

# THE NEW COLD WAR IN EUROPE

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Challenges, Threats and Way Forward

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## **Introduction**

Former Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev has recently warned that the world is at a dangerous point due to rising tensions between Russia and the US. The worsening relations between Russia and US is part of a broader escalation as both countries are blaming each other for the rise in tensions. Russia has moved its nuclear capable missiles near the Polish border and have ordered all its officials to fly home, any relatives living abroad amid heightened tensions over the prospect of a global war. US and NATO on the other hand has claimed itself the protector of the region in its conference in Warsaw in July, by mobilising and sending troops to Poland and Baltic countries and is in the process of installing missile defence systems in Poland and Romania. The United States have pulled out from ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty, expanded NATO to Russia's border. Both the countries are doing military exercises

The grim fact is that a quarter of a century after the Cold War ended we are on the threshold of a new Cold War, and it may well be more dangerous than the one which lasted from 1945 to 1989. Let me explain why.

## **Why The New Cold War is Different**

The New Cold War is of course different from the old one. It is not deeply embedded in a system of opposing military alliances with a clearly defined frontier along the borders of various nation-states, what use to be called the Iron Curtain. Nor is it a confrontation between two ideological systems in which each side plans and hopes to replace the other.

Under Boris Yeltsin as well as Vladimir Putin Russia is essentially a capitalist economy, committed to security of property rights, freedom of markets, a thriving stock exchange and an open door to foreign investment.

So the New Cold War between Russia and the West is not about territory or ideological rivalry. It's about international power and influence. It's a struggle in which no rules have been established and the terrain of struggle is fluent. This makes it less predictable and more volatile, and hence more risky than the old Cold War.

We also have a climate of hysteria and demonisation which never existed in the first Cold War. In the 1960s and 1970s Western governments never treated Leonid Brezhnev, who served as Soviet leader for 18 years, to the kind of public insults and crude stereotypes with which Putin is attacked today. There has been an almost total collapse of diplomatic courtesy and of the sense that you have to do business with powerful foreign leaders however much you dislike their system of government. This creates a climate in which it is much easier to justify war.

Finally we have a generation of politicians who do not have the experience of living with the overarching danger of nuclear weapons. During the original Cold War politicians on both sides of the East-West divide were well aware that the slightest miscalculation could lead to a nuclear exchange. This acted as a kind of restraining factor on everyone. It was a form of self-deterrence. That has now gone.

### **Origins of the New Cold War**

Now what are the origins of this New Cold War? How did it begin? The primary reason is that the old Cold War ended in an asymmetrical, that is to say an unbalanced way. The Western elite and the Russian elite viewed the event from radically different perspectives. Russians saw the end of the Cold War as a shared victory, a win-win situation in which both sides benefitted. Russia would no longer have to spend crippling amounts of its budget on defence and security. Its citizens would have the freedom to travel and the benefits of a gradual evolution of their political system away from authoritarianism towards democratic pluralism. The West would gain by having a friendly neighbour. This would give it too the chance to reduce its military arsenal. In place of the Iron Curtain dividing East from West Gorbachev said the nations of the continent would share a “common European home”.

At times, Western leaders seemed to accept that. President Bush the Elder, that is George Herbert Bush, talked of Europe being “whole and free”. But there was also a powerful strain of triumphalism in the Western reaction to the end of the Cold War. Western leaders and their supporters among Western commentators saw Russia as a defeated power. The Soviet Union’s collapse had liberated the United States from any need for restraint. It could fulfil its manifest destiny as an imperial power expanding its economic and military influence around the world, unchallenged. As President Bush (senior) said in January 1992: ‘By the grace of God, America won the cold war. ... [The] world ... now recognizes one sole and preeminent power, the United States of America.’

The first consequence of the new imbalance in Europe was the contrast which developed over what should be done about the two Cold War alliances. The Soviet-led Warsaw Pact disbanded in 1991, but instead of doing the same Nato remained firmly in place. As long ago as 1949 Nato’s first secretary-general Lord Ismay had said the alliance’s purpose was “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans down”. Forty years later nothing had changed. With the unification of Germany in 1990, which particularly worried Margaret Thatcher and the French president Francois Mitterrand, the third of Nato’s original objectives, that of keeping Germany down, stayed intact. As for the first goal, that of keeping the Americans in Europe, this was a phony issue. There was never a credible likelihood that the Americans would withdraw from Europe just as there was no likelihood of the United States withdrawing from Japan and South Korea. Nato was not needed as a hedge against something which was never going to happen. But Nato was useful to Washington as a tool in furthering their global ambitions.

The issue in 1991 was what to do about Nato's second goal, that of keeping the Russians out. Communism had collapsed so the question had to be whether Russia could now be brought in from the cold.

Regrettably it was not to be. In the early 1990s the US decided not only not to abolish Nato, but to expand it by taking in states which had once been Moscow's allies. Russia was not invited to join.

### **NATO's expansion and betrayal of Western promises**

Many Russians consider Nato's expansion was a betrayal of Western promises. Gorbachev himself has said so. So has Putin.

What does the historical record tell us? In 1990 the two German states and the four Second World War allies, the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union, held talks on the unification of Germany. They were known as the 2 plus 4 mechanism. The Russians were given assurances about Nato's future that seemed clear at the time. For example, James Baker, US Secretary of State, said on 9 February 1990: "We consider that the consultations and discussions in the framework of the 2+4 mechanism should give a guarantee that the reunification of Germany will not lead to the enlargement of NATO's military organisation to the East". The following day Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor, said "We consider that NATO should not enlarge its sphere of activity".

The difficulty is that the context suggests that they were only talking about Germany and the issue of Nato's role in the territory of what had been East Germany. Indeed the unification agreement that was signed later that year specifically said no Nato troops would move into East Germany for the next four years until all Soviet troops had withdrawn.

The assurances did not cover Nato's potential expansion beyond East Germany. This became clear in 1991 after the Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel made a speech in which he called for Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland to be brought into NATO. The Kremlin was alarmed. In response both John Major, the Prime Minister, and Douglas Hurd, the Foreign Secretary visited Moscow and told the Russians to relax. We know from the minutes of their meetings, as recorded by British diplomats, that Major told the Soviet Defence Minister Dmitry Yazov in February 1991 that he "did not foresee circumstances now or in the future where East European countries would become members of NATO". Douglas Hurd, Britain's Foreign Secretary, told his counterpart in March 1991 "there were no plans in NATO to include the countries of Eastern and Central Europe in NATO in one form or another".

That remained the position until Bill Clinton became US president in January 1993. Nato's future returned as a major policy issue. A majority of Clinton's key advisers supported Vaclav Havel's line and strongly favoured Nato's expansion, and so it went ahead. Boris Yeltsin, who had succeeded Gorbachev in the Kremlin, expressed mild dissent but no serious opposition. Yeltsin was desperately in need of loans from the West, as well as political support in the post-Soviet chaos of Russia's headlong switch to market capitalism. Indeed throughout his period in power up to December 1999 Yeltsin never challenged Western policy, except briefly over Kosovo in early 1999. Even Clinton found Yeltsin's weakness embarrassing. Strobe Talbott, Clinton's main adviser on relations with Moscow, recorded in his memoirs, that on one occasion when he and Clinton were talking together Clinton characterised Washington's relations with Moscow as a series of humiliating instructions which the Kremlin meekly accepted. In Clinton's words, " We keep telling Ol' Boris [President Yeltsin], "Okay, now here's what you've got to do next - here's some more shit for your face."

In the year 2000 Yeltsin gave way to Putin. It's commonly thought that things changed immediately. Here was a hard and relatively young man taking over from an elderly buffoon. Not true. In his first four year term Putin continued Yeltsin's policy of friendly relations with Washington.

Putin was the first foreign leader to express solidarity with George W. Bush after al Qaeda hijackers flew airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. He closed down the bases which the Soviet Union had built up in Cuba and Vietnam. He showed strong support for the American intervention in Afghanistan by allowing US military transport planes to fly to Afghanistan through Russian airspace. He even made little public criticism, and certainly no active opposition, when Nato expanded to the Baltics and for the first time gave membership to former Soviet republics in 2004. He cut Russia's military budget.

The message was that Russia remained a consistent and reliable partner of the West in spite of everything the US was doing.

### **Putin's U-Turn and change of direction**

Putin was certainly not happy with several of Washington's actions. In 2002 Bush withdrew the US from the thirty-year-old anti-ballistic missile treaty. This was a serious blow to Russia. It was followed by a US programme to install anti-missile radar systems in several European states. Ostensibly designed to protect Europe from missiles launched by Iran and North Korea, they were seen in the Kremlin as directed against Russia.

US policy in Georgia at the time of the first so-called colour revolution in 2003 when street crowds toppled the Georgian president also angered Moscow. A similar scenario developed in 2004 in Ukraine. As Putin saw it, Washington was fomenting regime change

in former Soviet republics, replacing Kremlin-friendly leaders with ones who were openly critical.

Nevertheless Putin accepted all this without serious resistance. It was not until the last half of his second four-year term that his simmering anger boiled over. In February 2007 at a security conference in Munich which was attended by defence and foreign ministers from most Western states he finally spoke his mind. Putin described Nato's expansion as a provocation and criticised the unilateralism of George Bush's policies. I just want to quote one paragraph: "We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. One state, and that is first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?"

Putin went on "I am convinced that the only mechanism that can make decisions about using military force as a last resort is the Charter of the United Nations. ... The use of force can only be considered legitimate if the decision is sanctioned by the UN".

You may think that what Putin said was pretty mild, if not blindingly obvious. But to Western leaders it came as a shock. Russia was challenging American hegemony. Russia was criticising the basic article of belief, shared by Republican neocons as well as Democratic party liberal interventionists, that the United States had a right to global leadership.

Putin's comments riled Washington but, in response, the Bush administration only stepped up its provocations. At a Nato summit in Bucharest in April 2008 the alliance declared that Georgia and Ukraine would become members.

The statement had disastrous consequences. Assuming he had Nato backing, Georgia's ferociously anti-Russian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, launched an armed attack on the breakaway region of South Ossetia, sparking a three-week war. and killing several Russian peace-keepers who had been in the territory under international agreement for over a decade. Moscow was bound to retaliate.

The war ended relatively quickly but what was particularly ominous was the way the Western media behaved while the fighting was underway. Almost without exception reporters took the Georgian side and painted the Russians as aggressors. This was the moment when demonisation of Putin really began in earnest, a trend which has only gathered intensity in the seven years since. The New Cold War had begun. It was to be a war in which propaganda and disinformation would play a major role.

## **US/NATO complicity in Georgia and Ukraine**

The big flashpoint came last year in Ukraine last year. I don't want to rehearse the events in Ukraine in detail because they happened very recently and you are probably well aware of the sequence of events. All I want to emphasise is that Nato's appetite for new members continued unabated after the Georgian war, even though it should have been obvious that Ukraine has deep historical, cultural, linguistic, economic and political ties with Moscow and any effort to pull it into an anti-Russian alliance would be playing with fire. It would also ignore the fact that in 2010 the Ukrainian parliament had voted to make non-alignment or neutrality the corner stone of its security. Every opinion poll in Ukraine showed a majority against joining Nato.

Instead of accepting the opinions of the majority of Ukrainians the United States maintained a well-funded public relations campaign to persuade Ukrainians to change their minds. They claimed Ukrainians needed to make a choice between being linked to Russia or to Europe, the implication being that Russia was not part of Europe. The EU went along with this, telling Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich that Ukraine could not be a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and also sign an association agreement with the European Union simultaneously. When Yanukovich hesitated and decided not to sign the association agreement with the EU, protest demonstrations started in Kiev. US and EU politicians came to Kiev to show solidarity with the protesters. It was an extraordinary piece of interference in another country's politics.

The sequence of events after that is well-known to you. A coup in Kiev, Yanukovich fleeing into exile, the parliament in Kiev passing a resolution to remove Russian as an official language, protests in eastern Ukraine, statements from leading Ukrainian politicians about terminating Russia's lease on the Black Sea port of Sevastopol, Putin's decision to reincorporate Crimea into Russia and hold a referendum there, armed clashes in Donetsk and Lugansk, and finally a serious military escalation, and Western sanctions on Russia.

Some of the tension of 2014 has abated this year thanks to negotiations on Ukraine known as the Minsk process. A ceasefire is holding and heavy weapons are being withdrawn by both sides.

## **The New Cold War hostilities and increase in war spending**

Now the New Cold War is in a very dangerous phase where all sides are arming themselves to hilt.

Western governments no longer look on Russia as a friend, ally or even a partner. But they don't yet define it as an adversary or an enemy. If there is a single word to describe how they view Russia, then probably the word which fits best is as a 'threat'. Western

strategy is what is called containment, just as it was in the first Cold War. Russia has to be contained, as though it is inherently dangerous and violent.

For its part the Kremlin says all that it wants is what any other sovereign state aspires to : recognition, respect and international influence.

The trouble is that the New Cold War benefits the elites on both sides of the divide. In the West the tension with Russia has given NATO a new lease of life, and made it easier for the arms manufacturers to sell their goods. Every NATO member is being urged to commit 2 per cent of GDP to defence spending.

The clash with Russia is also being used by Washington to demonstrate US strength and resolve after the failure of its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. US foreign policy is in a state of flux, if not of crisis. The alliance between the neocons and the humanitarian interventionists which has dominated Washington's strategy for the last two decades has not achieved any real successes. Going back to an old formula - confrontation with Russia - provides some comfort and reassurance to US elites who see their country's influence on the decline in the Middle East and East Asia.

It also helps to keep Europe in line, forcing Europeans to accept US hegemony. The US elite was shocked in 2003 when France and Germany joined Russia in opposing the invasion of Iraq. Here were two of the largest Nato members allying with the Kremlin. That nightmare is over now, thanks to the Ukraine crisis. France and Germany are in broad agreement with Washington again.

The United States's more realistic politicians realise that China offers a much greater challenge to US supremacy than Russia does. China is becoming a military superpower. It is already an economic one in a way that Russia, with its over-reliance on oil and gas, is not. But in the absence of a clear consensus on how to handle China, the policy of containing Russia and putting sanctions on it can also be used as a warning to China, a signal to Beijing that if it steps out of line it too may be put under sanctions and other forms of pressure.

Putin and the Russian elite also bear a share of the blame for the deterioration in relations. They have started to demonise the West just as badly as the West is demonising Russia. The tone of the Russian media is far more negative and hostile to the United States and the European Union than it has been for a decade.

Just as the New Cold War benefits Western arms companies, it also benefits Russian ones. Russia has been increasing its military spending, particularly on high-tech systems. The New Cold War also has the short-term benefit for the Kremlin of diverting attention from the need for Russia to undergo serious economic reform. It helps Putin personally. The

reincorporation of Crimea into Russia, and most recently the use of Russian war-planes in Syria, have given a huge boost to his poll ratings.

### **A new dangerous development**

A new development by European Union proposes public funds to the tune of €3.5 billion for European Defence Research Programme which will be applied to future military projects. The other is the European Union's proposal to for an "EU Army" proposed by Germany, both of these proposals undermine the EU's soft power approach.

The purpose and vision for which European Union was formed, was to unite countries economically which would end the bloody wars between European neighbours. Military matters were not part of it, being seen as the province of national governments and not the EU. Today, the EU's founders must be spinning in their graves as cooperation for peace and human rights is undermined as the EU inches towards militarisation.

### **Way forward and conclusion**

Is the situation going to worsen further? Could we be moving towards a complete breakdown in relations between the West and Russia, or even a hot war?

I don't think so. The Minsk agreement should be implemented for lifting of tension over Ukraine. In Syria now, in spite of the initial reaction to the Russian bombing campaign, there is dialogue between Washington and Moscow.

But we are in a period of danger, and it will require steady nerves and cool heads for us all to get through it. Public opinion counts, and the more that we protest and demonstrate against demonisation and in favour of diplomacy and mutual respect between Western leaders and Russia, the safer we shall be.

Russia and US are in talks with each other on Syria and to resolve the ongoing conflicts. At the same time, they should implement the Minsk Agreement on Ukraine crisis to lower down the tensions in the area. Both parties should show their willingness to work with each other. This ongoing confrontation is an opportunity to bring Russia and EU relations closer and promote closer ties between the countries in the EU's neighbourhood. The West should lift economic sanctions on Russia to show its genuine goodwill as a way to diffuse tensions between Russia and other European countries, paving the way for a more peaceful and safer world.

The new relation should be based on renunciation of use of force and confrontation. Michael Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader has called for peace and de-escalation between US and Russia in favour of dialogue between the two countries under current circumstances. I think the West and Russia need to listen and become reliable partners in

lessening the hostility in the area and act together for solving some of the urgent problems facing the world today.

Thanks for listening.

Notes:

1. Vijay Mehta, *Peace Beyond Borders: How the EU brought peace to Europe and how exporting it would end conflicts around the world*, New Internationalist, London 2016.
2. Vijay Mehta, *The Economics of Killing: How the West Fuels War and Poverty in the Developing World*, Pluto Press, London, 2012
3. Jonathan Steele, *The New Cold War*, Speech to London Region CND, November 4, 2015
4. *Russia Today*, US Missile Defence in Europe Directly Threatens Russia, 11 October, 2016
5. Paul Rogers, *Russia and the West: Risks of Hype*, Open Democracy, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2016
6. Ellen Powell, *Gorbachev calls for peace, is there a path forward*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2016

**Vijay Mehta** is an author and peace activist. He is Chair of Uniting for Peace and founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity. His books include *United Nations and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2005), *Arms No More* (2005), *The Fortune Forum Code: For a Sustainable Future* (2006), *"The Economics of Killing"* (2012) and *"Peace Beyond Borders"* (2016).

The Sunday Times described him as a "longstanding activist for peace, development, human rights and the environment, who along with his daughter Renu Mehta has set a precedent for striving to change the world" (**The Sunday Times, February 01, 2009**).

In 2014, Vijay Mehta's bio "**The Audacity of Dreams**" appeared in the book form "**Karma Kurry**" published by Jaico Publishing House, India with a foreword to the book by Nelson Mandela.

"Thank you for all you do Vijay – both the organisation Uniting for Peace and yourself are inspiration and give us all hope that both yourself and the organisation can bring a world without a war. Indeed it is possible, even in our own time." – **Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate 1976**

"This book, *Peace Beyond Borders* by Vijay Mehta, an astute non-European observer, uses this unprecedented, extraordinary experience as the centrepiece of a carefully crafted theory on the construction and maintenance of peace and prosperity on a global scale. It is my hope that many non-Europeans will use it as a source of inspiration as they attempt to carve out long-lasting peace in other parts of the world." – **Jose Ramos-Horta, Nobel Peace Laureate 1996 and Former President of Timor-Leste**