

as by the election of President William (Bill) Jefferson Clinton in 1992. Helped into office by an electorate that was now more focused on domestic matters rather than international affairs—and sensing that the American people were seeking a new foreign policy approach—he concentrated mainly on economic issues, linking prosperity at home with the US's ability to compete abroad. This did not preclude the US having to address other more traditional threats, such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons and terrorism. But having won the cold war, not only were the American people deeply reluctant to intervene abroad, there seemed to be no pressing reason for the US to get sucked into conflicts overseas either.

Yet, as Clinton conceded, the US could neither escape from the world nor retreat from it. There may have been little appetite for military intervention, especially following the 1993 debacle in Somalia, but the US was hardly inactive. It did after all impose its own military 'solution' on the Serbs in the unfolding war in former Yugoslavia. Clinton then pushed hard for the enlargement of NATO. And he was anything but hesitant when it came to trying to resolve some fairly intractable

regional conflicts, including in Northern Ireland. It was very easy for more conservative critics at the time to argue that the US had no 'grand strategy'. But this was less than fair or accurate. It may have had no single enemy to fight, but it could hardly be accused of having no foreign policy at all. Moreover, if Clinton displayed caution when it came to employing American military power overseas, this seemed to correspond to the wishes of most Americans during the 1990s. It also allowed the United States to focus on the one thing it seemed to do best: unleashing the power of the market at home while spreading American liberal values abroad.

Key Points

- The end of the cold war increased the US's weight in the international system.
- Under President Clinton there was a great focus on economic issues as a central part of US foreign policy.
- President Clinton was attacked by his conservative critics for having no 'grand strategy'.

After the USSR: Yeltsin to Putin

Scholars of International Relations have long been deeply interested in the interplay between the great powers and the reasons why even the most powerful have in the end disappeared from the stage of history—something that happened to the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires after the First World War, then to the European colonial empires after the Second World War, and finally to the Soviet empire itself between 1989 and 1991. But history also demonstrates that when empires fall this is not always followed by stability and prosperity. So it was in the past; so it turned out to be following the collapse of Soviet communism. Many challenges faced the new Russia.

First there was the issue of what to do with the USSR's nuclear arsenal, and how to either prevent weapons leaving the former USSR or ensure that control of them remained in Russian hands. Second, there was an equally serious problem posed by the break-up of the USSR. Not only did 25 million Russians now find themselves living outside of Russia proper, but the other nations of the former USSR also had to work out some kind of relationship with a Russia which found it almost impossible to think of its relationship with such states as Ukraine and Georgia in anything other than imperial terms. Finally, there was the even more basic problem of making the transition

from a centralized, planned economy, designed to guarantee full employment, to a competitive market economy where many of the old industries that had been the bedrock of the USSR (including its huge military-industrial complex) were evidently no longer fit for purpose. Clearly some very tough times lay ahead, made tougher still by the extraordinarily painful market reforms that Russia adopted from 1992 onwards. Indeed, as a result of its speedy adoption of Western-style privatization, Russia experienced something close to a 1930s-style depression, with industrial production plummeting, living standards falling, and whole regions once devoted to cold war military production going into free fall. Nor did the economic situation show much sign of improvement as time went on. Indeed, in 1998 Russia experienced its own financial crisis, one that wiped out the savings of ordinary people and made the new post-communist regime under Boris Yeltsin even less popular than it had been a few years earlier. Not surprisingly, a year later he decided to resign.

It was not at first clear that Yeltsin's successor would behave any differently. Indeed, it was no less a person than Yeltsin himself who chose Vladimir Putin as his anointed successor in 1999. Nor, it seems, did the new oligarchs voice any degree of opposition to Putin's elevation. In fact,

there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that they were perfectly happy with his accession to power. Already immensely wealthy himself, Putin only demanded one thing from the new Russian super-rich: acquiescence. Those who were prepared to go along with this did very well. Those who did not found themselves either in prison (such was the fate of the richest Russian of all, Mikhail Khodorkovsky) or in exile (which in the end is what happened to the hugely powerful Boris Berezovsky).

A product of the KGB (the Soviet security agency) and a central figure in the creation of its successor organization in the shape of the FSB, Putin seemed to have few, if any, original ideas of his own. However, he did understand power in the purest sense. Ruthless even by Russian standards, he brooked no opposition. But his wider task, as he saw it, was not just to impose his will on others but to restore Russian prestige after what he saw as its precipitous decline during the 1990s. Putin never hid his ambitions. Nor did he lack for a coherent narrative. The disintegration of the USSR, he repeated, had been a tragedy, and even though it would not be possible to put the old empire back together again there would be no

further concessions. This might not take Russia back to anything like the Soviet era. But Russia, he insisted, had to assert itself more forcefully—most obviously against those in the West who thought they could take Russia for granted. Nor should the newly wealthy simply be serving their own needs. They should also be asking what they could do for Russia. This would not lead (and did not lead) to a restoration of the old-style communist economic system. However, it did mean the newly privatized Russian economy was placed under much greater control by the Russian state. Putin even redefined the notion of democracy and gave it what many saw as a distinctly Russian or ‘sovereign’ character, in which the outward form of democracy remained intact while its inner content, in terms of an independent parliament and equal access to free media, was gradually hollowed out.

This shift in outlook produced some confusion in the West. At first the Americans and the Europeans turned something of a blind eye to these developments on the realist assumption that it was important to work closely with Russia: partly for economic reasons—Russia was a major supplier of oil and gas to Europe; partly

Case Study 4.1 Russia and the West: a new cold war?



Ukrainians protesting against Russian intervention

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It has become increasingly fashionable among commentators to define the Russian relationship with the West as being like a ‘new’ cold war. Perhaps the first to use the term was Edward Lucas in his 2008 bestseller, *The New Cold War*. Russian military intervention in Georgia, he believes, signalled the beginning of a new and dangerous period in the relationship. Subsequent developments have only seemed to confirm this early assessment. The murders of investigative journalists in Russia itself, targeted assassination outside Russia, its meddling in the internal affairs of the Baltic republics, Russia’s use of cyberwar, its various disinformation campaigns designed to undermine the West, and finally its interventions in Ukraine after

2013 all point to a profound crisis in relations—a new cold war in effect. Lucas also blames the West, not so much for having caused the conflict—Russia, he insists, is the guilty party—but rather for having failed to recognize the threat and confront it in its early stages. Preoccupied as the West once was with building a partnership with Russia, it didn’t see the writing on the wall until it was too late.

Critics of the term ‘new’ cold war do not so much dispute the facts—though some would blame the West as much as Russia for having precipitated the crisis. Rather they question the use of the term itself. They make four specific arguments. First, the cold war coincided with the existence of the old communist superpower, the USSR, and as the USSR no longer exists the term ‘cold war’ is not a suitable term to define the crisis in Russia’s relations with the West today. Second, the cold war was basically an ideological clash between opposing socio-economic systems—one communist and the other capitalist—whereas the current clash has little or nothing to do with ideology. It is just a pure power struggle. Third, the cold war kept the two sides apart. The new contest, on the other hand, seems to recognize no such boundaries, and as such might be much more dangerous. Finally, critics of the idea of a new cold war argue that one must beware of using terms drawn from history like ‘cold war’ which do more to obscure contemporary reality than illuminate it (M. Cox 2011).

Question 1: Is the term ‘new cold war’ useful or misleading?

Question 2: Is the West or Russia most to blame for growing tensions between Russia and the West?

because Putin appeared to be popular among ordinary Russians; and partly because Russia was a permanent member of the UN Security Council and remained a nuclear weapons state. However, the cumulative impact of Putin's policies could not but complicate Russia's relations with the West. Some even began talking—very loosely—of a 'new' cold war between Russia and the West (see **Case Study 4.1**). Whether or not it had become one remains open to question. Yet whatever one called it, one thing was becoming increasingly obvious: the relationship was fast becoming increasingly bitter and fractious. Russia blamed the West; the West, Russia. But it was clear that in spite of efforts on the US side to 'reset' the relationship, one event after another was pushing things towards a breaking point.

The situation deteriorated noticeably following Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008. Justifying this on the grounds that the West was trying to foment liberal change in its own 'backyard', Russian rhetoric against Western policies then began to intensify. Its use of the veto against the West in the UN became more frequent. It then decided it would use all means necessary to keep Bashar al-Assad in power in Syria. Then, and

most seriously, in 2013–14 came the crisis in Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea. Evidence also began to emerge that Russia was not only trying to destabilize Ukraine but the West too by backing the Trump presidential candidacy in 2016 while giving ideological and possibly financial support to parties and persons in Europe hostile to the European Union. A political corner seemed to have been turned. The relationship had reached what some regarded as a point of no return.

Key Points

- The break-up of the USSR inevitably unleashed problems which proved difficult to solve.
- Economic reforms in the 1990s created a new class of super-rich Russians but exacerbated Russia's overall economic decline.
- Vladimir Putin has attempted to reverse what he saw as Russia's decline in the 1990s.
- The relationship between the West and Russia has deteriorated drastically, particularly since Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Europe: rise and decline?

Though Americans may have claimed that it was the US that 'won' the cold war, it was in fact Europe and in particular Germany that were the most immediate beneficiaries. First, a continent and a country that had once been divided were now united. Second, the states of Eastern Europe achieved one of the most important of international rights: the right of self-determination. Finally, the threat of serious war with potentially devastating consequences for Europe as a whole was eliminated. Naturally, the move from one order to another did not happen without conflict, as events in former Yugoslavia (1990–9) revealed only too tragically. Even so, the new united Europe, with its open borders and democratic institutions, clearly had much to look forward to.

But what kind of Europe would it be? Here there was much room for debate, with some, especially the French, believing that Europe should now develop its own specific European security arrangements independent of the United States—the old Gaullist dream. Others, meanwhile, believed Europe should remain closely tied to the US—a view most forcefully expressed by both the new elites of Central Europe themselves, not to mention the other, more established members of

the NATO alliance. Europeans could not agree either about what kind of Europe they preferred. There were those, of course, who sought an ever deeper union that would fulfil their dream of building a United States of Europe, one that among other things would be able to play a major independent role in international politics. There were others who feared such a development. Europe, they asserted, should be a Europe composed of its very different nation-states, a Europe that recognized national difference and did not try to undermine the principle of sovereignty. Finally, Europeans divided over economics, with a clear line being drawn between *dirigistes*, who favoured greater state involvement in the management of a specifically European social model, and free marketeers—led by the British—who argued that under conditions of global competition such a protected system was simply not sustainable and that thoroughgoing economic reform was essential.

While many in 'old' Europe debated Europe's future, policy-makers themselves were confronted with the more concrete issue of how to bring the 'East' back into the 'West', a process that went under the general heading of 'enlargement'. In terms of policy outcomes,