 Wars have been around for a very long time. Grand strategies for fighting wars – if by “grand strategy” one understands the calculated use of available means in the pursuit of desired ends – have probably been around almost as long; but our record of them dates back to only the fifth century BCE when Herodotus and Thucydides set out to chronicle systematically how the great wars of their age had been fought. We do have, however, in the greatest of all poems, mythologized memories of a war fought centuries earlier, none of whose participants appear to have known how to write. But they did know about the need to connect ends with means: “Put heads together,” Homer has wise Nestor admonishing the Achaeans at a desperate moment in the long siege of Troy, “if strategy’s any use.”

The ancient Greeks made no sharp distinction between war and peace. Wars could last for years, even decades; they could pause, however, to allow the sowing and harvesting of crops, or for the conduct of games. The modern state system, which dates from the seventeenth century, was meant to stake out boundaries that did not exist in the era of Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides: nations were either to be at war or they were not. But the boundaries blurred again during the Cold War, a struggle that went on longer than the Trojan, Persian, and Peloponnesian wars put together. The stakes, to be sure, were higher. The geographical scope of the competition was much wider. In its fundamental aspects, however, the Cold War more closely resembled the ancient Greek wars than it did those of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.

It is hardly surprising, then, that grand strategies dominated Cold War statecraft. They could no longer be deployed when military operations began, and retired when hostilities ended. Nor could such strategies remain static,

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for the Cold War’s particular combination of limited violence with long
duration required responding not only to the actions of adversaries but also
to the constraints of resources, the demands of constituencies, and the persist­
ent recalcitrance of reality when theory is applied to it. The grand strategies of
the United States, the Soviet Union, and their allies therefore evolved in relation
to one another, much as competitive species do within common ecosystems.

Here too an ancient Greek provides a guide. Thucydides’ great history of
the Peloponnesian War gives equal weight to the strategies of all its belliger­
ents, to the ways in which each shaped the other, and to the manner in which
none escaped the unexpected. Even more strikingly, Thucydides does this with
us in mind: he writes for “those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge
of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of
human things must resemble if it does not reflect it.”

Stalin’s grand strategy

Before there can be a grand strategy there must be a need for one: a conflict
that goes beyond the normal disputes of international relations, for which
diplomacy is the remedy. Because we know that the Cold War followed
World War II, it is easy to assume that the leaders of the victorious coalition
knew this too and were preparing for the struggle that lay before them. This
was not the case. Indeed, it is doubtful that any of those leaders, prior to 1945,
anticipated a “cold war” as we have come to understand that term – with the
sole exception of Josef Stalin.

We do not often think of Stalin as a grand strategist, but perhaps we should.
He rose to the top in the Kremlin hierarchy by systematically eliminating
rivals who underestimated him. He transformed the Soviet Union from an
agrarian state into an industrial great power. He then led that state from a
devastating military defeat to an overwhelming triumph in less than four
years. When World War II ended, Stalin had been in power for almost two
decades: he alone among postwar leaders had had the time, the experience,
and the uncontested authority to shape a long-term plan for the future.

Stalin’s strategy had several objectives, the first of which was to continue
the acceleration of history his predecessor Vladimir Ilich Lenin had begun.
Karl Marx had identified class conflict as the mechanism that would cause
capitalism to give way to socialism and then to Communism, at which point
states would wither away. But Marx had been as vague about when this would
happen as he had been precise about where it would occur: in the great
industrial societies of Europe. Lenin sought to hasten the process by starting
a revolution from the top down in Russia, with the expectation that it would
spark revolutions from the bottom up in Germany, Britain, and other coun­
tries in which workers were supposedly waiting to overthrow their capitalist
masters. They had not done so, however, by the time Lenin died in 1924.

That disappointment led Stalin toward another method of advancing the
Communist cause: he would industrialize Russia, and then use it as a base
from which to spread revolution elsewhere. He undertook this process during
the 1930s with little regard for the human or material costs. He also knew,
though, that his accomplishments would mean little unless the USSR was safe
from external attack. One could hardly expect capitalists to welcome the
emergence of a strong socialist state whose goal it was to end their own
existence.

This led to the second of Stalin’s objectives: a fusion of traditional Russian
imperialism with Marxist–Leninist ideology. Lenin regarded imperialism as
the highest form of capitalism, but since capitalism was doomed he thought
imperialism was also. He never saw the reconstruction of empire as a way
to speed the destruction of capitalism. Stalin’s strategy, however, required
extending the Soviet Union’s boundaries as far as possible, for with Nazi
Germany and Imperial Japan on the rise, the international environment was
hardly benign. The most plausible justification was to claim all the lands the
Russian tsars had once possessed, together with spheres of influence beyond
them that would allow only “friendly” neighbors.

From this perspective, Stalin’s apparent inconsistencies between 1935 and
1945 — his call for the League of Nations to resist the aggressors, his support
for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, his 1939 “non-aggression” pact
with Adolf Hitler, his alliance with the United States and Great Britain after
Germany attacked in 1941, his determination to retain his wartime gains after
the war — reflected a single underlying priority, which was to ensure the safety
of the Soviet state, the base from which the international proletarian revolu­
tion would in time spread. Imperialism now had a revolutionary purpose.

The third and final objective in Stalin’s grand strategy was to await the self­
destruction of capitalism. Stalin firmly believed, as had Lenin, that “internal
contradictions” arising from an inability to resolve economic crises would
produce rivalries among capitalist states which would eventually lead them to
attack one another. The two world wars had arisen, after all, from just such

2 Robert B. Strassler (ed.), The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian
War, revised edition of the Richard Crawley translation (New York: Simon & Schuster,
1996), 16.
outbreak of war in Europe later that year, and the fall of Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France to the Germans in the spring of 1940.

policies of the British and the French left him little basis upon which to seek an end to American isolationism. Made domestic economic recovery the greater priority, while the appeasement had hoped to revive Wilson's cause after becoming president in 1933, but he a time when no other state had the strength to do so. Franklin D. Roosevelt the responsibility for defending ideas it valued democracy and capitalism at posture of avoiding entanglements beyond its hemisphere. It thereby dodged left the White House, however, the United States had reverted to its traditional security, political self-determination, and economic integration. Before he even left the White House, however, the United States had reverted to its traditional posture of avoiding entanglements beyond its hemisphere. It thereby dodged the responsibility for defending ideas it valued democracy and capitalism at a time when no other state had the strength to do so. Franklin D. Roosevelt had hoped to revive Wilson's cause after becoming president in 1933, but he made domestic economic recovery the greater priority, while the appeasement policies of the British and the French left him little basis upon which to seek an end to American isolationism.

All of this changed with Hitler's seizure of Czechoslovakia in 1939, the outbreak of war in Europe later that year, and the fall of Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France to the Germans in the spring of 1940.

Roosevelt's response

No equally comprehensive strategy for confronting the Soviet Union emerged anywhere in the capitalist world before 1945. One reason was the absence of a single manager for the global economy, Britain having relinquished that role after World War I, and the United States not having yet assumed it. The rise of authoritarianism in Italy, Germany, and Japan further fragmented capitalism. By the mid-1930s, the remaining European democracies were too preoccupied with the Great Depression to devise common approaches in foreign affairs beyond the vague hope that appeasing the fascists might somehow satisfy them. Stalin's diagnosis in this sense was correct: divisions among capitalists prevented their devising a plan comparable to his own.

Despite their power, the Americans during these years were particularly purposeless. Woodrow Wilson had called, in response to the Bolshevik Revolution, for a new international order based upon principles of collective security, political self-determination, and economic integration. Before he even left the White House, however, the United States had reverted to its traditional posture of avoiding entanglements beyond its hemisphere. It thereby dodged the responsibility for defending ideas it valued democracy and capitalism at a time when no other state had the strength to do so. Franklin D. Roosevelt had hoped to revive Wilson's cause after becoming president in 1933, but he made domestic economic recovery the greater priority, while the appeasement policies of the British and the French left him little basis upon which to seek an end to American isolationism.

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By this time, Roosevelt had a grand strategy: it was to do everything possible to save Britain, defeat Germany, and contain Japan. That meant cooperating with the Soviet Union, however, because Hitler's invasion in June 1941 had made that country an informal ally of the British and the Americans. Germany's declaration of war on the United States following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor closed the circle, creating the Grand Alliance.

It was almost as if Roosevelt had foreseen these events, for from the moment he extended diplomatic recognition to the USSR in 1933, he had sought to bring it within a shared international system. He consistently assumed the best of Stalin's intentions, even when the Kremlin dictator with his brutal purges and his cynical pact with Hitler made this difficult. After they became wartime allies, Roosevelt deferred generously to Stalin's postwar territorial demands. But he also expected Stalin to respect an American design for a postwar world that would combine great power collaboration with a new set of international institutions most significantly the United Nations based on Wilsonian principles.

Was Roosevelt naïve? It is difficult to say for sure because his death, in April 1945, prevents our knowing what he would have done once it became clear that Stalin was no Wilsonian. We do know, though, that Roosevelt left his successor, Harry S. Truman, in a strong position to confront the Soviet Union if that should become necessary. Roosevelt had kept wartime casualties to a minimum, relying on the Red Army to do most of the fighting against the Germans. He had agreed to few, if any, territorial changes that Stalin could not have brought about on his own. He had doubled the size of the American economy during a war that had devastated the economies of most other belligerents including that of the USSR and he had authorized the building of an atomic bomb. Roosevelt's did not seem, to Stalin, to have been a naïve grand strategy.

None of this changes, however, a fundamental asymmetry. Roosevelt allowed for the possibility that a cold war might not happen. Stalin regarded it as inevitable.

Kennan and containment

But no grand strategy fails to produce feedback. What if Stalin's own brutality the harsh nature of his dictatorship and the unilateral manner in which he had imposed Soviet influence in Eastern and Central Europe should frighten other Europeans into settling their differences? What if the United States should commit itself to reviving capitalism and democracy among them?
For someone who used fear with such success in gaining and consolidating power, Stalin was strangely oblivious to the possibility that fear might rally his adversaries.

The chief wartime priority of the United States and Britain had been to secure the Eurasian balance of power against future threats like those of 1914 and 1939-41. Stalin shared that objective to the extent that it meant defeating and totally disarming Germany and Japan. By the spring of 1946, however, the Soviet Union itself seemed to the Americans and their West European allies, to be threatening postwar stability.

Few officials in Washington, London, or Paris expected a Soviet military attack, but there were fears that war-weary Europeans – recalling the prewar failures of capitalism and democracy – might vote their own Communist parties into power, in effect inviting the Soviet Union to dominate them. The crisis was one of confidence, in the absence of which any positive program might prevail. The Truman administration had made it clear that it was not going to be another Harding administration: that however frustrating the European situation might be, it would not produce yet another American withdrawal from overseas responsibilities. But that was only a promise. It was not a strategy for countering European despair.

It fell to George F. Kennan, an American Foreign Service expert on Russian history and Soviet ideology, to show how such a strategy might work. Kennan agreed with Marx, Lenin, and Stalin that industrialized states held the key to power in the modern world, but he did not accept their view that capitalism carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Stalin’s own system, he pointed out, contained more serious “internal contradictions.” These included its lack of legitimacy – the fact that it had never risked free multiparty elections – together with the tendency of all multinational empires to over-expand, provoke resistance, and break apart. Here Kennan cited Gibbon on Rome. He could as easily have invoked Thucydides on Athens.

Democracy embodied legitimacy, Kennan pointed out, and that made it stronger than most of its practitioners realized. If they could muster the self-confidence in their institutions that Stalin claimed to have in his – and if they could keep remaining centers of industrial power from falling under his control – then future Soviet leaders could hardly continue to see history as on their side. The United States and its allies would have found a path between renewed appeasement and a new world war.

That was the theory behind what Kennan called “containment,” but it took leadership to put it into practice. This came in June 1947 when the Truman administration offered Europeans the resources necessary to rebuild their economies and revive their societies. The Marshall Plan’s beneficiaries in turn agreed to subordinate their historic rivalries to the common European task of reconstruction, integration, and democratization. That meant including an old enemy – the western parts of Germany then under British, American, and French occupation – within the new Europe. The United States in 1948 embraced a similar set of priorities for occupied Japan.

Stalin had not expected any of this because Leninist theory said it could not happen: capitalists were supposed to fight, not help, one another. Caught off guard, he authorized a Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, denounced Yugoslav Communists for insubordination, and blockaded the city of West Berlin. These measures backfired: they ensured public support for the Marshall Plan within the United States, they hastened the creation of a democratic capitalist West German state, and they led the other European democracies to request inclusion within a formal military alliance organized by the United States. Meanwhile Josef Broz Tito’s regime in Belgrade survived – with discreet American help – thereby showing that international Communism could fragment, just as Stalin had expected international capitalism to do.

With the success of the Marshall Plan, the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the rehabilitation of West Germany and Japan, and the Yugoslav defection, Stalin’s strategy of exploiting capitalist rivalries lay in ruins. His “scientific” theory had run up against an emotional reality, which was that the Soviet Union frightened the capitalists – even some other Communists – more than the capitalists did each other. All that the Americans and their allies needed to do henceforth, Kennan claimed, was to wait for a Soviet leader to detect this fact, abandon his nation’s revolutionary-imperial aspirations, and transform the USSR into a satisfied member of the international system. History, it appeared, was not on Stalin’s side after all.

The global Cold War

Kennan too, though, failed to anticipate feedback, notably the risk that selective containment – protecting only the industrial regions of Western Europe and Japan – might not sustain self-confidence within the democracies over however long it might take for Soviet behavior to change. Self-confidence is an emotion, which Kennan hoped to produce through rational argument. So had Pericles when he advised the Athenians to rely exclusively on their
naval strength and the wealth it brought them, while watching impassively from atop their walls as the Spartans ravaged their countryside. Strategy depends as much on morale as on logic, and Pericles found the Athenians unready for the path he meant to follow. Kennan’s experience was similar.

Containment, Kennan acknowledged, was like walking a tightrope. It was an economical way to cross an abyss, but it was important not to look down. That meant maintaining composure when Stalin succeeded - unexpectedly early - in building his own atomic bomb. It meant not worrying about Communist victories in non-industrial regions like China, where Mao Zedong had defeated Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists and was poised to take power. Neither of these developments significantly shifted the global geopolitical balance, Kennan argued at the end of 1949: deterrence would still work, Mao might not follow Moscow’s orders, and even if he did China would absorb whoever tried to run it. The United States should simply stick to reviving capitalism and planting democracy in Western Europe and Japan - lest it too succumb, as the Soviet Union had, to imperial temptations.

But the Americans were no more prepared than the Athenians had been to suffer setbacks with equanimity. The Truman administration, under congressional pressure, had to agree to build a thermonuclear bomb, a weapon so powerful that war planners had no idea how it might be used. The president also commissioned a reassessment of containment, NSC-68, which concluded that no parts of the world were now peripheral, that no means of protecting them could now be ruled out, and that the existing defense budget was woefully inadequate. Then, in June 1950, the North Koreans invaded South Korea, a country whose defense no one in Washington had regarded as a vital interest. Now everyone, including even Kennan, believed it to be.

Historians have generally argued that Stalin blundered in authorizing this attack. He had not expected the United States to intervene; when it did military spending tripled, while Truman used the crisis to justify rearming the West Germans and stationing American troops permanently in Europe. From the Soviet leader’s perspective, however, Korea also brought benefits. The United States suffered major military reversals there without using the atomic bomb. Chinese involvement ended any hope in Washington that Mao might become another Tito. And the war convinced Truman and his advisers that the authors of NSC-68 were right: any part of the world threatened or even apparently threatened by international Communism - industrial or not - would have to be protected.

4 Strassler (ed.), The Landmark Thucydides, 98, 123.

So the Americans, like the ancient Greeks, lost the self-confidence to leave anything undefended. They gained in its place the insecurity that accompanies expansion: “fear [was] our principal motive,” Thucydides has the Athenians tell the Spartans. “[It] appeared no longer safe to give up our empire; especially as all who left us would fall to you.” From a strategy meant to retain the initiative by distinguishing vital from peripheral interests, the United States shifted to one that yielded the initiative to its enemies. Wherever they chose to challenge, it would have to respond.

Stalemate: ideology

Therein lay the makings of a grand strategic stalemate, like the one that perpetuated the Peloponnesian War. Its roots lay in frustrated hopes: those of Soviet leaders that capitalism would collapse; those of American leaders that it would be enough simply to ensure that capitalism survived. The Cold War shifted now to strategies for breaking this stalemate, none of which proved decisive. Their effect instead was to stabilize and therefore prolong the Cold War - to transform it into a new international system that closely resembled a very old one.

The first of these efforts focused on reforming Marxism-Leninism. Stalin saw little need to make his dictatorship popular because he assumed that capitalist economic crashes and the wars they produced would do that for him. But as his successors watched the growing prosperity and political legitimacy of postwar capitalism, they lost any illusions that its self-destruction was imminent. Instead, they began wondering how their own system was going to sustain itself and spread its influence if it could not demonstrably improve the lives of the people who lived under it.

The problem became clear as early as June 1953 when workers in East Germany - the very class, according to Marx, that should have most welcomed Communist Party rule - instead rebelled against it. The Red Army quickly crushed the uprising and the hardline East German leader Walter Ulbricht survived, but the experience convinced Nikita Kruschev, soon to emerge as the Soviet Union’s new leader, that “socialism” had to be given “a human face.” That meant disavowing Stalin and promising something better - even if still within the framework of a command economy and one-party rule.

Conceding the necessity of reform, though, made it hard to control the pace. Khrushchev’s attacks on Stalin’s legacy - most dramatically his February 1956 “secret” speech - had the unintended effect of encouraging attacks on Soviet authority, for how could the two be separated? By the end of that year, Khrushchev had narrowly avoided a revolution in Poland, only to face one in Hungary that he suppressed by harsher means than Stalin had ever employed in that region. Meanwhile, an open border with West Berlin was allowing millions of East Germans to emigrate. When Khrushchev and Ulbricht built a wall to prevent this in 1961, they gave up any pretense that the people they governed preferred “socialism” over democratic capitalism. The Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern and Central Europe would remain, but only against the wishes of those included within it.

Khrushchev’s reforms provoked an equally unanticipated response from the Chinese, a people he could not shoot down or wall in. It had been one thing for Tito to challenge Stalin and stay in power. Yugoslavia was a small country, and the Soviet dictator’s influence within the international Communist movement remained dominant. It was quite another thing for the volatile and inexperienced Khrushchev to condemn Stalin without consulting Mao, the leader of the most significant revolution since Lenin’s who now ruled the world’s most populous country - and who had patterned his leadership on the example Stalin had set. With the Sino-Soviet split, the fragmentation of international Communism became irreversible just as the revival of market capitalism and democratic politics was also becoming so.

Leonid Brezhnev and Aleksei Kosygin, Khrushchev’s successors, did no better. Having encouraged reforms in Czechoslovakia, they concluded in 1968 that these had gone too far and ended them with yet another military intervention. It was the Soviet Union’s right, they claimed, to intervene whenever “socialism” seemed to be in danger. But the Brezhnev Doctrine frightened whatever Marxist sympathizers were left in Europe, while Mao saw it as aimed at China and began preparing for war with the USSR. By the end of the decade, the Communist world had two centers whose hostility toward each other was at least as great as that of each toward the capitalists they had sworn to overthrow.

However well-intentioned it may have been, then, Khrushchev’s strategy of reforming Marxism-Leninism instead diminished its legitimacy and shattered its unity. It showed that any withering away of state authority - or any wavering of resolve among leaders - could cause that ideology itself to implode. This was disconcerting indeed for ruling Communist parties because it suggested that change carried within itself the seeds of their own destruction.

Why, then, did the Cold War continue? Why did the Americans and their allies fail to confront a dysfunctional adversary and claim victory? The best answer is that this crisis within an ideology coincided with a quantum leap in the lethality of weaponry. By the early 1960s, tolerating a Cold War stalemate - even if one side lacked the legitimacy the other side thrived on - seemed safer than trying to end it.

The United States tested its first thermonuclear weapon in November 1952, but the Soviet Union quickly followed with one of its own in August 1953. Hydrogen bombs were at least a thousand times more powerful than the atomic bombs that had devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki: it quickly became clear that their mass use might render the northern hemisphere uninhabitable. For only the second time in modern military history - the first was the non-use of poison gas in World War II - competing war plans came up against a common ecological constraint.

This danger discouraged the exploitation of vulnerabilities. The United States did nothing to assist the rebellious East Germans, Poles, or Hungarians - despite the fact that it had earlier aided the rebellious Yugoslavs. It assumed that the Soviet Union would fight to retain its sphere of influence in Europe, if necessary with nuclear weapons, and that the results would be catastrophic. It insisted that it would do the same to defend its NATO allies, and especially the exposed Anglo-American-French outpost in West Berlin. As a consequence, the political asymmetry that dominated postwar Europe - the legitimacy of democratic capitalism and the illegitimacy of Marxism-Leninism - did nothing to change its political boundaries, which remained frozen through the end of the 1980s.

There lingered, however, the lurking sense that there must be some way to extract advantages from nuclear weapons without actually using them. President Dwight D. Eisenhower thought that threats to use these devices might lower the costs of containment while deterring Soviet and Chinese challenges outside of Europe, but the results were unimpressive. Meanwhile, Khrushchev seized upon a rare Soviet technological “first” - the launching of an earth satellite in October 1957 - to claim that the USSR had surged ahead of the United States in strategic rocketry and to attempt to extract concessions from this feat. That strategy failed even more thoroughly than Eisenhower’s, though, because the Soviet Union had not in fact surged ahead, a fact the Americans soon confirmed from secret reconnaissance flights and later satellite photography.
The nuclear-arms race, then, reinforced the Cold War status quo, a fact made dramatically evident in 1962 when Khrushchev undertook one more effort to change it. In a risky attempt to redress the strategic balance – and to defend Fidel Castro’s revolution – he sent medium- and intermediate-range missiles equipped with nuclear warheads to Cuba. He thereby brought the world as close as it came during the Cold War to a nuclear war, but in the end the crisis changed little. Khrushchev withdrew his missiles, the Americans promised not to invade Cuba, and the Soviet-American rivalry went on as before – except in one respect. The confrontation had been sufficiently alarming that Soviet and American leaders agreed tacitly not to use nuclear weapons again to try to break the Cold War stalemate. That was one promise they kept.

Stalemate: tails wagging dogs

The United States and the Soviet Union were not alone in seeking to shape Cold War strategy, however, and here, too, there were ancient echoes. One of the striking things about the Peloponnesian War is the extent to which smaller powers maneuvered the superpowers of their day. For in so delicately balanced a situation, small shifts in allegiance could make big differences. The same was true in the Cold War.

Small powers had several sources of strength during that conflict. One came from the simultaneous dismantling – in some cases collapse – of the great European colonial empires in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. All at once dozens of new states were appearing that had not yet taken sides in the Soviet-American conflict. Few, if any, could expect by doing so to tilt the global balance in any measurable way. But fears in Washington and Moscow had gone beyond the measurable: the critical balance was now a psychological one in which appearances meant as much as hard facts. That empowered regimes that only recently had lacked power.

If there was a grand strategist of tilt it was Tito, whose defection from Moscow and subsequent success in winning American aid first demonstrated the possibility of playing off one superpower against the other. He, in turn, became close to Jawaharlal Nehru in India and Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, who also saw the leverage such a strategy could provide and encouraged other new states to embrace it. By 1955, the three of them had organized the “Non-Aligned” Movement: a Third World, as it came to be called, where

6 Strassler (ed.), The Landmark Thucydides, especially 24, 365.

power resided in the possibility that the countries that constituted it might cease to remain non-aligned.

The United States and – later – the Soviet Union tried persistently to shape such choices through diplomacy, economic and technological assistance, even covert and overt intervention. Their successes, however, were problematic because none of these measures could prevent future defections, whether as the result of revolutions, coups, dissatisfaction, neglect, or simply the other side’s offer of a higher price. The Third World, then, was both victim and manipulator of the “first” and “second.”

Alliances – formal and informal – provided another way to transform weaknesses into strengths. States generally join alliances because they lack power: they have either sought protection or been forced to accept it. But if the leading nation of an alliance has lost the ability to discriminate – if it has put its credibility on the line everywhere by declaring everything vital – then it has passed the initiative to its weaker partners, who can often use that advantage to get what they want.

Hence Ulbricht in East Germany undermined Khrushchev’s attempts to reform Marxism–Leninism by repeatedly warning that, if pressed too hard, his regime might collapse. Similarily, Syngman Rhee in South Korea and Chiang Kai-shek on the Nationalist-held island of Taiwan coerced a reluctant Eisenhower into giving them security guarantees, on the grounds that without these the North Koreans and the Chinese Communists would attack, with devastating results for American credibility. Rhee and Chiang were hardly democratic allies – they were not even predictable allies. But by flaunting their weakness they made themselves, like Ulbricht, necessary allies.

The risks of not defending allies became clear in 1965 when the administration of John F. Kennedy decided to abandon Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam. It thereby left, for Lyndon B. Johnson, a leadership vacuum he was never able to fill. Fearing that the North Vietnamese, with the help of their Soviet and Chinese allies, would take over the country, Johnson embarked upon a full-scale military intervention that would cost the lives of 58,000 Americans, an unknown but far larger number of Vietnamese, and would bring the United States close to domestic paralysis.

It later became clear that neither the Soviet Union nor China had authorized Ho Chi Minh’s war against South Vietnam. In yet another demonstration of strength through weakness, he had acted on his own, confident that neither Moscow nor Beijing would disavow him. He was right: these large Marxist–Leninist states let a small one tell them what to do because they feared their own loss of ideological credibility if they failed to support it. Ho’s
strategy produced impressive results. The long and costly war in Vietnam dissipated American resources and shook American resolve—even though, in retrospect, the global balance of power was never really at stake there to begin with.

One additional effect of the Vietnam War was to help mobilize a new generation of educated young people who were less prepared than their elders to accept the Cold War stalemate. Their energies manifested themselves, to be sure, in anti-war protests, but also in challenges to “establishments” everywhere: to governments, corporations, and universities throughout the United States and Western Europe, to Marxist-Leninist regimes that had suppressed dissent in Eastern Europe, even to the state and party bureaucracy in China, where Mao himself launched his destructive “Cultural Revolution” — a rare instance of an establishment igniting an insurrection against itself.

By the end of the 1960s, the grand strategic flexibility available to the Cold War great powers had narrowed significantly. Leaders in the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, and even China found themselves frustrated in winning support for their ideologies, frightened by the prospect of nuclear war, worried about the solidity of their alliances—and even about the cohesion of their own societies. The Cold War was now not only a stalemate: it seemed to be diminishing the influence of the states that supposedly dominated it.

Détente: a failure of stabilization

Détente was a cooperative superpower effort to reverse this trend, but also a competitive superpower attempt to regain the advantage in the Cold War. It was, thus, the first grand strategy to reflect common interests in Washington, Moscow, and the capitals of their respective allies—beyond the obvious desirability of avoiding a nuclear holocaust. But détente was never meant to end the Cold War: instead its designers sought to set rules for what they all understood would continue to be a contest. What none had anticipated was that setting rules would sharpen the conflict.

By 1969, all sides had an interest in cooling off the Cold War. The Americans were failing in Vietnam. The Soviet Union had suppressed the “Prague spring,” but only by alienating ideological allies elsewhere. Sensing the unlikelihood of reunification, West and East Germans had begun easing tensions across the walls that divided them. And in China, Mao Zedong had convinced himself that the Soviet Union was now a greater threat to his country’s safety than the United States would ever be: his diplomatic revolution was about to overshadow—even if not yet end—his cultural revolution.

These converging circumstances made it possible for the new president of the United States, Richard M. Nixon, and his assistant for national security affairs, Henry Kissinger, to make the most radical shift in American grand strategy since NSC-68. They had several objectives: to get the United States out of Vietnam without appearing to have been forced out; to engage the Soviet Union in negotiations on arms control, economic contacts, and the management of Third World conflicts; to open relations with China as a way of applying pressure in Moscow, and to restore presidential authority at home. By the end of 1972, it all seemed to have worked: Nixon had traveled to Beijing and Moscow, signed the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with the USSR, come close to a Vietnam ceasefire, and won reelection triumphantly. It looked as though the Americans had become grand strategic wizards.

But the wizardry rested on shaky foundations. The Nixon–Kissinger strategy required a carefully controlled “linkage” of inducements with constraints—of sticks with carrots—leaving little room for leaks to the press, complaints from critics, or congressional oversight. It implied an equal distribution of calculable benefits to the United States and the Soviet Union, but their rivalry had long been propelled by incalculable fears. It expected saintliness on the part of the superpowers—that they would resist Third World temptations—but it did nothing to prevent Third World regimes from continuing to offer them. And it conflated stability with justice: the relief that would come from lessening the danger of nuclear war, Nixon and Kissinger believed, would overcome whatever resentments would arise from locking the Cold War stalemate into place.

None of these assumptions held up. Domestic critics assailed the Nixon administration for giving away too much on strategic arms, and for not having done enough for human rights. The president’s insistence on centralizing power led to abuses of power, with the Watergate crisis forcing his resignation in August 1974. Meanwhile, Nasser’s successor in Egypt, Anwar Sadat, had tempted the United States by expelling Soviet advisers from his country: when Washington failed to seize this opportunity, he attacked Israel, forcing an American-imposed settlement from which Kissinger excluded the USSR—a bitter humiliation for Moscow. That left Kremlin leaders with little sympathy for Nixon’s successor, Gerald Ford, when he and Kissinger tried to save South Vietnam from a North Vietnamese invasion in the spring of 1975, or when they sought to prevent Cuban and Soviet intervention on behalf of Marxist rebels in the former Portuguese colony of Angola later that year.

American unilateralism in the Middle East was not the only reason, though, that the Soviet Union went on the offensive in the Third World. Brezhnev
worked hard for détente and wanted it to succeed; but within the Soviet Communist Party and especially the emerging regional institutes – Moscow’s equivalent of think tanks – a new generation of experts was insisting that this was the time to seize the initiative. The United States had shown itself unexpectedly irresolute in Vietnam. The USSR now had the naval and air strength to project power into distant parts of the world. The Cuban revolution had shown that Marxism–Leninism could thrive in “developing” countries, and the Cubans themselves had become adept at playing Ho Chi Minh’s game: embracing causes – Angola was an example – which Moscow could not easily disavow. Perhaps history was again moving toward revolution, this time in Southeast Asia, Southern Africa, and Latin America.

So while the plans of Nixon and Kissinger, by the mid-1970s, had fallen into disarray, so too had those of the Soviet Union. The international Communist movement had long ceased to be monolithic; now leadership in Moscow was becoming pluralistic. Détente, which began as a joint superpower effort to stabilize the Cold War, instead destabilized the priorities of both superpowers. It was not even clear anymore what each side’s grand strategy was, much less how one might measure its effectiveness. The resulting confusion left a vacuum in which the long-obscured ecology of the Cold War – the environment within which all of its antagonists operated – began to manifest itself.

Soviet strategic overstretch

One reason we still read Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War is that he allows us to see the underlying structural features of that conflict. One of these was dissimilar capabilities: the fact that Athens was a naval power while Sparta relied on a land army meant that neither could easily defeat the other. Structures in this ancient war, however, were never completely stable. If one side could master the skills of the other, or if one side blundered into situations that favored the other, then the stalemate could end. This happened when the Athenian assembly approved a land war in Sicily for which its army was ill-prepared, after which the Spartans found ways to harass and then defeat it by sea. Athens never recovered from this reversal of roles – this failure to respect structures that had sustained its power, even as it exposed itself to those that had favored its enemy.

Something like this happened to the Soviet Union after détente collapsed. At first the United States seemed weakened: Jimmy Carter’s administration found it difficult to devise any consistent grand strategy with respect to the USSR, while that country’s leadership appeared, from the outside at least,
As it happened, though, Moscow lost control in another way. Capitalist 
credits left the East Europeans – apart from the enterprising Hungarians – 
with few incentives to undertake reforms: they simply borrowed the money 
to finance their imports. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, a major oil producer, 
was now a legitimate enterprise, because Brezhnev’s signature on 
formal agreement to that effect at Helsinki in the summer of 1975. In return, 
the Soviet and East European economies were much more closely tied 
to the global economy than they had been at its beginning. That solved some 
problems but created others: notably a contraction of credit when the Eastern 
Europeans found it difficult to repay their loans, and – even more devastat-
ingly for the USSR a sharp decline in oil prices during the early 1980s.

All of this took place as Soviet military expenditures were soaring, owing to 
the collapse of détente, the Afghan war, and support for Third World revolu-
tions elsewhere. By some calculations, the USSR was spending as much as 25 percent of gross domestic product on defense – the equivalent figure for the 
United States, on a far larger economic base, was about 5 percent. Meanwhile, 
living standards were worse than they had been when Kremlin leaders first 
decided to reverse autarchies and risk integration into what was still a capitalist 
world.

The most surprising way in which Brezhnev and his advisers misjudged 
structures, however, had to do with human rights. The Soviet Union had long 
sought recognition of post-World War II boundaries in Eastern Europe, and in 
the spirit of détente persuaded the United States and its NATO allies to sign a 
formal agreement to that effect at Helsinki in the summer of 1975. In return, 
and with remarkable short-sightedness, Brezhnev committed his country to 
the principle that sovereignty could no longer shield brutality – that the 
manner in which a state treated its own citizens was a legitimate matter for 
international concern.

He did this in the belief that Soviet and East European authorities could 
easily contain whatever disruptions the concession might cause: it was more 
important to get the boundaries recognized. But no one had any intention 
of challenging boundaries in the first place. Challenging authoritarian rule, 
however, was now a legitimate enterprise, because Brezhnev’s signature on 
the Helsinki Final Act formally endorsed the argument that the Soviet Union’s 
adversaries had been making throughout the Cold War: that the people, not 
the party and its leaders, had the right to organize, vote, and thereby deter-
mine their own future.

Dissidents who had long hoped for reform could now claim it as their right, 
and within months their demands were sweeping the Soviet bloc. Several 
circumstances prevented Moscow from crushing these movements as it had in 
the past. One was the economic dependence on the capitalists that had come 
with the abandonment of autarchies: any replay of Budapest 1956 or Prague 
1968 would cause an immediate cut-off in credits, technology, and food 
imports, worsening an already deteriorating situation. Another was dispro-
portionate military spending, which left little room – especially after the invasion 
of Afghanistan – for taking on still greater military burdens. But a third was 
what Soviet leaders had themselves pledged at Helsinki: a public commitment 
to respect precisely the processes that were eroding their own authority.

Each of these miscalculations – these failures to respect structures that had 
sustained Soviet power – became, for Moscow, what the Sicilian expedition 
had been for Athens: an ill-considered departure from a long-held strategy, 
with results that overstretched resources, exposed vulnerabilities, and thus 
handled enemies the means to break a long stalemate.

Reagan, Gorbachev, and the end of the Cold War

By 1981, the Soviet Union had many enemies: in China, where the twice-
purged Deng Xiaoping had succeeded Mao Zedong and shown that a single-
party Marxist state could indeed reform its economy – but only by moving 
toward capitalism; in Czechoslovakia, where the playwright Vaclav Havel 
and the movement he founded, Charter 77, were pressing Soviet leaders to 
honor their Helsinki human rights commitments; in the Vatican, where a 
papal conclave surprised the world – and especially the Kremlin – by electing 
a Polish pope determined to challenge Moscow’s influence in Eastern Europe; 
in Britain, where Margaret Thatcher had become prime minister by attacking 
planned economies; in Poland, where a persistent Gdansk shipyard worker, 
Lech Wałęsa, had forced the government in Warsaw to recognize Solidarity, 
the first independent trade union within the Soviet bloc; and in the United 
States, where Ronald Reagan had become president after decisively defeating 
Carter’s bid for reelection – with an explicit promise to kill détente.

The simultaneous appearance of so many adversaries suggests several 
things. One is a major failure of strategy in Moscow, since an obvious standard 
for success in strategy is to decrease, not increase, the number of opponents 
one faces. Another is that the shaking up of the Cold War stalemate – the 
destabilizations of the 1970s and the misjudgment of structures into which 
these lured the USSR – destroyed the sense of inevitability that had come to 
surround bipolarity: they opened minds to the possibility that a superpower 
rivalry was not the only conceivable way to organize the world. Still another is
that détente, which had been meant to institutionalize such a system, instead wound up de-institutionalizing it.

For it now had become apparent that détente could never end the Cold War; it could at best only make the struggle safer and more predictable. That was progress, but it still meant that half the world would live under governments it had not chosen. Détente’s gravediggers—Havel, John Paul II, Thatcher, Wałęsa, Reagan—were determined to change that situation. Deng was content with it but sought something else equally radical: to make the world’s most populous country a prosperous country. There was no common strategy in all of this—the anti-Soviet movement was too diverse and disconnected—but there was a convergence of strategies with a common objective. That was to move beyond the Cold War.

No one was sure, though, how this might happen. Many people still feared a nuclear war, not least the dying Brezhnev and his equally feeble successors Iurii Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko. Others hoped for a negotiated settlement, but the Reagan administration at first seemed uninterested, and even if it had been interested, the old men in the Kremlin would hardly have been capable of negotiating. A few prophets predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union but found it difficult to specify how or when that might occur. A few officials in Washington and London foresaw the possibility that a Soviet leader might emerge, as Kennan decades before had foreseen, who would sense the “internal contradictions” of his own system and seek to change it. But it was not at all evident, even to Kennan, how the Soviet system of the early 1980s, which had never been more set in its ways, could ever produce such a visionary.7

In the end, as often happens in history, all expectations were confounded. The nuclear danger was greater than at any point since the Cuban missile crisis, but Reagan turned out to be a nuclear abolitionist—the only one ever to occupy the White House—and upon recognizing the risks quickly moved to diminish them. The ossified Soviet system did produce a negotiating partner in Mikhail Gorbachev, who succeeded Chernenko in 1985, but it also produced much more: Gorbachev turned out to be the Soviet leader Kennan had hoped for. To everyone’s surprise including probably his own, Gorbachev abandoned the Soviet Union’s revolutionary-imperial aspirations and set out to make his state a normal member of an international system in which the Cold War itself would cease to be “normal.”

A Clausewitzian conclusion

But Gorbachev too misjudged a structure, which was that of the Soviet Union itself. It turned out that to give up its ideology, to relinquish its sphere of influence, and to acknowledge the right of non-Russian nationalities to secede—without at the same time transforming that state into a multiparty democracy and a market economy—was to hollow it out from within: Gorbachev left it no reason to exist. He could never bring himself to acknowledge that reality, but his successor, Boris Yeltsin, saw it clearly. For just as the visionaries of the 1980s understood that détente, having perpetuated the Cold War, had to be eliminated, so this visionary of the early 1990s concluded that the same was now true of the Soviet Union itself.

Bibliographical essay

The bibliographical essays in the three volumes of the *Cambridge History of the Cold War* aim at being selective and critical overviews of the literature available in each subfield of historical investigation. The entries are written by the authors of the chapters in the main text, with additions, deletions, and cross-references suggested by the editors. Readers may want to look at the bibliographical entries in more than one volume to get an overview of the literature on a particular issue or region.

I. Grand strategies in the Cold War


John Patrick Diggins, Ronald Reagan: Fite, Freedom, and the Making of History (New York: Norton, 2007), seeks to place Reagan's strategy within a broad historical context, while Paul Letnow, Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (New York: Random House, 2009), focuses on that particular aspect of it. William Tammum is preparing the definitive biography of Mikhail Gorbatchev; until it appears, the best sources for Gorbachev's strategy are his Memoirs (New York: Doubleday, 1995), and Anany
Volume II of The Cambridge History of the Cold War examines the developments that made the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union a long-lasting international system during the 1960s and 1970s. A team of leading scholars explains how the Cold War seemed to stabilize after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and how this sense of increased stability evolved into the détente era of the early 1970s. The authors outline how conflicts in the Third World, as well as the interests and ideologies of the superpowers, eroded the détente process. They delve into the social and economic roots of the conflict, illuminate processes of integration and disintegration, analyze the arms race, and explore the roles of intelligence, culture, and national identities. Discussing the newest findings on US and Soviet foreign policy as well as examining key crises inside and outside Europe, this authoritative volume will define Cold War studies for years to come.

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