Nicole Tom, University of California, Los Angeles

The Colder War? A Threat Comparison of Russia and the Soviet Union

1. Introduction

The existence of Russia as a threat to the security of the United States is one of few invariable characteristics in an ever-changing international arena. With the exception of several instances approaching amity, such as the undertaking of joint operations in the Gulf War and the general thaw that occurred after the fall of the Soviet Union, this uneasy relationship has been the status quo for nearly a century. While numerous efforts have been undertaken in the pursuit of cooperation and peace, tensions have only worsened between Russia and the West within the last few years. In fact, relations appear to be the worst they have been since the Cold War era, causing many scholars and analysts to refer to these times as the “New Cold War.”

In addition to the dismal state of formal relations between Russia and the United States, there are a number of other ways in which the New Cold War parallels its predecessor. First, there has been a remarkable arms buildup in recent years on the part of both countries, as seen in the competition between weaponry upgrades and overall technological modernization that has made both the United States and Russia all the more formidable as opponents. Russia’s major arms buildup began in 2010 after twenty years of little activity, and judging by its recent defense budget, this is a long-term process:

In 2012, Russia announced that it expected to spend approximately RUB (roubles) 20 trillion (EUR 310 billion) on armaments by 2025. Another RUB 3 trillion (EUR 50 billion) would be spent on modernizing its defense industry. In 2015, Russia plans to spend 1.74 trillion RUB (EUR 30 billion on its SAP (State Armaments Programme)—more than half of its RUB 3.3 trillion (EUR 50.7

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1 Lucas, 4.
2 See Martens, 2.
billion) National Defense budget for the year, compared to less than one-third of the budget in 2005.³

Russia’s current domestic policies also show signs of a return to Cold War methods. Recently, “various actors [have] sharpened their public criticism of Russia’s domestic record, decrying new, restrictive legislation and the hostile climate for civil society activists and human rights defenders.”⁴ One target of this criticism has been the increase in media censorship and the introduction of new laws that have expanded state control over the media. With a Press Freedom Index score of 83 in 2015 (with 0 representing the most free countries and 100 representing the least free countries),⁵ and a Freedom House score of 6 in 2015 (with 1 representing the most free countries and 7 representing the least free countries),⁶ the state of free expression in Russia has been determined to be extremely poor. Such conclusions also were reached in reports by NGO Agora, a Russian human rights advocacy group, which has found that instances of internet censorship increased nine-fold from 2014 to 2015.⁷ (Agora itself was eventually banned by a regional Supreme Court in Russia for publishing this information.) The government has also been criticized for its persecution of LGBT individuals. The Human Rights Watch has attributed this to the fact that “Russian officials and state media spread hateful, anti-LGBT rhetoric. In this environment, the absence of any concerted official efforts to condemn discrimination against LGBT people is effectively a carte blanche to engage in homophobic violence.”⁸ As a whole, these policies have damaged relations between Russia and the West.

³ Ibid., 2–3.
⁴ “Целый ряд акторов стал более резко критиковать ситуацию с правами человека в стране, в том числе ужесточение законодательства и враждебную атмосферу для оппонентов Кремля и правозащитников.” “World Report 2015: Russia.”
⁵ See “2015 World Press Freedom Index.”
⁶ See “Russia: Freedom in the World.”
⁷ See Gainutdinov, 4.
⁸ Cooper.
There has been a significant amount of scholarship concerning the emergence of the New Cold War. A majority of scholars focus on how Russia has become more of a threat to the United States since the years immediately following the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. One specific example is Edward Lucas, author of *The New Cold War*, who does not question the existence of Cold War-like tensions between Russia and the United States in his book but rather focuses on the origin of this new era and the current state of affairs.⁹ More recently, there have been a number of articles published out of think tanks that compare Russia with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Contrary to the thinking of Edward Lucas, many of these do not consider modern relations between Russia and the United States to be as tense as during the Cold War. For example, a piece by Matthew Rojansky, “Russia is Difficult, but Far from an Enemy,” argues the need for cooperation between Russia and the United States and espouses the belief that the recent increase in tension does not necessarily signal a return to Cold War relations.¹⁰

The idea that Russia as it exists today is much less of a threat than the Soviet Union is one outstanding factor that causes the New Cold War to differ from its predecessor. This is not to say that Russia poses no danger to the United States, which certainly is not the case. Rather, a variety of factors are responsible for the decrease in its overall threat to the West. These factors include developments in information technology, economic interdependence, a lack of proxy wars, and shifts in ideology. Modern developments in information technology have allowed for easier access to understanding what actions an opponent is taking. This not only gives the United States more time to determine a response to provocation, but it also eliminates a great deal of uncertainty that could lead one side to rapidly escalate the conflict. With regard to economic interdependency, the

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⁹ See Lucas.
¹⁰ See Rojansky.
use of sanctions as a form of communicating approval/disapproval has reduced a country’s need to engage solely militarily. Rather, sanctions provide a more peaceful means of influencing politics around the world. Additionally, the lack of proxy wars has effectively decreased the likelihood of missteps that might lead to conflict escalation between Russia and the United States. Finally, shifts in ideology have changed Russia’s goals from creating and supporting international communist governments, which ostensibly threaten(ed) the security of the United States, to pursuing merely its own security and stability.

2. Developments in Information Technology

The last few decades have seen remarkable improvements in the field of information technology that have, in turn, significantly decreased the threat emanating from Russia. During the Cold War, widespread uncertainty resulted in fear on both sides, much of which stemmed from an inability to identify a threat until it was too late to respond appropriately or verify whether or not a threat was legitimate.\textsuperscript{11} This lack of knowledge made it easy for high-tension conflicts between the United States and the USSR to escalate rapidly and also risked rash responses, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war on a number of occasions.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, the threat of a surprise attack in this manner led to preventive actions from both sides, ranging from the massive buildup of nuclear capabilities to various reconnaissance and patrol missions. These led to escalated tensions and increased the possibility of a catastrophe.

One such potential catastrophe was the Cuban Missile Crisis. A number of issues arose as a result of low-information technology and uncertainty regarding the opposing nation’s actions and motives. Though suspicions concerning the USSR’s activities in Cuba were raised relatively

\textsuperscript{11} See Cimbala, 50.
\textsuperscript{12} See ibid., 4.
early on through word-of-mouth reports and evidence pointing to the installation of defensive surface-to-air-missiles, the fact that ballistic missiles were being housed in the country went unconfirmed for over a month due to restrictions on reconnaissance flights over Cuba and bad weather in the region.\textsuperscript{13} The latter prevented the United States’ Corona photoreconnaissance satellites from collecting good photos of the area in question and delayed U-2 missions over the region. Appropriate U.S. responses were thus delayed as well, allowing the Soviets to advance their plans further.\textsuperscript{14}

The United States’ initial reaction to this event revealed the extent to which it was surprised by Soviet activities. With the added uncertainty concerning the USSR’s motives and capabilities, “the president and his team wrestled with a diplomatic crisis of epic proportions.”\textsuperscript{15} By the time the missiles were discovered in the middle of October, the launch sites were already under construction. President Kennedy and his administration were, however, uncertain as to the operational status of the missiles and chose to treat the situation as though the missiles were already prepared for launch. It was discovered only in 1992 that approximately ninety of the missiles were fully operational short-range tactical nuclear warheads that could have been launched by the Soviet commander in Cuba without the need for authorization from Moscow.\textsuperscript{16} As a result of the heightened tension and uncertainty surrounding this stand-off, numerous close calls occurred, including the shooting down of a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft over Cuba and blockade confrontations in the waters surrounding it.\textsuperscript{17} Each of these events risked escalating the conflict to a kinetic war.

\textsuperscript{13} See “Forty Years Ago: The Cuban Missile Crisis.” \\
\textsuperscript{14} See ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{15} “Cuban Missile Crisis,” History.com. \\
\textsuperscript{16} See “Cuban Missile Crisis,” The Choices Program. \\
\textsuperscript{17} See “Cuban Missile Crisis - John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum.”
Uncertainty about the situation at hand also made it difficult for the United States to decide upon an appropriate course of action. This led the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff to recommend that the president respond with an air strike and full scale invasion of Cuba. Had President Kennedy acted on any of the suggestions originally offered to him, the Cuban Missile Crisis could have come to a far less amicable end, given the missile capabilities now known to have been in place at the time. In his book *The Fog of War*, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara describes the moment as follows: “Under a cloak of deceit, the Soviet Union introduced nuclear missiles into Cuba, targeting 90 million Americans. The C.I.A. said the warheads had not been delivered yet. They thought twenty were coming on a ship named the *Poltava*. We mobilized 180,000 troops. The first day’s air attack was planned at 1080 sorties, a huge air attack.”\(^{18}\) As a consequence of low-quality information technology, the United States was caught off guard and had very little time to decide how to respond to the missiles in Cuba. In addition, the advanced state of construction caused uncertainty as to the operational status of the missiles, making it difficult for the United States to determine how to react appropriately and risking actions that could have led to a nuclear war.

In contrast to the technology utilized during the Cuban Missile Crisis, modern satellite technology, such as the Lacrosse/Onyx and Misty satellite series, allows for the immediate confirmation of the target being observed, which provides the potential to reduce the uncertainty and risk associated with such an event. With the ability to avoid being detected, the capacity to survey up to several hundred kilometers, and the ability to see through cloud cover, foliage, and darkness, modern satellites have made it much easier to obtain the information required to make

\(^{18}\) Quoted in “Cuban Missile Crisis,” The Choices Program.
sound national security decisions.\textsuperscript{19} By reducing uncertainty, this technology gives immediate clarity to any situation in which it is being used, allowing nations the time to choose a logical course of action as opposed to making them question whether or not their responses appropriately match the actual conditions of the event.

In addition to allowing for the rapid identification of a target, the mere existence of this technology works as a deterrent against the type of provocations seen during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As this operation was based on deception and denial, Soviet success depended heavily upon secrecy, the United States’ lack of advanced surveillance and reconnaissance techniques, and U.S. ignorance until the missiles were far along in their installation.\textsuperscript{20} Even troops accompanying the transported missiles were given false information as to their destination and duties and were dressed in civilian clothing, all to avoid compromising the mission.\textsuperscript{21} As a deterrent to these types of action, advanced technology like the aforementioned satellite series is designed to limit the opponent’s ability to surprise. Countries that are militarily weaker than their opponents are left at a particularly serious disadvantage when they are unable to supplement their attacks with the element of surprise. Advanced information technology is thus critical to preventing the occurrence of events on the scale of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Another example of a development in modern information technology involves maritime radar capabilities. This technology has helped recently to detect incoming threats to the U.S. military, such as the Russian military fighter planes that have been repeatedly “buzzing” U.S. Navy ships. One of these events occurred in early April 2016, when “two Russian fighter jets flew within

\textsuperscript{19} See Vick.
\textsuperscript{20} See Zich.
\textsuperscript{21} See Hansen, 3.
30 feet of the USS Donald Cook.”\(^{22}\) Demonstrating the gravity of this situation, Secretary of State John Kerry responded by warning, “The Russian action could have resulted in the jets being shot down.”\(^ {23}\) This radar capability aids in determining the intentions of a potential threat and an appropriate response. With this knowledge it is much easier to avoid resorting to a response as severe as the one threatened by Kerry. Likewise, improved radar technology can work as a deterrent against enemy forces that intend to use the element of surprise to facilitate attacks. Without this technology, these forces are at a huge disadvantage. The ability to identify a threat quickly also allows for adequate time to decide how to counter it, decreasing the risk of last-minute, low-information decisions such as those made during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Developments in information technology have played a significant role in preventing the reoccurrence of events on the scale of that crisis and as a result have decreased the level of threat Russia poses to the United States.

3. Economic Interdependence

Present-day Russia further contrasts with the Soviet Union in terms of the countries with which it has shared economic interests. Like the developments in information technology, this factor has played a significant role in decreasing the Russian threat by creating incentives against initiating conflict, in addition to providing more peaceful means of imposing penalties, such as through sanctions. A well-known theory among political scientists and economists states that economic interdependence tends to foster peace between nations. Dr. Margit Bussmann has provided insight on this theory:

> The statement that economic integration reduces the likelihood of conflict is largely based on the effects of trade. A similar rationale can be applied to economic interdependence in the form of international capital exchange. A state

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\(^{22}\) Browne.  
\(^ {23}\) Ibid.
is expected to avoid political risk, especially severe forms such as militarized disputes, in order not to deter investors.\textsuperscript{24}

Thus, when states have vested economic interests in each other—whether through the exchange of human or technological capital, financial investments, or the trading of goods or services—they have more of a reason to avoid the type of militarized conflict that would be detrimental to this partnership. The risk of suspending economic ties therefore often works as a deterrent to violent disputes for the majority of the countries that share them.

The Soviet Union was, for the most part, economically self-sufficient. This allowed it a modicum of autonomy, particularly in relation to those countries that would have sanctioned the state and thus disrupted its growth toward an idealized communist country, should it have acted against their will. During this period of autonomy, imports and exports accounted for around four percent of the gross national product, and the bulk of this trade (around eighty percent) was conducted solely with the Eastern Bloc and Third World countries.\textsuperscript{25} This fostered an environment in which the Soviet Union could act as it wished with little fear of economic consequences. As a result, when the USSR acted contrary to U.S. interests, both sides engaged in or came very close to starting a military conflict. One such conflict occurred in Berlin in 1961, when tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union over control of the region reached a climax, and the United States began seriously preparing its fighting forces and budget for an all-out war.\textsuperscript{26} Though negotiations were attempted on multiple occasions between President Eisenhower and Khrushchev, and later between President Kennedy and Khrushchev, the fact that the United States had no real leverage over the USSR hindered any attempts at a reasonable resolution. Following

\textsuperscript{24} Bussmann, 1.

\textsuperscript{25} See “Soviet Union: A Country Study.”

\textsuperscript{26} See “The Berlin Crisis, 1958–1961.”
the construction of the Berlin Wall, a standoff occurred between U.S. and Soviet troops on either side of the diplomatic checkpoint in what has been dubbed “one of the tensest moments of the Cold War in Europe.”\textsuperscript{27} Frequent disputes between troops from each side only increased the likelihood of one wrong move quickly escalating the conflict. Without the ability to deter Soviet occupation in Berlin economically, the United States risked a face-off and the chance that an outbreak of conventional fighting would lead to rapid military escalation between the two nuclear powers.

Today economic sanctions, rather than military engagements, are routinely implemented as a first response when the United States disagrees with Russian actions. This has become the norm due to changes in Russia’s economic policies, beginning with the introduction of major trade with non-communist countries in the 1970s. For its imports Russia relies heavily on Germany and the United States, bringing in around $45.5 billion and $11 billion respectively to its economy.\textsuperscript{28} Thus, the risk of suspending the economic ties created by this interdependence often works as a deterrent to the pursuit of violent disputes. For example, in regard to the current Crimean conflict in Ukraine, though the United States did send several thousand troops to help train Ukrainian forces, none actively engaged in the conflict. This resulted in zero reported U.S. casualties and also prevented missteps that might have led to conflict escalation between the United States and Russia. Rather, the United States and other countries have succeeded in influencing Russian policy and deterring further action in Ukraine by initiating a number of sanctions against Russia. Specifically, “both the U.S. and European Union banned long term financing of more than 90 days out, and prohibited companies from selling equipment used in oil and gas drilling, as well as

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} See “Russia.”
sanctioning exploration and production joint ventures with Russian oil and gas companies.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, Russia had to deal with oil prices free-falling from $80 per barrel at the beginning of 2014 to between $40 and $50 by the end of the year. Additional sanctions also were placed on specific individuals close to Russian President Vladimir Putin and some of the major businesses they owned. These sanctions, together with the falling oil prices, in total caused $151.5 billion in capital outflow in 2014 and around $100 billion in 2015. Overall, the sanctions implemented over the Ukraine crisis have contributed to the Russian ruble’s 50 percent decrease in value and to the 2014–2015 economic crisis.\textsuperscript{30} Many officials and analysts credit these effects and the threat of further sanctions with a containment of conflict in the region and with prompting Putin to take into account Western responses to his actions in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{31} An increase in sanctions would only further damage the already struggling economy and Putin’s reputation. This supports the argument that sanctions, as opposed to purely military engagements, have the power to change policy and influence the decisions made by other nations.

While some political theorists reject the concept that economic interdependence produces peace, value still can be found in the fact that countries with economic ties also have shared interests. Yet even if the mere existence of economic ties does not deter violence, measures exist by which nations still can send harsh and tangible signals to each other without having to engage in brutal conflicts. It is clear, then, that the development of economic ties with Russia has established means of non-physical restraint against unchecked power. This has generally worked to decrease Russia’s threat to the West.

\textsuperscript{29} Rapoza.
\textsuperscript{30} See ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} See Dreyer.
4. Absence of Proxy Wars

Partially as a result of the ties created through economic interdependence and the deterrent measures these ties create, the number of proxy wars between the United States and Russia since the end of the Cold War has significantly decreased. This has served to limit the chances of a rapid escalation of conflict between the two countries, thus working to decrease the threat Russia poses to the United States. As opposed to constant direct fighting between two different nations, a proxy war is defined as entailing “two major nations actively—and to a real extent equally—supporting opposite sides in a conflict.”32 A proxy war can be the result of any number of issues, though more often than not it is largely influenced by ideological differences. Not only are proxy wars taxing on the economies, political systems, and militaries of the primary nations involved, but they also lead to a great deal of political, economic, and social destabilization in the regions in which they are fought.

During the Cold War proxy wars were being fought across the globe, with the spread of leverage and prestige as the United States’ and the USSR’s primary motivation. The latter’s goals in particular included the secure establishment of communism and its spread to other countries when the opportunity presented itself.33 Therefore, when the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in conflict over Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, China, Lebanon, and a number of other countries, influence and power were the driving forces. Not only was the spread of Soviet influence a direct threat to the well-being of the United States—as those opposing forces that sided with the USSR were wholly against the West and its ideals and worked to actively demonstrate this—but

32 Kupchan.
33 See Campbell, 307.
engaging in these conflicts also led to a huge drain of human, financial, and military resources for the countries involved.

For example, in the Korean War, which lasted only three years, over $30 billion (over $300 billion after inflation) was spent on the U.S. military alone. In total, over thirty-five thousand American lives were lost.\(^\text{34}\) The Soviets, for their part, largely limited their contributions to military aid and materials. It has been widely acknowledged that they attempted to keep their involvement as covert as possible in order to avoid the outbreak of an actual war with the United States.\(^\text{35}\) This only further demonstrates how fragile these situations were and how fearful both sides were of starting a direct conflict with one another. Though proxy wars are supposed to allow outside powers to solve their disagreements while avoiding actual combat, this was rarely the case during the Cold War, when both sides fought with troops.

The relative lack of proxy wars today has thus decreased the risk of a direct war between Russia and the United States. While some political analysts would argue that the current conflict in Syria resembles a proxy war, this claim is still heavily debated. Though the United States undoubtedly is involved in supporting forces fighting against the Assad regime, a number of political strategists, such as Lionel Beehner, believe the following:

First, describing the Syrian quagmire as a proxy war implies that the conflict is mainly about larger fissures in the region, especially the rift between Sunni and Shiite, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Second, it suggests that the conflict will be resolved chiefly by outside actors hashing out their differences at the table....[These] assumptions are wrong. Proxy wars do not miraculously extinguish themselves without some measure of bottom-up attempts to make peace among local fighters or a fundamental shift in the conflict’s balance of power on the ground.\(^\text{36}\)

As Beehner suggests, calling the situation in Syria a proxy war implies that the main issues

\(^{34}\) See “America’s Wars.”
\(^{35}\) See Xiaoming.
\(^{36}\) Beehner.
fueling the conflict have to do with problems between the outside powers involved and that the conflict will be resolved entirely by these powers. Yet neither condition is applicable. The origins of this conflict are regional and the issues informing it will need to be resolved by the immediate parties involved. This conflict will not be resolved by an agreement between the United States and Russia.

Still other analysts, such as Cliff Kupchan, believe that the Syrian conflict is not a proxy war because of the lack of resource expenditure and involvement on the part of the outside nations that have joined the fight. This is particularly apparent when compared to the proxy wars that occurred during the Cold War. As Kupchan argues, “The U.S. has not, and I don't think will, actively oppose the Russian move….US strategy is not proxy war.”

Whether or not the conflict in Syria can be defined as a proxy war, it is important to note the degree of involvement of each outside actor, as this can be used to determine the level of risk associated with the conflict. For its part, the United States is deploying significantly fewer troops than it had during the Cold War proxy wars, and very few of those currently deployed are actively involved in the fight. This general decrease in on-the-ground involvement lowers the chance of a misstep on the part of either side leading to a rapid escalation in conflict between the United States and Russia. This differs significantly from the higher probability of conflict escalation during the more numerous and more intensely-fought proxy wars of the Cold War era. As a whole, the lack of proxy wars and the minimal involvement of troops on the ground has diminished the chance of a violent encounter that would lead to the outbreak of a kinetic war between the United States and Russia.

37 Kupchan.
5. Shifts in Ideology

In addition to the positive effects of a general reduction in proxy wars, shifts in ideology from the Cold War to the present day have also worked to temper Russia’s status as a threat to the United States. Previously, the ideology of the Communist Party of the USSR had been the driving force behind its foreign and domestic policies. Though the USSR had abandoned the pursuit of a world revolution, settling instead on the ideal of “socialism in one country,” it still actively supported communist revolutions and insurgencies in foreign regions when the opportunities presented themselves. This practice inevitably prompted responses from the United States.

Wherever the Soviets were able to disseminate their ideology, they installed governments much like their own that often positioned themselves—both in rhetoric and in practice—against the United States and the ideals it represents. A specific example of this was the Cuban Revolution. After the Soviet Union helped to establish it as a socialist state with a communist government, Cuba went on to support revolutions in other countries, such as Algeria. It also supported communist insurgencies and independence movements in Angola, Ghana, Nicaragua, and Yemen. The United States was involved on the opposing side in all of these conflicts. Thus, by establishing a state sympathetic to its ideals the Soviet Union created a country that was anti-Western in ideology and in practice. With each new state that sympathized with the Soviet cause, more support would be given to the forces opposing the United States in later proxy wars. In the Vietnam War, for example, the Viet Cong were supported not only by the Soviet Union but also by China, North Korea, Cuba, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Mongolia, and Romania. By

38 See Trofimenko.
39 See Domínguez, 7.
spreading its ideology, the Soviet Union created allies that not only shared common ideals and principles but also often shared a common enemy in the United States.

Ideological shifts in Russia have altered the state’s foreign objectives. Upon the broad acceptance of liberalism in Russia—that is, an ideology associated with an open economy, a general move towards tolerance, and more open political institutions—Russia’s perspective on its role in the world changed to become aligned with and favorable towards the West. Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this new ideological stance began to have a strong influence on the political, social, and economic make-up of the state. Without the presence of communism driving its foreign and domestic policies, Russia no longer had the need to defend its ideology around the globe by creating and supporting sympathetic foreign governments. Instead, by adopting a more Western ideology, Russia’s focus has shifted to ensure its own domestic stability and well-being. As Edward Solovev states in his book *National Interests and Major Political Forces in Modern Russia*, “It was supposed that only the Soviet Communist regime has real enemies. The elimination of this regime and the disappearance of dividing lines in Europe will allow Russia into the club of the leading nations of the world.”

After suffering at the hands of its own economic, political, social, and foreign policies, the USSR was in dire need of a change by the end of the Cold War. As the United States and other foreign economies modernized, the USSR fell far behind. The CIA estimates that the Soviet economy was roughly half that of the United States in 1989, despite the fact that its labor force was larger (152,300,000 in the USSR compared to 125,557,000 in the United States). By

40 See Aron.
41 “Предполагалось что реальные противники есть только у коммунистического советского режима, устранение которого и исчезновение разделительных линий с карты Европы…и откроют перед Россией двери клуба ведущих стран мира.” Solovev.
42 See “Soviet Union: A Country Study.”
renouncing the ideology that served as the foundation for all of its actions, Russia began to pursue a new Western-friendly ideology that would allow it to establish the alliances needed to substantiate its legitimacy once again in the international arena and to develop to the level of efficiency observed in Western countries. Almost immediately, the United States began working with international organizations like the World Bank and IMF to provide financial assistance to Russia. This support continued, as “American and Western efforts over the last 25 years—to which the United States and Europe devoted billions of dollars—was aimed at helping Russia overcome the horrid legacy of Soviet communism, which left the country on its knees in 1991.”

This new ideology largely eliminated the primary reasons for Russia’s conflicts with the United States. Though it is arguable that the Syrian conflict is one notable exception, there are several important justifications for Russian involvement. First of all, Syria remains one of Russia’s few allies in the Middle East as well as a valuable partner in the fight against ISIS, and it has allowed Russia to establish a military base in the state. Syria and Russia also share a significant amount of cultural and commercial connections. Additionally, as opposed to perpetuating an ideology that operates entirely against American ideals, the Russians seem to be motivated more by protecting their own national interests and security and by establishing their legitimacy in the international arena. Thus, while Russian involvement in Syria is understandably frowned upon by the West, it is clear that the United States has no reason to see these actions as provocations.

6. Conclusion

While the modern state of relations with Russia has led many to refer to these times as the New Cold War, today Russia poses far less of a threat to the United States than the Soviet Union

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43 “After the Fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. Tried to Help Russians.”
44 See “Why Russia Is an Ally of Assad.”
did. While there have been serious provocations and a significant strain in relations between the West and Russia within the last decade, there also exist a number of safeguards against a drastic move by the Russians: developments in information technology, investment in shared economic interests, a general lack of proxy wars, and significant shifts in ideology. These factors have provided a deterrence against Russian provocations and have created incentives against taking actions that would disrupt relations between the two countries.

With an understanding of how these factors influence Russian policy and strategy, it becomes evident that Russia does not need to be feared in the same way that the United States once feared the Soviet Union. More than anything, this fear of a return to the Soviet era appears to drive the United States’ interpretations of and responses to the majority of Russia’s most recent activity abroad. Though it would be a stretch to see Russia as any kind of ally to the United States, it is certainly no longer the most unpredictable threat to the West, and U.S. policy towards Russia should change accordingly. Rather than viewing every move taken by the Russians as an affront to Western power and authority, the United States would benefit by taking into account Russia’s desire to ensure its own security, stability, and overall well-being. Not only would this change in perspective promote more favorable relations between the United States and Russia, but it would also allow the United States to focus its efforts and resources on combating other more imminent threats.

The safeguards that allow for this change did not exist previously—at least not to the extent that they do today—and the world spent decades in fear of a nuclear apocalypse. In a cyclical fashion, this shared uncertainty and the precautionary actions taken by both the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War reflected this fear and only served to heighten tensions and increase the chances of conflict escalation. While the Unites States has always faced a plethora of
threats to its overall stability, security, and well-being, post-Soviet Russia has transitioned to become a less significant threat.

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