condemning Russia for the redrawing of the world map. In turn, Russia accused the United States of orchestrating the Georgia crisis.

The Russo-Georgian War resulted in a severe crisis in U.S.–Russia relations drifting towards a long-term confrontation. However, Russia demonstrated that it would defend its spheres of influence in the post-Soviet space, so, in this sense, Russia managed to strengthen its position as an independent actor on the global stage (Mankoff, 2009). The Russo-Georgian war became a final chord in U.S.–Russian relations under the Bush administration. The implications were profound, first of all for Russia, which was punished by the withdrawal of foreign investment that affected the Russian economy. More significantly, this war revealed “the failure of political leaders in both Western countries and Russia to overcome the main institutional legacies of the Cold War” (Pitty, 2010, p. 40). The next period under the presidency of Barack Obama, Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin brought new challenges.

Reset vs Overload

The Obama presidency started with a promising initiative to reload strained U.S.–Russia relations. Symbolically, Hillary Clinton, the U.S. secretary of state, and Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, during the official meeting on reloading of U.S.–Russian relations activated a pushing button where instead of the Russian word “perezagruzka” meaning “reset”, the word “peregruzka”—“overload”—was written. It was prophetic: the reset turned into the overload. Nevertheless, Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama achieved some positive results in bilateral relations: They launched the Obama-Medvedev commission for effective U.S.–Russia cooperation and communication as well as reached an essential agreement for global security, New START—Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

The geopolitical context, however, was complicated, especially when Hillary Clinton pursued a tough policy in international affairs. Playing “the realist hawk” in the Obama administration, Hillary Clinton had a profound impact on the American president (Hirsh, 2013). She maintained relationships with influential political actors and launched

major initiatives in foreign policy, including a NATO-led intervention in Libya and support of the Arab Spring. In March 2011, Dmitry Medvedev, then the Russian president, granted the United States a legal opportunity for military operations in Libya refusing to put a veto on U.N. Security Council Resolution. As Charles Grant (2012), director of the Center for European Reform, stated, “That decision—opposed by Prime Minister Putin and much of the Russian security establishment—gave the United States and its allies the legal cover to intervene militarily in Libya”. The U.S.-led NATO military action in Libya resulted in the dismantling of the Qaddafi regime and the brutal murder of the Libyan leader, Muammar Qaddafi. The Libya debacle became a key point of disagreement inside the ruling tandem of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, and, in the longer term, affected Russia’s foreign policy to prevent a repeat of the Libyan scenario in Syria.

The period from 2011 to 2012 became a litmus test for U.S.–Russia relations when Russia faced mass protests against the ruling party *Edinaya Rossiya* (United Russia) and Vladimir Putin. The protests intensified just before the presidential election in Russia. Moscow, disturbed by outcomes of the Arab Spring igniting the Greater Middle East, presumed that the United States could evoke rebellious moods in Russia. Tensions escalated when Vladimir Putin blamed Hillary Clinton for “inciting unrest in Russia”, supported by the U.S. Department (Herszenhorn & Barry, 2011). The Russian leader became more suspicious of American policymakers, striving for “eliminating foreign political influence in the country and ensuring that Moscow’s special interests in its former borderlands are recognised” (Trenin, 2014).

The reset, in the end, failed and resulted in disappointment and frustration for both sides. Some incidents added fuel to the fire—the Magnitsky case and U.S. sanctions against Russian officials, and the Snowden case, when Russia granted asylum for Edward Snowden, the American whistleblower, rejecting his extradition to the United States. In response, Barack Obama cancelled the U.S.–Russian summit in 2013.

The Syria campaign turned out to be especially frustrating for the American president who was irritated by Russia’s growing influence and assertiveness in this geopolitically vital region. In Syria, Russia steadily

resisted U.S. attempts to overturn the Bashar al-Assad regime. Robert Legvold (2016, p. 109) argued, “On the heels of the Libyan intervention, the U.S. campaign against Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war was perceived as more of the United States recklessly toppling regimes without considering the chaos that would follow”. To save Assad, Russia vetoed several UN resolutions on Syria backed by the United States and other members of the UN Security Council, including Britain and France. In 2013, Vladimir Putin skillfully prevented a U.S. strike against the Syrian leader just shortly before a decisive vote in the U.S. Congress on Obama’s decision to attack Bashar al-Assad, blamed for using chemical weapons. Then the Russian leader offered Syria to remove or destroy its chemical weapons under the control of the United Nations. As a result, Russia and the United States reached an unprecedented agreement on Syria’s chemical disarmament (Gordon, 2013). In 2015, Russia launched a military operation in Syria, challenging the U.S.-led order in this region (Trenin, 2016, p. 17). Geopolitically, the Russian military campaign in Syria is supposed to be far-reaching for Russia’s perspectives in the Greater Middle East as well as for Russia’s strategic competitiveness in the region where multiple interests of various political actors are intersected.

Deep Freeze

The Syria campaign was only a prelude to a geopolitical turmoil engaging Ukraine, Russia, and the West. The Ukraine crisis has become a crucial turning point in Russia’s relations with the United States and the West. For the first time in post-Cold War history, a strategic rivalry between major powers has reached its highest point leading to a full-scale confrontation. Clashes of geopolitical interests have broken out in a vulnerable post-Soviet place—Ukraine, unfolding on the unpredictable scenario, followed by a long-term hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine, provocations and dramatic events in the conflict zone involving Donetsk and Lugansk. Matthew Rojansky (2017), director of the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center, explained different approaches of both states to the Ukraine crisis: “Where Americans saw Russian

aggression and violation of basic international norms in Ukraine, Russians described a necessary counter-offensive against hostile European and American intervention to pull Ukraine into an anti-Russian alliance”. This conflict has poisoned Russia’s relations with Ukraine and the West, so it seems incredibly challenging to come to a reconciliation. Geopolitically, Ukraine is one of the most vital regions for Russia, as Zbigniew Brzezinski clearly described this phenomenon in his book “The Grand Chessboard” (1998, p. 46), “Ukraine... is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire”. Russia’s annexation of Crimea (in Russian interpretation, the reunification with Crimea) became the point of no return for Moscow, resulted in further Russia’s alienation from the West and heavy economic sanctions.

In 2016, when Donald Trump came to power, the United States accused Russia of meddling in the presidential election. The Russia case was under a special investigation, conducted by U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller, who, in the end, did not find any evidence of a criminal conspiracy between the Trump administration and Russia (“Mueller report”, 2019). Russia’s meddling in U.S. elections has become one of the most discussed themes in the American media and outweighed essential issues in domestic politics. “Not surprisingly, “the fog of suspicion” is chilling, even freezing, public discourse about worsening U.S.—Russian relations, which should be a compelling media subject”, believes Stephen F. Cohen (2019, “The fog of suspicion”, para. 3). It seemed to be a climax in a hyperreal postmodernist story when *The New York Times* (Goldman, Schmidt, & Fandos, 2019) reported that the F.B.I. thoroughly investigated whether American president Donald Trump was a Russian agent working “on behalf of Russia against American interests”. Remarkably, Russia has been exploited as “a meme in U.S. politics” (Lukyanov, 2018), and this trend has reflected increasing political polarisation in American society. In 2016–2019, the Trump-Russia saga was one of the main political and media shows, surprising and frustrating the public. No doubt, the so-called Russiagate has damaged U.S.–Russian relations, and the Trump presidency has turned out to be challenging for Moscow. Severe economic and diplomatic sanctions, imposed on Russia

by the United States and the European Union, have contributed to the escalation of tensions between Russia and the West. Geopolitically, in response to these challenges, Russia has cultivated relations with other world players, including China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Israel, and extended its influence in strategically important areas.

In terms of global security, Donald Trump's policy toward Russia remains controversial. National Security Strategy, developed by the Trump administration, considers Russia as "one of the most geopolitical threats to the United States" (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019). In this regard, the issue of nuclear proliferation highlighted on the agenda of world leaders seems to be essential for global security. The United States, blaming Russia for testing and deploying new cruise missiles, decided to terminate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), the historical agreement on the elimination of intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles, signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1987, after several years of U.S.–Russian negotiations ("America tears up an arms treaty", 2018). In symmetrical response, Russia announced that it also would pull out the INF treaty. Ramifications of the INF treaty demise are likely to be detrimental: from an uncontrollable nuclear arms race to global nuclear disaster. Being a cornerstone of nuclear security, the treaty allowed to control nuclear players. "Consumed by their New Cold War, Russia and the United States are dismantling the last pieces of the arms control framework they laboriously negotiated over a half-century", resumes Robert Legvold (2018, p. 15). These developments reveal that nuclear security, undoubtedly, remains an acute issue on the global agenda and demands a greater responsibility of the United States and Russia in terms of growing threats of a nuclear catastrophe. In today's complex multipolar world, states can exploit nuclear proliferation for strategic manoeuvres in foreign policy (Trenin, 2018). Many experts believe that a doomsday scenario is highly probable if a nuclear catastrophe can be triggered by a conventional military conflict or subversive activities of non-state actors. In this sense, a military confrontation between the two major powers can be disruptive for global security; on the contrary, U.S.–Russian collaboration can minimise risks of nuclear disaster.

Conclusion

For the last 30 years, U.S.–Russia relations have been affected by various factors such as clashes of geopolitical and national interests, the strategic rivalry in wars and conflicts, military ambitions and sophisticated information techniques. Until now, the United States and Russia have pursued a conventional policy of confrontation. However, it becomes clear that the old paradigm is outdated. It is difficult for a new generation to find sense and logic in the existential struggle between the former Cold War rivals. Despite political turbulence and uncertainty, world leaders have to tackle global challenges such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, cyber warfare, natural disasters and climate changes. In this regard, Russian–American cooperation can be beneficial for world security, stability and development. Some options for a strategic partnership between Moscow and Washington are worth considering. First, there is a need for a joint policy in the field of global security, including nuclear and cybersecurity. Second, the United States and Russia need to balance their national interests in geopolitical spheres of influence, particularly in the post-Soviet space. Third, the two states can optimise business and science cooperation, including projects in such areas as artificial intelligence and space exploration. There is only one way to reach a breakthrough in U.S.–Russia relations: A common willingness to end the confrontation and derive benefits from the partnership.

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