

Opinions

Who is the bully? The U.S. has treated Russia like a loser since the end of the Cold War.

By Jack F. Matlock Jr.

March 14, 2014

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One afternoon in September 1987, Secretary of State George Shultz settled in a chair across the table from Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in a New York conference room. Both were in the city for the United Nations General Assembly.

As he habitually did at the start of such meetings, Shultz handed Shevardnadze a list of reported human rights abuses in the Soviet Union. Shevardnadze's predecessor, Andrei Gromyko, had always received such lists grudgingly and would lecture us for interfering in Soviet internal affairs.

This time, though, Shevardnadze looked Shultz in the eye and said through his interpreter: “George, I will check this out, and if your information is correct, I will do what I can to correct the problem. But I want you to know one thing: I am not doing this because you ask me to; I am doing it because it is what my country needs to do.”

Shultz replied: “Eduard, that's the only reason either of us should do something. Let me assure you that I will never ask you to do something that I believe is not in your country's interest.”

They stood and shook hands. As I watched the scene, with as much emotion as amazement, it dawned on me that [the Cold War](#) was over. The job of American ambassador in Moscow was going to be a lot easier for me than it had been for my predecessors.

I thought back to that moment as talks between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russia's top diplomat this past week failed to resolve the crisis in Ukraine. It's striking that the language being used publicly now is so much more strident than our language, public or private, was then. “It can get ugly fast if the wrong choices are made,” [Kerry declared Wednesday, threatening sanctions.](#)

I don't believe that we are witnessing [a renewal of the Cold War](#). The tensions between Russia and the West are based more on misunderstandings, misrepresentations and posturing for domestic audiences than on any real clash of ideologies or national interests. And the issues are far fewer and much less dangerous than those we dealt with during the Cold War.

But a failure to appreciate how the Cold War ended has had a profound impact on Russian and Western attitudes — and helps explain what we are seeing now.

The common assumption that the West forced the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus won the Cold War is wrong. The fact is that the Cold War ended by negotiation to the advantage of both sides.

At the December 1989 Malta summit, Mikhail Gorbachev and President George H.W. Bush confirmed that the ideological basis for the war was gone, stating that the two nations **no longer regarded each other as enemies**. Over the next two years, we worked more closely with the Soviets than with even some of our allies. Together, we halted the arms race, banned chemical weapons and agreed to drastically reduce nuclear weapons. I also witnessed the raising of the Iron Curtain, the liberation of Eastern Europe and the voluntary abandonment of communist ideology by the Soviet leader. Without an arms race ruining the Soviet economy and perpetuating totalitarianism, Gorbachev was freed to focus on internal reforms.

Because the collapse of the Soviet Union happened so soon afterward, people often confuse it with the end of the Cold War. But they were separate events, and the former was not an inevitable outcome of the latter.

Moreover, the breakup of the U.S.S.R. into 15 separate countries was not something the United States caused or wanted. We hoped that Gorbachev would forge a voluntary union of Soviet republics, minus the three Baltic countries. Bush made this clear in August 1991 when he urged the non-Russian Soviet republics to adopt the union treaty Gorbachev had proposed and warned against “suicidal nationalism.” Russians who regret the collapse of the Soviet Union should remember that it was the elected leader of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, who conspired with his Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts to replace the U.S.S.R. with a loose and powerless “commonwealth.”

Even after the U.S.S.R. ceased to exist, Gorbachev maintained that “the end of the Cold War is our common victory.” Yet the United States insisted on treating Russia as the loser.

“By the grace of God, America won the Cold War,” Bush said during his 1992 State of the Union address. That rhetoric would not have been particularly damaging on its own. But it was reinforced by actions taken under the next three presidents.

President Bill Clinton supported NATO’s bombing of Serbia without U.N. Security Council approval and **the expansion of NATO** to include former Warsaw Pact countries. Those moves seemed to violate the understanding that the United States would not take advantage of the Soviet retreat from Eastern Europe. The effect on Russians’ trust in the United States was devastating. In 1991, polls indicated that about 80 percent of Russian citizens had a favorable view of the United States; in 1999, nearly the same percentage had an unfavorable view.

Vladimir Putin was elected in 2000 and initially followed a pro-Western orientation. When terrorists attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, he was the first foreign leader to call and offer support. He cooperated with the United States when it invaded Afghanistan, and he voluntarily removed Russian bases from Cuba and Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.

What did he get in return? Some meaningless praise from President George W. Bush, who then delivered the diplomatic equivalent of swift kicks to the groin: further expansion of NATO in the Baltics and the Balkans, and plans for American bases there; withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; invasion of Iraq without U.N. Security Council approval; overt participation in the “color revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan; and then, probing some of the firmest red lines any Russian leader would draw, talk of taking Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. Americans, heritors of the Monroe Doctrine, should have understood that Russia would be hypersensitive to foreign-dominated military alliances approaching or touching its borders.

President Obama famously attempted a “reset” of relations with Russia, with some success: The [New START treaty](#) was an important achievement, and there was increased quiet cooperation on a number of regional issues. But then Congress’s penchant for minding other people’s business when it cannot cope with its own began to take its toll. [The Magnitsky Act](#) , which singled out Russia for human rights violations as if there were none of comparable gravity elsewhere, infuriated Russia’s rulers and confirmed with the broader public the image of the United States as an implacable enemy.

The sad fact is that the cycle of dismissive actions by the United States met by overreactions by Russia has so poisoned the relationship that the sort of quiet diplomacy used to end the Cold War was impossible when the crisis in Ukraine burst upon the world’s consciousness. It’s why 43 percent of Russians are ready to believe that Western actions are behind the crisis and that Russia is under siege.

Putin’s military occupation of Crimea has exacerbated the situation. If it leads to [the incorporation of Crimea in the Russian Federation](#) , it may well result in a period of mutual recrimination and economic sanctions reminiscent of the Cold War. In that scenario, there would be no winners, only losers: most of all Ukraine itself, which may not survive in its present form, and Russia, which would become more isolated. Russia may also see a rise in terrorist acts from anti-Russian extremists on its periphery and more resistance from neighboring governments to membership in the economic union it is promoting.

Meanwhile, the United States and Europe would lose to the extent that a resentful Russia would make it even more difficult to address global and regional issues such as the Iranian nuclear program, North Korea and the Syrian civil war, to name a few. Russian policy in these areas has not always been all the United States desired, but it has been more helpful than many Americans realize. And encouraging a more obstructive Russia is not in anyone’s interest.

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