

Research Paper

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# A 'New Cold War'?

## Abusing History, Misunderstanding Russia



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## Summary

- The war in Ukraine suggests a new era of competition between the West and Russia. It has (again) revealed both fundamental differences in how European security is understood, and increasing friction in values. Together, these problems suggest an emergent 'clash of Europes' that pits the West's relatively liberal vision for the region against a more conservative 'Russian Europe'.
- A 'new Cold War' narrative, increasingly popular, interprets this competition as a resumption of the Cold War. Many Western political figures and observers have asserted that Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, is trying to turn back the clock, even to rebuild the USSR, and therefore that the experience of the Cold War could offer useful lessons for politicians today.
- This narrative, though seductive, is misleading. It too often frames the discussion in a repetitive and simplistic polemic that inhibits understanding of Russia and its relationship with the West. This makes it harder for the West to craft realistic policies with respect both to the Ukraine crisis and Russia generally.
- The use of other sensationalist historical analogies – such as comparing modern Russia's actions to those of Nazi Germany in the late 1930s – further detracts from the understanding of a complex international crisis. It is an abuse of history in which political myths and abstractions obscure informed arguments about Russia and blur the differences between the presumed and the known.
- The 'new Cold War' debate traps Western thinking about Russia in the 20th century. It reflects, and encourages, a dangerous tendency on the part of politicians and military strategists to prepare for past wars. It also offers a misleading sense of familiarity and predictability about Russia that does not take into account either the different international situation today or Russian adaptability to changing geopolitics.

## Introduction

History, it seems, shrouds Russia's relations with the West. Even as Europe last year celebrated the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and this year marked the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, officials, expert observers and media commentators have debated whether the current deterioration in relations between Russia and the West constitutes a 'new Cold War', a 'Cold War II' or a 'return to the Cold War'. Commentary has emphasized echoes of the past, the recurrence of old and familiar tensions, and the need to learn lessons from the Cold War in order to address the current situation more effectively.<sup>1</sup>

Thinking in such terms, though seductive, is distracting and misleading. This is not to suggest that the West's relationship with Russia is not bad. It is. Nor do the prospects for an improvement in the short to medium term look auspicious. The war in Ukraine has again emphasized the systemic nature of problems between the West and Russia. It has evolved into an economic war, as each side has imposed sanctions on the other. At the same time flows of money, political support and weapons have turned the conflict in Ukraine into a proxy war between Russia and the West.

Yet debating Russia in terms of a 'new Cold War' is counterproductive because it leads to poor framing of the problem. While the phrase 'new Cold War' may fit the easy assertion that President Vladimir Putin is trying to take Russia back to, or rebuild some version of, the Soviet Union,<sup>2</sup> it has become an empty phrase with little meaning beyond 'the West and Russia have a troubled relationship'. It anchors Western public policy thinking about Russia to a simplistic and often inaccurate, even mythical, past. The debate is usually presented in euphonious and familiar, but often partial and misleading, references to stalwarts of 20th-century Western strategic and political thinking such as Winston Churchill, George Kennan and George Orwell.

It is time to think of Russia and its relationship with the West in fresh, 21st-century terms. This is necessary if the West is to understand the questions, challenges and opportunities Russia presents, and to respond adequately to them. This research paper reflects on three related problems. First, it explores the repetitiveness of the discussion and its effects. Mainstream Western thinking about Russia is trapped in a time-loop of polemics that are dogmatic, inflexible and inaccurate. Such thinking overlooks the more recent emergence of a 'clash of Europes' characterized by friction over values and fundamental disagreement about the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The paper then turns to a second problem, the abuse of history, particularly the prevalence of a small range of sensationalist analogies that reduce history to politically charged myth. The paper concludes with reflections on a third problem, the sense of déjà vu in debate and policy. By interpreting current events through the prism of the Cold War or other eras, and in effect seeking to apply old solutions

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<sup>1</sup> For a small selection of such commentaries, see: Michael McFaul, 'Confronting Putin's Russia', *New York Times*, 23 March 2014; Robert Legvold, 'Managing the New Cold War. What Moscow and Washington can Learn from the Last One', *Foreign Affairs*, July–August 2014; Paul Saunders, 'Seven Ways a New Cold War with Russia will be Different', the *National Interest*, 11 May 2014; 'The New Cold War: Are We Going Back to the Bad Old Days?', the *Guardian*, 19 November 2014; Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro, 'Consequences of a New Cold War', *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 2, April–May 2015; Matthew Rojansky and Rachel Salzman, 'Debunked: Why There Won't be Another Cold War', the *National Interest*, 20 March 2015. For examples of Putin as Stalin, see: 'Putin Could be as Bad as Stalin, Says Former Defence Secretary', the *Guardian*, 15 September 2014; 'US Military Chief Compares Putin's Ukraine Move to Stalin's Invasion of Poland', the *Daily Beast*, 24 July 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Strobe Talbott, a prominent American 'Russia hand' who was ambassador-at-large holding the former Soviet Union portfolio in the 1990s, has suggested that the 'defining issue' of Putin's presidency is the 'turning back' of the clock, the repudiation of the transformational policies of his immediate predecessors and the reinstatement of the 'key attributes of the Soviet system' in Russia. Strobe Talbott, 'The Making of Vladimir Putin', *Politico*, 19 August 2014.

to new challenges, politicians and military strategists are lulled by a sense of familiarity into preparing to fight past wars, albeit in today's very different international context. There is too strong a whiff of the 20th century in Western thinking about Russia.

This paper aims to clear some ground, and make explicit the problems in some of the current analyses, in order to spur discussion. To reiterate, the author neither contests the difficulty of the West's current relations with Russia, nor advocates a return to a 'business as usual' or '*status quo ante* Ukraine' position. The history of the Cold War is important, and is relevant to understanding today's Russia. But the 'new Cold War' narrative draws on automatic assumptions that remove history in any meaningful sense from the debate: the Cold War era should be seen as providing no more than a backdrop to today's situation, rather than informing the outdated, stereotypical and increasingly abstract concept of 'Russia' that has become ingrained in public policy thinking.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive survey of the Cold War. Numerous points are not discussed in depth, including the history of the Cold War itself. Equally, the paper does not critique in detail the relevance or accuracy of specific historical analogies.<sup>3</sup> Nor does it discuss the Russian side of the debate,<sup>4</sup> the different points of historical focus for Russian analysis, or the increasingly visible differences in understanding of 20th-century history.<sup>5</sup>

## The West, Russia and the 'new Cold War' time-loop

Though it came to prominence in 2014, the 'new Cold War' debate is not, in fact, new. It has been a recurrent feature of the mainstream Western discussion for a decade. Indeed, there is a strong sense of familiarity to it, since much of today's discussion of Ukraine repeats almost exactly the commentaries of 2006 surrounding the energy crisis between Russia, Ukraine and Europe, and those of 2008 that followed the Russo-Georgian war.<sup>6</sup>

As one Western observer has suggested, Putin's second term as president (beginning in 2004) was accompanied by ever more insistent suggestions that a 'new Cold War' was in the making. Debate over the dynamics of Russian foreign policy became increasingly closely connected to the controversy over the nature of Putin's regime, and of Russia not going in the 'right direction' (i.e. towards democracy and partnership with the West).<sup>7</sup> This was given impetus in 2005 when, during his yearly Federal Assembly speech, Putin spoke of the collapse of the USSR as the 'greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century'. This speech has subsequently returned to haunt the

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<sup>3</sup> This has been done elsewhere by historians. See, for instance, Martin Brown, 'Ukraine Crisis is Nothing Like the Invasions of Czechoslovakia', the *Conversation*, 4 April 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Vasily Kashin, 'A New, Senseless Cold War is Now Inevitable', the *Moscow Times*, 2 September 2014; Sergei Karaganov, 'Time to End the Cold War in Europe', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 28 April 2014; 'Novaya 'kholodnaya voyna?', *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 28 July 2014, [www.redstar.ru/index.php/component/k2/item/17540-novaya-kholodnaya-voyna](http://www.redstar.ru/index.php/component/k2/item/17540-novaya-kholodnaya-voyna); Dmitri Trenin, 'Welcome to Cold War II', *Foreign Policy*, 4 March 2014, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04/welcome\\_to\\_cold\\_war\\_ii](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04/welcome_to_cold_war_ii).

<sup>5</sup> This was illustrated by Putin in late 2014, when he suggested: that history showed the West's unreliability towards, even 'betrayal' of, Eastern European allies such as Poland in the Second World War; that Western historians 'hush up the Munich agreement'; and that, in focusing on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the division of Poland, they overlook how Poland invaded and annexed part of Czechoslovakia when the Germans annexed the Sudetenland in 1938. 'Meeting with young academics and history teachers', 5 November 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/23185>. For an interesting discussion of the use of history in Russia, see Gudrun Persson, *Russian History – a Matter of National Security*, RUSF Briefing paper No. 19, August 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The main themes in these commentaries were the safety of Europe's energy imports from Russia on one hand; and the prospect of a Russian attack on the Baltic states, and thus on the validity of NATO's collective defence commitments, on the other.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Sakwa, "'New Cold War' or 'Twenty Years' Crisis: Russia in International Politics", *International Affairs*, 84:2, 2008, p. 241.

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Western debate about Russia, with commentators often observing that it suggested Putin's intention to rebuild the USSR and that it was an early indicator of what was to come in 2014.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 was taken by many as a declaration of a 'new Cold War'. This was emphasized by the increasing dissonance between Russia and Euro-Atlantic organizations (NATO and the European Union), caused by Russia's suspension of its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) and by Russia's recommencement of strategic bomber flights in 2007. Each new move by Moscow was heralded in the West as a 'return to the old ways' of European security.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the 'new Cold War' narrative became part of a polemic among Western observers,<sup>10</sup> one that has been regularly revived, almost yearly, each time appearing to ignore that the onset of a 'new Cold War' has been hailed often before.

The surrounding debate has been unconstructive and distracting. The emergence of the 'new Cold War' argument, particularly from 2007, generated an initially convincing series of refutations; conditions, according to critics, were simply different from the original Cold War. There were neither fundamental conflicts of interest nor ones of ideology dividing the West and Russia, as there had been in the second half of the 20th century. Each time the polemic of a new Cold War re-emerged, these same refutations have been redeployed – including during the current crisis.<sup>11</sup> This polemic – often depicted as being between 'Cold War warriors' and 'Putin apologists' – has become increasingly acrimonious, particularly since 2014. On occasion, it has seemed to be more the focus of attention than Russia itself. This is reason enough why the 'new Cold War' idea should be sidelined: Western politicians and commentators cannot help but be surprised by Russia when they often appear to be paying more attention to arguing among themselves than to developments in the country itself.

A more serious problem is that these arguments have been repeated so often over the past decade that they have become automatic, unthinkingly deployed. Neither side of this polemic helps policy-makers to come to grips with the fresh, intensified friction between the West and Russia. On one hand, although given superficial impetus by the war in Ukraine, the 'new Cold War' narrative has become increasingly dogmatic. It is often expressed in versions of the idea that 'Putin is resurrecting the USSR' – usually with casual but portentous reference to Putin's 2005 speech reflecting on the collapse of the USSR – or that Russia is embarking on a renewed imperial expansionist drive. This essentialist argument ignores the evolution and deterioration in Russia's relations with the West over the past decade, as well as most of the policy issues relevant to the

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<sup>8</sup> This quote is often simplistically referenced in the mainstream media to suggest that Putin sees the collapse of the USSR and communism as a greater catastrophe than world war or genocide. Among specialists the precise translation into English remains disputed. On the official Kremlin website it is translated as 'a major geopolitical catastrophe'. Annual address to the Federal Assembly, 25 April 2005, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031\\_type70029type82912\\_87086.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml).

<sup>9</sup> 'Putin's speech: Back to cold war?', BBC, 10 February 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6350847.stm>; 'Russia restarts Cold War patrols', BBC, 17 August 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6950986.stm>.

<sup>10</sup> See discussion in Stephen Kotkin, 'The Myth of the New Cold War', *Prospect*, April, 2008; Leon Aron, 'Putin's Cold War', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 December 2007. Perhaps the most prominent such text was Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War. How the Kremlin Menaces Both Russia and the West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). His book pointed to current and future challenges, and Lucas himself was clear that 'the old Cold War will not return, and analogies with it are anachronistic and outdated. But so too are the rosy sentiments that succeeded it'. p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, *Collective Defence, Common Security: Twin Pillars of the Atlantic Alliance*, Group of Policy Experts Report to the NATO Secretary General, Chatham House Working Group Paper, 10 June 2014.

current situation.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the refutation arguments are no longer accurate either, as they too miss most of the evolution and deterioration in relations.

## Towards a 'clash of Europes'

The war in Ukraine has revealed fundamental differences in how Euro-Atlantic security is understood in the West and in Russia, particularly in relation to the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Moscow argues that European security is divided between institutions that offer both political and legal security guarantees, such as NATO and the EU, and those that offer only political guarantees, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and that the protections afforded by the latter can change quickly and are unreliable. Furthermore, there is disagreement between the West and Moscow over Russia's representation in European security and Moscow's desire for a greater voice. This deceptively deep division in how European security – and the roles of Russia and NATO in it – is understood by both sides lies at the heart of most current and likely future problems in the relationship.

This friction between Russia's interests and those of the West is further illustrated not only by the current acrimonious security statements from NATO and Russia, but by Moscow's ongoing attempts to launch a discussion about European security, even proposing a new treaty initiative. This has a long history, but has particular relevance since the most recent version was initiated by Moscow in 2007–09 (resulting in the OSCE's Corfu Process). Since then, the Russian leadership has often stated its opposition to the current Euro-Atlantic security architecture, and there are indications that Moscow may try again to initiate a similar discussion to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act in 2015.<sup>13</sup> That the West and Russia see the post-Cold War history of European security in very different terms is likely to render their positions broadly unacceptable to each other, however, entrenching this fundamental division, even conflict of interests.

Even interests seen as common to both sides cause friction. While both Russia and the West are anxious to counter international terrorism, for instance, or prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, these interests are not 'shared' in any meaningful sense. Each side defines the causes, nature, location and scale of the issues differently, and each has different ideas on how to address them. Indeed, in many cases the positions of Russia and the West are mutually contradictory, since one side blames the other for causing the problem or considers the other party's proposed solutions likely to exacerbate it. One such example is the need to tackle the threat from the jihadist movement Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Although countering ISIS would appear to be a common interest, as the group poses potentially serious threats to both the West and Russia,<sup>14</sup> it is not clear that the causes of, and solutions to, the problem are understood in the same way in Western capitals and in Moscow.

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<sup>12</sup> These issues are all post-Cold War in nature. They include the European security architecture, NATO enlargement (and potential membership for Georgia and Ukraine), cyber security, missile defence, unresolved conflicts, arms control, the CFE treaty and so on.

<sup>13</sup> See Putin's remarks at the Conference of Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives, 1 July 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/22586>. For more discussion of the question of the indivisibility of European security and the Corfu Process, see Andrew Monaghan (ed.), *The Indivisibility of Security: Russia and Euro-Atlantic Security* (Rome: NATO Defence College, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Paddy Ashdown, 'We Must Embrace Putin to Beat Islamic State', *The Times*, 30 September 2014.

Furthermore, while no revival in global ideological confrontation is taking place on a scale similar to that of the liberal-democratic/communist divide, there is increasing friction over values. The drive to create a strategic partnership based on shared values ground to a halt nearly a decade ago, and differences over the nature of democracy (particularly human rights and the role of the state in society) became increasingly evident.

These differences have often been described as a 'values gap', but this term no longer adequately describes the increasingly evident friction between more liberal Western values and the more conservative Russian approach. Addressing the Valdai international discussion group in September 2013, for instance, Putin suggested that there were serious challenges to Russia's identity and that Euro-Atlantic countries were rejecting their roots, including the Christian values underpinning Western civilization. 'They are denying moral principles and all traditional entities,' he stated, and 'are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with belief in Satan.' Furthermore, 'people are aggressively trying to export this model all over the world', he continued, taking a 'direct path to degradation and primitivism resulting in a profound demographic and moral crisis'. Without the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions, without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people would inevitably lose their human dignity, Putin suggested, before emphasizing that he considered it 'right and natural to defend those values'.<sup>15</sup> Even if this has not yet blossomed into a full-scale ideological confrontation, it is an emergent friction along ideological or, perhaps more accurately, European civilizational lines.

All this speaks to a 'clash of Europes' that has emerged over the last decade between the Western EU model of Europe and the quite different Russian vision. This divide appears set to last at least for the short to medium term, in the form of competing visions of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and a clash over the values, understanding and trajectories of European heritage and Christian civilization. These points are at the heart of an emergent strategic rivalry, as Moscow seeks to adjust and challenge the European political and security architecture through military, diplomatic and political means (the latter involving the provision of financial support and platforms for non-mainstream political parties in Europe).

To be sure, this is only part of a wider picture. The term 'clash of Europes' is not intended to overlook Russia's active role in Eurasia, or exclude the United States, central as it is to the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Attention must also be paid to the increasingly important role of China and the Russo-Chinese relationship. Nevertheless, the term is a useful metaphor for the rivalry between the more liberal, Western-oriented part of Europe embodied by NATO and the EU; and another 'Russian Europe' taking shape against it.

## The blinding blur of analogies

Yet just as this 21st-century challenge to the European security architecture – a challenge that demands unclouded assessment of modern realities – is emerging, the debate on Russia is doing

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<sup>15</sup> Transcript of Putin's speech at Meeting of Valdai International Discussion Club, 19 September 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6007>.

the exact opposite of what is required, by diverting attention to the events and challenges of the 20th century. This leads to the second problem with the 'new Cold War' polemic. Although it draws the mind's eye back to an extraordinary time in European and world history, in an effort to illustrate and inform the current situation, this provides little clarity, let alone material for 'learning lessons'. This is because it is unclear what the 'Cold War' actually means, beyond vaguely signifying a period of troubled relations between Russia and the West. This allows leeway for a great variety of interpretations, reducing the idea of a *new* Cold War to superficial analogy. This is not the use of history, but its abuse.

As Gordon Barrass, formerly a member of the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee and Chief of Assessments staff in the final years of the Cold War, has suggested, 'many mysteries of the Cold War remain unresolved, and the overall picture remains fragmentary'; there are many myths about the period and, consequently, choosing what lessons to take from it is not easy.<sup>16</sup> Even its basic parameters are disputed. Some suggest that the Cold War began in the mid- to late 1940s, others that it emerged as a result of the post-Korean War stalemate, and others that it started much earlier in 1917–18 with the tussle between Woodrow Wilson and Lenin. Nor is there agreement on whether it finished in 1989 or 1991, or why it ended as it did.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, Lawrence Freedman has argued that since the 1990s the Cold War has increasingly become merely a 'convenient label' for more than 40 years of history. It provides a shorthand for an 'undifferentiated chunk' of history presented as a 'curious concatenation of summits and negotiations, alliances and clients, spies and border posts, ideological dogmas and underground resistance and a combination of arcane theories about deterrence with some nasty actual wars'. But if the label is convenient, it is misleading when used to embody the wide range of human affairs, and the many facets and fluctuating tensions of different periods within that 40 years, that all fall under this 'roomy heading' of a Cold War.<sup>18</sup>

As a result, Cold War analogies remain so indistinct in their breadth and multiplicity as to be largely meaningless. This vagueness allows stereotype and crude caricature to infiltrate the argument, a problem compounded by the evolution of the post-Cold War discussion of it. Not only has understanding of the Cold War in the West evolved significantly since 1989,<sup>19</sup> but the enlargement of the EU and NATO has resulted in different versions of history being emphasized. To the 'old' member states that experienced the Cold War in a roughly similar way have been added the new NATO members formerly from the Warsaw Pact and/or the USSR. These countries have completely different memories of the Cold War and subsequent interpretations of it. If, for some old member states, the Cold War is synonymous with both a common fear of total war between nuclear-armed parties and a 'long peace' in Europe – albeit punctuated with occasional periods of high crisis – for others in Europe it is synonymous with occupation and repression. If, for some, memories of the Cold War are beginning to fade, as one Western commentator suggested five years ago, for others

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon Barrass, *The Great Cold War. A Journey through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 379.

<sup>17</sup> See panel discussion, LSE IDEAS, 27 October 2014, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/events/events/2014/14-10-27-Cold-War-in-Retrospect.aspx>; and special edition of *Cold War History*, Vol. 14, No. 4, November 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Laurence Freedman, 'Frostbitten', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2010.

<sup>19</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know. Rethinking Cold War History* (London: Clarendon Press, 1998).

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'the scars linger'.<sup>20</sup> This confused image makes it hard to draw direct comparisons between eras, let alone identify lessons to be learnt.

Understanding is further blurred by the increasingly frequent invocation of a small (and again very repetitive) range of other sensationalist historical analogies. Although some officials and observers have suggested that Russia is acting in a '19th-century manner', the most prominent and frequent comparisons recall the crises of 1914, the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979, and, most frequently, Nazi Germany in the 1930s. This latter analogy, visible since 2006 but particularly since 2014, itself then fragments into an array of mini-analogies that liken Russian actions in Ukraine and Crimea to the 1938 Anschluss and Nazi annexation of the Sudetenland; and Russian and Western diplomacy to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the Munich accords.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, echoing the point about ideas gaining currency through repetition, the Nazi analogy has resonance as a frame of reference not only for the West's relations with Russia,<sup>22</sup> but also in international affairs more broadly – it has featured in almost all Western debates about conflict and international crises since the Korean War in 1950.<sup>23</sup>

The discussion about today's Russia therefore suffers from a repetitive plethora of absurdly simplified explanatory images in which Russian actions are associated with, though rarely rigorously compared to, those of the Soviet Union and/or Nazi Germany; and in which Vladimir Putin appears as the reincarnation of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler or some blend of the two.<sup>24</sup> The result is that Russian actions are being compared to any number of indistinct events, usually the first that come to mind, cherry-picked from the last two centuries regardless of context, the role of the individuals involved and the passing of time. Variety and complexity are ignored, and uncertainties presented as certainties.

The cherry-picking approach is confusing for those who seek to draw practical lessons. For example, which of the following is the more 'helpful' reference for understanding Russian actions in

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20 Quentin Peel, 'Chilling Lessons', the *Financial Times*, 14 March 2009.

21 A number of senior public and international figures have made such comparisons, including David Cameron, Hillary Clinton, Wolfgang Schäuble and Stephen Harper. See 'Crimea Seen as "Hitler-Style" Land Grab', BBC, 7 March 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26488652>; 'David Cameron Steps up Rhetoric Against Russia', the *Financial Times*, 30 July 2014; 'David Cameron warns of "appeasing Putin as we did Hitler"', the *Guardian*, 2 September 2014; and 'Cameron Warns Putin as Russian President Lashes Sanctions', the *Guardian*, 15 November 2014. Prominent Western observers who have made such comparisons include Bobo Lo, 'Crimea's Student Crisis', *Project Syndicate*, 18 March 2014, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/bobo-lo-argues-that-vladimir-putin-s-strategy-bears-striking-similarities-to-hitler-s-in-1938#wYpCtvLcMtO76czV.01>; and Jonathan Eyal in 'Russian military move on Ukraine would echo HITLER annexing the Sudetenland, expert warns', *Daily Express*, 25 February 2014. Eyal suggested that Putin's 'Sudetenland option' could usher in a new Cold War with the West. For Anschluss analogies see, for instance, Radoslaw Sikorski, 'Polish FM: "Anschluss" in Crimea needs EU response', Radio Poland, 17 March 2014, <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/165408,Polish-FM-Anschluss-in-Crimea-needs-EU-response>; Nikolai Bershidsky, 'In Ukraine, Echoes of the Anschluss', Bloomberg View, 2 March 2014, <http://www.bloombergvew.com/articles/2014-03-02/in-ukraine-echoes-of-the-anschluss>. For Munich, see Paul Goble, 'Vytautas Landsbergis: Minsk Worse Than Munich', the *Interpreter Magazine*, 13 February 2015. David Cameron has repeatedly returned to this rhetoric – though he does not advocate a military solution.

22 The Sochi Winter Olympics were compared by some commentators to 'Hitler's Olympics' in 1936. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact is another regular feature of the debate about Russia. 'The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the Slippery Slope of Big Power Politics', RFE/RL, 26 September 2014, [http://www.rferl.org/content/The\\_MolotovRibbentrop\\_Pact\\_And\\_The\\_Slippery\\_Slope\\_Of\\_Big\\_Power\\_Politics/1805658.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/The_MolotovRibbentrop_Pact_And_The_Slippery_Slope_Of_Big_Power_Politics/1805658.html). The agreement between Russia and Germany to build the North Stream pipeline was criticized in such terms by Radoslaw Sikorski in 2006, 'Indirect Hitler Comparison: Polish Cabinet Official Attacks Schroder and Merkel', *Der Spiegel*, 1 May 2006, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/indirect-hitler-comparison-polish-minister-attacks-schroeder-and-merkel-a-413969.html> (this was subsequently reported as 'Cold War Part Two', the *Guardian*, 6 November 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/nov/13/russia.eu>).

23 Jeffrey Record, 'The Use and Abuse of History: Munich, Vietnam and Iraq', *Survival*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2007; David Chuter, 'Munich, or the Blood of Others' in Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser (eds.), *Haunted by History. Myths in International Relations* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998).

24 After the Second World War, Western officials often saw Joseph Stalin as another Adolf Hitler. Beatrice Heuser, 'Stalin as Hitler's Successor: Western Interpretations of the Soviet Threat', in Beatrice Heuser and Robert O'Neill (eds.), *Securing Peace in Europe, 1945–62. Thoughts for the Post Cold War Era* (London: MacMillan, 1992). Putin is routinely also compared to Leonid Brezhnev, among other Soviet and Russian leaders.

Crimea: the German annexation of the Sudetenland as a result of the Munich agreement, or the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia? These were two very different events. A further problem is that history is effectively removed from the discussion, since little of the historical detail in such analogies is accurate, and even ongoing historical debates about these events are ignored. The result is an increasingly abstract image of Russia.

History thus becomes myth or sacred tale, often building on resentments and prejudices, and deployed in political advocacy.<sup>25</sup> Such myths are more about recognition than similarity to the historical episode being invoked. They are intended immediately to conjure specific associations to establish a feeling of agreement (though not one based in fact). Argument is thus short-circuited, and differences between the presumed and the known are blurred. The effect is to amplify the polemic, and to stifle dissent through guilt by association: attempts to dispute a point are often dismissed as equivalent to supporting the USSR or Nazi Germany.

Instead of providing concrete lessons, history is used to assert repetitive patterns. This approach not only disguises tenuous analogy as history but also deploys it in a spuriously predictive capacity. It implies a force or pattern of history from which specific lessons must be learnt, otherwise catastrophic consequences will ensue. It denies the uniqueness of events and discards chance, change and freedom of action.<sup>26</sup> While this is fertile ground for emotive political advocacy and mobilization of public opinion, it is poor material for drawing practical or useful lessons. Hard thinking about things as they are, and may become, is substituted with lazy thinking about a simplified and repetitive pattern. As Richard Neustadt and Ernest May argued in their study of the use and abuse of history in policy-making, this is 'unreasoning by analogy': analogy builds on analogy to create an artifice – a contrivance or expedience<sup>27</sup> – that distorts and obscures understanding of both history and the current context as the image becomes detached from the circumstances of the original episode.

This artifice creates two particular problems. First, it produces unnecessary distractions. During Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, for instance, the Western discussion was dominated by simplistic Nazi analogies (particularly with respect to the Sudetenland). There was very little examination of the actual Russian military operation, or of Russia's evolving military capabilities (particularly those of the country's newer special operations forces) and security thinking. Subsequently, the discussion of a 'new Cold War' has diluted attention to the detail of the disaster in Ukraine.

Second, this discourse frames the range of proposed policy options as a binary choice between 'appeasing' Russia, a label that remains unpalatable for many politicians, and confronting it through containment or deterrence. Yet even this is no true alternative, since the 'lesson' from Munich in 1938, for example, is didactic: that aggression must be stood up to (and when it was, of

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<sup>25</sup> Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser, 'Introduction: of Myths and Men' and 'Conclusions: Historical Myths and the Denial of Change', in Buffet and Heuser, *Haunted by History*.

<sup>26</sup> Buffet and Heuser, *Haunted by History*.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time. The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (London: Free Press, 1988). See also Ernest May, *Lessons from the Past. The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

course, Europe was plunged into war).<sup>28</sup> To reduce all diplomacy and negotiation to the fear of returning to 'appeasement' and supplicant inaction is to remove many of the tools at Europe's disposal. Moreover, for containment and deterrence to be successful, one must actually understand the party to be deterred, the roots of its actions and the nature of its decision-making processes. Caricaturing modern Russia as the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany or some other former foe does not aid this understanding.

## Preparing to fight the last war

This leads to the final reason why the 'new Cold War' idea is problematic: it anchors today's thinking to the 20th century, precluding a more sophisticated understanding of how Russia is evolving in the 21st. This is especially visible and important with respect to military thinking and planning, as it may increase the risk that politicians and generals commit the well-known error of preparing to fight past wars. This is a familiar problem in the Russian context: as George Kennan noted during the Cold War, it was hard to dissuade the Pentagon from seeing in Stalin another Hitler, or from using the tactics of the last war all over again in its plans for a new one. US defence strategists could not free themselves from the images of Hitler.<sup>29</sup>

This raises two important points. First, if the 'new Cold War' narrative is part of an appeal by some to prioritize the threat from Russia, the wider security landscape and core challenges facing the West are substantially different from those of the Cold War. Russia manifestly needs to be on the West's security and political agenda, not least because Moscow has repeatedly emphasized its dissatisfaction with the European security architecture as it stands. But this is only one part of a complex international picture. There is a difficult balance to be struck, and today's leaders will need to work much harder to find cohesion than they needed to during the Cold War.

The context of Western security has fundamentally changed, therefore, but the 'new Cold War' debate obscures this. Unlike during the Cold War era, no one threat currently stands clearly above the others: as former NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen suggested, the alliance faces an 'arc of crisis'.<sup>30</sup> The numerous other major security questions that the alliance and its member states must consider include the question of migration across the Mediterranean, the enflamed civil wars in Libya and Syria, the continuing tension between Israel and Palestine, and the rise of China. Furthermore, many of the major Western powers have identified the rise of ISIS as the most serious security threat they face, and have begun military strikes against it.<sup>31</sup> To this list of regional and transnational challenges can be added those posed by disease (such as the Ebola virus) and climate change. While NATO faces multiple challenges, achieving consensus on what those challenges are, how to address them, and what resources should be devoted to each is proving difficult. In the current context, what passes for Euro-Atlantic cohesion is very different from the unity of the Cold

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<sup>28</sup> It's worth asking what signals might be received in Moscow as a result of the references to appeasement and Hitler. The analogy, if pursued to its full conclusion, suggests that Europe should wage what is inevitable war on Russia, defeating and enforcing unconditional surrender on it, including a complete regime change.

<sup>29</sup> Kennan cited in Heuser, 'Stalin as Hitler's Successor', p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> 'NATO after ISAF – staying successful together', 8 April 2014, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions\\_94321.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_94321.htm).

<sup>31</sup> This sense has only increased in 2015, following the terrorist attacks in Paris.

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War era. For example, while some (though not all) eastern members of NATO focus on Russia, southern member states emphasize their legitimate concerns about the threats from Libya and ISIS.

Second, in this changing and difficult context, discussion of a 'new Cold War' appears to offer welcome familiarity. Complexity and change elsewhere are seen as contrasting with an apparent lack of change in dealing with Russia.<sup>32</sup> This reflects and confirms the tendency of many officials and observers to refer wistfully to the Cold War, seeing it as a time both of Western success and of reassuring rationality and predictability on the part of the Soviet adversary compared with the complex and opaque terrorist threats of today.<sup>33</sup>

This sense of familiarity creates a permissive intellectual environment that allows decisions to be made about Russia with only a minimum of fresh analysis. It undercuts the need to adapt to current circumstances, instead offering easy, off-the-peg solutions that can be dusted off after 20 years' neglect. Such thinking was illustrated when US army general Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested that, as a result of Russian actions, the US military needed to 'look inside our own readiness models to look at things we haven't had to look at for twenty years ... about basing, lines of communications and sea lanes'.<sup>34</sup>

But these were the readiness models for the war before last, prepared for a different opponent in a different time. Moreover, this approach assumes that preparations from 20 years ago were the correct ones at the time. This is by no means certain, given that the preparations were never tested and that the nature of the Soviet military threat was not always well understood. One leading expert on Soviet affairs suggested in the late 1980s that very few people in the West outside the intelligence services were capable of analysing the development of Soviet military thinking. As a result, there was a great danger that Soviet policies and actions, especially in the military sphere, might be misinterpreted.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, another expert argued that the West misunderstood Soviet actions because its frame of reference was wrong: 'the West should base its appreciation of the Russian ability to implement its threat on the very real practical difficulties which actually face the Russians rather than as seems to be the case now, on the West's knowledge of the West's own deficiencies'.<sup>36</sup> Both statements are equally relevant today.

Nevertheless, since the end of the Cold War, Western security thinking has gone through a twofold evolution: the peace dividend resulted in cuts to defence budgets, and the loss of much institutional memory and knowledge about the Soviet Union and Russia; and the aftermath of 9/11 focused policy attention on counterterrorism and counter-insurgency. Over the past 15 years the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have absorbed attention and resources, while attention and resources dedicated to Russia have withered. So, too, has much of the capacity that might have informed a

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32 See Martin Dempsey, 'The Bend of Power', *Foreign Policy*, 25 July 2014.

33 Freedman, 'Frostbitten'; Mathew Burrows, *The Future, Declassified. Megatrends that Will Undo the World Unless We Take Action*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Such impressions overlook the point that the record of predicting Soviet actions was not uniformly successful. The West was surprised by the Soviet interventions in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, for example, and the imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981. Nor, beyond a small circle, was the collapse of the USSR predicted.

34 'Dempsey: Russian Attacks Change European Security Landscape', US Department of Defense, 25 July 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=122751>.

35 Christopher Donnelly, 'Preface' in David Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art. In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), p. xix. See also Charles Dick, 'Catching NATO Unawares. Soviet Army Surprise and Deception Techniques', *International Defence Review*, 1986, pp. 21–26. It is worth noting that the work of leading Sovietologists and particularly of military specialists – reference to whom would help to inform the discussion – hardly features in the 'new Cold War' debate.

36 Peter Vigor, 'Doubts and Difficulties Facing a Would-be Soviet Attacker', *RUSI Journal*, 125, June 1980, p. 32.

detailed and nuanced understanding of the Soviet threat, and how that might be relevant to today – in other words, limiting the practical ability to draw appropriate lessons.

Indeed, beyond a shrinking group of subject matter experts, little attention has been paid in the West to the evolution of Russian military and security thinking and capability in the post-Cold War period, and to understanding Russia's emergent strengths and ongoing weaknesses. Policy-makers' grasp of the Russian leadership's motivations and decision-making processes, especially in respect of specifically military matters, has been degraded. So too, as a result, has the West's ability to pursue effective policies of deterrence, since it remains unclear what actually deters the Russian leadership.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the 'new Cold War' narrative makes no allowance for Russian adaptability. While Western leaders, particularly in the military, have focused on other regions, Russia's thinking about war and its military capabilities have both evolved. As Russia poses questions of the European security architecture and moves to assert its interests, Moscow is likely to find ways to mitigate Western strengths both real and perceived either through rendering NATO obviously or explicitly redundant (the 'WEU-ization' of the alliance)<sup>38</sup> or through developing methods that undercut NATO's military effectiveness and superiority.<sup>39</sup> It is noteworthy, for instance, that Russian operations in Crimea (and the war in Ukraine) feature elements of counter-insurgency, war among the people, opacity of identity and affiliation of participants, and opacity of chain of command. All these elements cause problems for the West. Not only are Western leaderships and forces likely to shy away from such situations following their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, but building and sustaining political and popular support for intervention in such complex scenarios is more difficult.<sup>40</sup>

Neither the wider international context, nor the range of potential questions posed by Russia, is therefore comparable to the Cold War. Military 'lessons' from the Cold War cannot be applied arbitrarily to different circumstances. Some recognize this. Philip Breedlove, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, has accurately phrased the Russian operation in Crimea as a '21st-century offensive', one that builds on Soviet and Russian traditions, but that incorporates new thinking and 21st-century tools.<sup>41</sup> For those who deal with Russia and are concerned about European security, these should be the terms of reference.

Indeed, there is no choice but to think about and plan for Russia and its foreign and security policy afresh. Facile comparisons with the USSR should be avoided. Instead, analysis must take into account the evolving Russian understanding of strategy, conflict, coercion and war. For, as discussed above, Moscow will continue to challenge the Euro-Atlantic security architecture: first

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<sup>37</sup> The author is grateful to Gordon Barrass for exchanges, particularly on this point.

<sup>38</sup> The Western European Union (WEU) was an international organization and military alliance established in 1954. With the end of the Cold War, the WEU's responsibilities were slowly transferred elsewhere, increasingly rendering the organization redundant. In 2010, states began to withdraw from it, and it officially ceased to exist in 2011.

<sup>39</sup> For discussion of Russian views of the changing rules in war, see Valeriy Gerasimov, 'Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii', *Voenno-promyshlenni kurier*, 27 February 2013. Gerasimov, the Russian chief of general staff, points to the Arab Spring and asks whether it may be the typical war of the 21st century and what can be learnt from it. Given the events of 2014, it is to be expected that this thinking is being updated on the basis of recent lessons learnt. For an examination of the changes in Russian capabilities, including both successful and less successful reforms to the armed forces, see Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (eds.), *Brothers Armed. Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (Minneapolis: East View Publishing, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> The author owes this point to Charles Dick, and is grateful to him for the several exchanges on these themes in autumn 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Philip Breedlove, 'The Meaning of Russia's Military Campaign Against Ukraine', *Wall Street Journal*, 16 July 2014.

through diplomatic initiatives, such as through a renewed attempt to launch a European security debate; and then by pushing at the supporting pillars of the architecture if these overtures are rebuffed. In the meantime, the Russian authorities will go on adjusting their system, preparing it and training it. And so Russian capacities will continue to evolve, building on the lessons of 2014–15 and adapting previous lessons.<sup>42</sup> Russia will continue re-equipping and restructuring its armed forces, with the result that it is likely to be a near-peer or peer competitor in European security within five years. Complementing its strategic nuclear arsenal, the Russian leadership has published plans to renew and reform its armed forces, including modernizing 70 per cent of its military equipment and enlisting half a million contract soldiers by 2020. These may be optimistic targets, and while it is unlikely that Russia could become a near-peer competitor to the United States in this period, even reaching half of these targets for contract soldiers and modern equipment would present a very different challenge for NATO in Europe, particularly given that many of the alliance's European member states are much smaller and unlikely significantly to increase defence spending in the foreseeable future. As such, Russian military expansion is set to pose serious questions of Western policy-makers that cannot satisfactorily be answered by simplistic templates from the last century.

## Trapped in the abstract

The irony of the argument outlined in this paper is that history should help understanding of Russia, and of its relationship with the West. It certainly provides the intellectual tools for approaching a new context of geopolitical competition. French historian Marc Bloch, emphasizing the point that preparing to fight the last war rarely works, suggested that history can be understood as the science of change. Its lessons, he argued, are derived not from thinking that what happened yesterday will necessarily happen tomorrow, or that the past will go on repeating itself. Instead, the study of history demands detailed examination of how and why yesterday differed from the day before, in order to envisage how the future may differ from the past. A failure to carry out such examinations, whether because of a lack of imagination or a tendency to take refuge in abstraction, risks a mental sclerosis that impairs decision-making in the face of unexpected developments.<sup>43</sup>

Analysis should tease out and make explicit the continuities in Russia that derive from the country's Soviet inheritance. It should also elaborate on the changes that have taken place in the West and in Russia, and in the relationship between the two. Western capabilities have been substantially altered by the fragmentation of Russia-related expertise and resources since the end of the Cold War, and by their redirection to other issues. This has limited the ability to draw profitably on what the West learnt about itself during the Cold War (which approaches enhanced understanding of the USSR and which did not, for instance); or on what it learnt about the USSR and Russians, and how Russian military and security thinking has evolved. Instead, a combination of polemic, automatic analogy and comforting familiarity has emerged in the form of the 'new Cold War' debate, supported by the superficially appealing but simplistic language of 'containment' and 'deterrence'.

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<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that such lessons will be the same as those the West might draw; nor is it to suggest that all the lessons the Russian leadership learns will be the 'right ones', nor even well learnt.

<sup>43</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Strange Defeat* (London: Important Books, 2013), pp. 38–39, 85, 92.

The ‘new Cold War’ narrative traps thinking into a narrow and abstract image of Russia and its role in European security.

This mix contains all the potential hazards for entrenching cliché and stereotypes, learning inadequate lessons and making ill-informed decisions. Rather than illuminate it, the polemics and analogies serve to choke discussion, with each denunciation coming louder than the last, all the while emptying real history from metaphor and debate. The sense of apparent familiarity compounds this by ignoring history. As a result, the ‘new Cold War’ is not a guide to action, but a prison that confines and constrains thinking. It makes it difficult for the West to develop informed and realistic strategies for dealing with the situation in Ukraine or with Russia, and increases the risk that the wrong policy choices will be made.

Superficial historical analogies are a popular and fashionable means of attempting to frame issues. But given the serious problems in European security, there is a need to free thinking from the 20th century and the threadbare idea of a ‘new Cold War’. We must stop confusing ourselves with the array of other tempting but superficial comparisons with the past. George Orwell, one of the thinkers who initially framed the idea of the Cold War in the mid-1940s, also urged writers to avoid stale images and worn-out metaphors: the lessons from his famous 1946 essay, ‘Politics and the English Language’, apply to today’s debate about Russia and the West’s relationship with it.

The Cold War was an important time in history, but its use in discussion of the current conflict in Ukraine, and of Russia’s broader geopolitical posture, is devoid of meaning. People rely on the analogy either to save themselves the effort of thinking the situation through, or to be deliberately vague in the service of a political agenda. As Orwell wrote, ‘if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought’,<sup>44</sup> and the ‘new Cold War’ metaphor is corrupting our understanding of today’s Russia. It is therefore time to retire it, along with repetitive and imprecise references to – among other things – Putin’s statement a decade ago that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, and to let Churchill and Kennan rest in peace. The world, including Russia, is at a time of flux and competition in which Western rules and the Euro-Atlantic architecture as it stands will be challenged. It is time to adapt. And to do so, fresh concepts are necessary. The ‘clash of Europes’ is a place to start.

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<sup>44</sup> George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English Language’, in George Packer (ed.), George Orwell, *All Art is Propaganda. Critical Essays* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009).

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