



The Return of History: Cold War Lessons for Current International Crises

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Forging ahead to the past? Features of Cold War crises

Today, as in past epochs, the search for an international political balance is accompanied by intense confrontation between major powers and military blocs. Not surprisingly, mutual hostility is emerging as the dominant mode in relations between Russia and the West. The checks and balances of the 1997 Russia-NATO Founding Act are now a thing of the past. Any hope of building an inclusive European security architecture or developing tools to restrict military activity and provide greater transparency have been dashed, as have cooperative approaches to resolving differences. All of this has been replaced with furious rhetoric, a broad range of methods to weaken the enemy, and a military build-up in the direct vicinity of the Russian border. The West's policy in Ukraine testifies to the revival of proxy conflicts as a means of inflicting a strategic defeat on adversaries at low cost, with someone else doing most of the dirty work¹.

Addressing the St Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about the “revolutionary, tectonic changes in geopolitics, the global economy, the technological sphere, and in the entire system of international relations.” He once again underscored the bankruptcy of the plans to preserve the unipolar world order, adding that the “building and shaping a new world order is no easy task”².

At this new stage in its development, the international system is rapidly relapsing into the same kind of bipolar confrontation it left behind 30 years ago. The stereotypes of “bloc thinking” are being revived; the gap between the sides is only growing larger and the language of containment is already dominating contacts. At the same time, there is less proficiency in wielding the tools of crisis balancing which reflects a partial loss of acumen.

¹Trenin D.V. Hybridity as a Central Feature of Contemporary International Conflicts // Journal of International Analytics 13. No. 2. June 27, 2022. P. 12–22.

²St Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary session // President of Russia. 17.06.2022. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68669>

During the Cold War, the sides were keenly aware of the cost of a head-on clash and the risks of unintentional escalation. In the mid-20th century, this caution was informed by the tragic experience of World War II. Subsequent crises made Soviet and Western elites conscious of the fact that no outcome of an armed conflict between the superpowers could justify the eventual losses and that any victory would be Pyrrhic.

After the collapse of the bipolar system, a “counter-revolution” occurred that eroded the values of military-political restraint³. States are ready to demonstrate, for the sake of a dramatic public gesture, strategic irresponsibility and frivolity⁴. We have witnessed regular provocations near Russia’s maritime and airspace borders, expulsions of Russian diplomats, and increasingly tough rhetoric on the part of NATO leaders, including its Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. It was only when the stakes got too high in the early 2020s that the Western countries regained some of their sense of danger and fear of possible mistakes.

The purpose of this report is to update the lessons of the Cold War for the current international situation. The history of international relations in the latter half of the 20th century can be fairly described as a treasure-trove of experience for current Russian and Western foreign policy elites. It includes a number of experiments in managing live conflicts amid severe international crises. This legacy is exactly what politicians need as they look for mechanisms of preventing a spontaneous escalation in situations where states are teetering on the brink of a military clash.

The 1962 Cuba missile crisis, depicted as the apogee of the Cold War, is what most often comes to mind, unfairly overshadowing other Soviet-US crises. The Berlin crisis (late 1950s and early 1960s) and the confrontation in the early 1980s, set against the background of the

³ Богатуров А. Д. Контрреволюция ценностей и международная безопасность // Международные процессы. 2008. Т. 6. № 2. С. 4–15 (Bogaturov A.D., The Counter-Revolution of Values and International Security// International Processes, 2008, Vol. 6, No. 2. P. 4–15).

⁴ Международные угрозы: перехват инициативы // Евразийские стратегии (International Threats: Seizing the Initiative). 9.01.2022. URL: <http://eurasian-strategies.ru/media/insights/prognoz-mezhdunarodnye-ugrozy-2022/>.

Euromissile dispute, were no less intense⁵. Moreover, both crises were unfolding in a significantly more important geographic space for both sides which is re-emerging today as the flashpoint between Moscow and the West.

Besides, the focus on the Soviet-American tug-of-war diverts attention from crises that were not directly related to relations between the superpowers. The Cold War period should not be entirely identified with the rivalry between the USSR and the USA alone. A case in point is the Suez crisis that put the final nail in the coffin of British and French great-power ambitions⁶. In that moment bipolarity became the norm in the world, consolidating the privileged status of Moscow and Washington.

Are today's intellectual and political elites able to draw useful crisis response models from the study of the Cold War's flashpoints? After all, it is clear that in the second half of the 20th century the international system had different structural characteristics. The Cold War was characterized by a global status quo. The post-Yalta and post-Potsdam world gave birth to an unofficial doctrine of non-interference in the affairs of the opposite bloc. Washington did not interfere in the Polish or Czechoslovak crises, while the USSR, as a rule, did not prevent the United States from retaining its control over Latin America⁷. Today, accusations of revisionism are equally applicable to Moscow, Beijing and Western countries⁸. To some extent, the existing rules do not suit the majority of main actors.

But the bipolar epoch has not passed without a trace. In East Asia at any rate the Cold War in its pure form did not end with the collapse of the USSR. The bloc confrontation is no more, but the US hub-and-spokes system is still there, albeit with a focus on threats

⁵ Nuti L., Bozo F., Rey M.-P., and Rother B., eds. *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War*. Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015.

⁶ Pearson J. *Sir Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis*. London: PalgraveMacmillan UK, 2003.

⁷ Косолапов Н. А. Пороговый уровень и вероятность конфликта США с Россией // *Международные процессы* 2008. Т. 6. №. 3. С. 15–25 (Kosolapov N.A., *The Threshold Level and Likelihood of US-Russia Conflict* // *International Processes*, 2008, Vol. 6, No. 3. P. 15–25).

⁸ Sushentsov A.A., and Wohlforth W.C. *The Tragedy of US-Russian Relations: NATO Centrality and the Revisionists' Spiral* // *International Politics* 57. No. 3. June 28, 2020. P. 427–50. Roy A. *Russian Revisionism, Legal Discourse and the "Rules-Based" International Order* // *Europe-Asia Studies* 72. No. 6. July 2, 2020. P. 976–995.

posed by China. The current crisis in relations between Russia and the Western countries has exposed the quasi-bloc nature of the European order, which has remained intact despite the demolition of the Berlin Wall. How can the past patterns be used under the new conditions? Will the system of containing tensions used in the previous era be needed today? Do foreign policy elites today find the Cold War experience useful? This report seeks to begin a discussion of the lessons we can draw from the history of bipolarity and what elements of the past are to be feared and avoided.

Conceptualising the crisis: The debate between rationalists and sceptics

How important are international political crises from a historical perspective? If we look at the key confrontations of the 1940s-1950s (the dispute over Iran, tensions over West Berlin, or the Korean War), the Soviet Union failed to achieve its goals in any of them⁹. Nevertheless, at the end of the first decade of the Cold War, the Soviet Union emerged as a formidable opponent to the United States. Its rise was due to growing economic and military might, and this growth was in no way hindered by an occasional foreign policy setback.

The Cold War did not end because any particular local clash ended in any particular way, either. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the Soviet Union was crippled by the Afghan war. Despite its contradictory and painful nature, it diverted a relatively small portion of Soviet capacity. The end of bipolar confrontation came because the Soviet Union lost the ability to compete with the West, primarily, in the economic and technological spheres after the vitality of the socialist society's ideological foundations had been shattered¹⁰.

⁹Zubok V. M. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. The New Cold War History. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

¹⁰Zubok V. M. *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.

The more important the crisis, the greater divergence of interpretations of the outcomes of military-diplomatic interaction. In particular, the Cuban missile crisis is often seen as a failure of Soviet diplomacy, from the lack of preparations to the ill-conceived raising of stakes that brought the world to the brink of a nuclear war, and the painful climb-down in the end¹¹. However, the crisis played a major role in pushing the United States into starting a dialogue with the Soviet Union later and prompting Washington to approach Moscow more seriously. The ensuing détente was the outcome of this reassessment. In other words, the Soviet Union managed to reap long-term benefits.

In terms of strategic analysis, these crisis episodes need to be placed in a broader context. The question is, to what extent are isolated events capable of influencing macrohistorical trends? On the other hand, what would the dynamics of bipolar rivalry have looked like without crises? For example, could détente have taken place sooner if the 1960 Paris summit had not failed because of the controversy over the downed U-2 spy plane? Attempting to answer such questions leads one to the shaky ground of counterfactuals.

If we are to understand these crises, we must consider the logic of the participants in light of the nature of the ultimate outcomes. It is no secret that seemingly well-conceived plans often defy expectations. The problem is that nation states have a limited ability to calculate opponents' reactions to their own steps, all the more so as interaction often takes place in several rounds, and the parties learn different lessons from previous contacts¹². This discrepancy obscures the potential for conflict management.

The lessons learned from analysing crisis situations also point to the risk of reducing the participants to implacable foes¹³. This is partly

¹¹ Horelick A.L. The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior // *World Politics* 16. No. 3. April, 1964. P. 363–89; Garthoff R.L. Cuban Missile Crisis: The Soviet Story // *Foreign Policy*. No. 72. 1988. P. 61–80.

¹² Axelrod R. Tit-for-Tat Strategies. In *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy*. Routledge. London, 2001.

¹³ Herrmann R.K., Voss J.F., Schooler T.Y.E., and Ciarrochi J. Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata // *International Studies Quarterly* 41. No. 3. 1997. P. 403–433.

due to deliberate posturing on their part. To uphold their interests, the parties tend to exaggerate their resolve and stoop as low as to demonise the opponent. In reality, international politics is rarely a struggle between unconditional good and universal evil.

Nobel Prize winner Thomas Schelling noted that the zero-sum game is not the correct framework for analysing international conflicts¹⁴. Schelling was convinced that they should be considered from the perspective of a “variable sum game”, in which one side’s gain does not necessarily entail the other side’s loss. For example, during the Cold War, there were disagreements between the superpowers, but also interdependence and common goals, primarily, a shared interest in preventing nuclear Armageddon. In some cases, the interests of Moscow and Washington overlapped even more. The mutually beneficial outcome of the Suez crisis for the Soviet Union and the United States consisted in showing the “old” powers their place in the emerging bipolar configuration. It marked the moment the former colonial empires stepped down from the global stage. The consolidation of the superpowers’ quasi-monopoly on nuclear weapons (Britain, France and China obtained them, but the ambitions of other states were thoroughly suppressed following the adoption of the Non-Proliferation Treaty) was a mutually beneficial result of the arms race.

Despite the presence of such cooperative elements, international political crises are primarily competitions of political will. During the Cold War, the sides had perhaps an imperfect, but nonetheless stable idea about each other’s military capacity such as conventional and nuclear forces. The degree to which either was prepared to use these forces and means remained an open question in light of the cost of a potential conflict. Therefore, crises performed an important function and were designed to show the opponent each superpower’s commitment to uphold its interests regardless of risks¹⁵.

¹⁴Schelling T. C. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Harvard University Press, 1960.

¹⁵Gartzke E.A., Carcelli Sh., Gannon J.A., and Zhang J.J. Signaling in Foreign Policy. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, Eds. Gartzke E.A., Carcelli Sh., Gannon J.A., and Zhang J.J. Oxford University Press, 2017; Fearon J.D. Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs // *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41. No. 1. 1997. P. 68–90.

However, neither side actually sought an armed clash, and this fact resulted in the emergence of the “last but one step” concept, tying the amount of pressure exerted to the probability of victory¹⁶. It reflected strategic incentives to escalate the situation to the limit, approaching the point where it goes from a political to a military confrontation. The privilege to take the final step across the threshold of escalation was left to the opposite side, confronting the enemy with a choice between painful retreat or all-out collision.

US President John F. Kennedy’s decision to impose a naval blockade of Cuba is a case of escalating a confrontation to the brink of conflict. Kennedy rejected options involving direct attacks on the island, which would have made Washington the initiator of the armed phase of the conflict. But in the case of a blockade, a potential attempt by the Soviet Union to break through the cordon would make the Soviet Union responsible for the military clash between the superpowers. Under these circumstances, Moscow preferred to de-escalate and agreed to withdraw the missiles stationed in Cuba¹⁷.

But even the most rationalistic approaches to managing conflicts point to an element of unpredictability in brinkmanship. In order for the opponent to take threats seriously, the risk of a collision must be greater than zero. Moreover, a state should demonstrate “reasonable irrationality”. It must show that it is prepared to take actions that would look disadvantageous or even erroneous in a normal situation. For example, it may be required to enter into a conflict over a strategically insignificant and geographically remote area in order to prevent possible pressure in a more important area.

In fact, the very concept of nuclear deterrence which took shape during the Cold War relies precisely on “reasonable irrationality” in which the parties pledge that, if needed, they will commit collective suicide (a nuclear war between superpowers could not have ended

¹⁶ Schelling T. C. *Arms and Influence*. Yale University Press, 1967.

¹⁷ Allison G.T., Zelikow Ph. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. 2nd ed. New York: Longman, 1999.

in anything else). Ironically, maintaining stability requires potentially destabilising steps to convince the enemy that you will indeed use strategic forces if needed.

This kind of signalling, though, runs into a political and psychological difficulty caused by discrepancies in how the same military and diplomatic moves are assessed by different observers¹⁸. During international crises, the sides are at the mercy of unreliable communication channels and often interpret the other sides' intentions based on the nature of the actions being taken. This guesswork makes the room for speculation and misinterpretation larger. The latter, in turn, make the situation extremely difficult to calculate and, hence, even more dangerous.

For example, in 1979, the Soviet leadership regarded the diplomatic manoeuvres of the Afghan leaders as an attempt to reorient their foreign policy, and the hypothetical consolidation of the US presence in a neighbouring country was perceived as direct threat to the national security of the Soviet Union, giving rise to fears of the possible destabilisation of Soviet Central Asia. These fears largely determined the decision to deploy a limited contingent of Soviet troops to Afghanistan¹⁹. In turn, Washington erroneously interpreted Moscow's actions as part of a larger push toward the strategically important oil resources of the Gulf, and responded by providing massive support to the anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

The behaviour of state leaders in crises is influenced not only by strategic considerations and psychology, but also public opinion and internal political strife, interagency squabbles, bureaucratic routine and formal procedures²⁰. As a result, the decision-making process becomes more complicated and slower, and proposed solutions become less rational. Taken together, these effects greatly complicate the attempts to manage confrontation when balancing on the brink of conflict.

¹⁸Jervis R. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton University Press, 1976.

¹⁹Zubok V. M. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. The New Cold War History. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

²⁰Allison G.T. *Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis* // *American Political Science Review* 63. No. 3. November 1969. P. 689–718.

Raising the stakes: Styles of leadership and crisis solutions

The key task in analysing crises in the era of bipolar confrontation is to understand the factors determining each side's willingness "to raise the stakes". Did national leaders carefully weigh the consequences of a crisis? How well did they assess possible risks? What was the pain threshold after which they had to pull back? Often, answers to all these questions come much later, with the publication of memoirs and the opening of archives. Luckily, researchers already have significant material on Cold War crises, as distinct from some other periods.

The US record is particularly well documented and studied. Its close consideration suggests a number of meaningful conclusions and useful lessons. Specifically, it shows what influence differences in national leaders' personal styles can have on the course of developments. US leaders relied on widely differing decision-making processes, which was reflected in the implementation of national strategies.

Harry Truman, for example, neglected foreign policy and often delegated decision-making to his aides²¹. In so doing, he frequently shied away from mediating their disputes, preferring to maintain a noncommittal posture and remain above the fray. The consequence was inconsistency in US foreign policy, which became strikingly obvious, for example, shortly before the Korean War. Speaking on behalf of the United States, a deputy of Secretary of State Dean Acheson suspended South Korea from the defensive perimeter, something that did not prevent them later from joining the conflict. Washington's view of the importance of the Korean Peninsula changed radically in a matter of several months.

Lyndon Johnson showed a similar indifference to foreign policy. In the mid-1960s, this was instrumental in drawing the United States into yet

²¹ Leffler M.P. *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*. Stanford Nuclear Age Series. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1992; Offner A.A. "Another Such Victory": President Truman, American Foreign Policy, and the Cold War // *Diplomatic History* 23. No. 2. April, 1999. P. 127–155.

another conflict in Asia. Johnson intervened in the Vietnam War largely out of fear that the Republicans would accuse him of insufficient resolve in the face of the Communist threat. But he deliberately contained the scale of US involvement as he sought to avoid both a response from the USSR and China and public criticism at home. Johnson feared that high foreign policy costs would interfere with his effort to pass his Great Society legislative program, the centrepiece of his domestic agenda. However, his gradualistic approach ended up in strategic quagmire. Johnson's indecision led to the United States getting bogged down in Vietnam. The US military presence expanded and there was a loss of strategic rationale²².

On the contrary, **Dwight Eisenhower**, a former military officer, set about strengthening discipline at the US foreign policy apparatus, introducing clear-cut procedures and interagency coordination processes, and centralising decision-making. Eisenhower personally focused on the international agenda, regularly attending National Security Council meetings and presiding over the key debates²³. His approach led to a lot of red tape and less flexibility in decision-making, while his penchant for taking personal control had an ambiguous effect on the U-2 crisis (the shooting down of a US spy plane over the USSR). It cannot be ruled out that had he pointed the finger at subordinates, the Paris meeting would have taken place after all. At any rate, the Soviet side took Eisenhower's claim that it was he who had authorized the U-2 flights as a way to raise the stakes²⁴.

The style of another Republican leader, **Richard Nixon**, demonstrates yet another model of leadership. Unlike his Democratic predecessors Truman and Johnson, he took a profound interest in foreign policy matters owing to his extensive personal experience. But unlike Eisenhower, under whom he served as vice president, Nixon pursued personalistic approach in the decision-making process. He prioritised informal channels and took pains to side-line bureaucrats from the

²² Gaddis J.L. *The Cold War: A New History*. New York: Penguin Press, 2005.

²³ Мирошников С.Н. Проект «Солярий» администрации Д. Эйзенхауэра // Вестник Томского государственного университета. 2009. № 328. С. 72–76 (Miroshnikov S.N., The Eisenhower Administration's Project Solarium // Newsletter of the Tomsk State University. 2009. No. 328. P. 72–76).

²⁴ Gaddis J.L. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*. Rev. and Expanded ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

foreign policy process. As a result, the Department of State was often in the dark about his policy, which was handled by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger²⁵. But Nixon did not entirely trust even Kissinger. The air of secrecy and mutual suspicion poisoned the atmosphere inside the administration and caused a lack of coordination among Nixon's inner circle. True, foreign policy was left largely unscathed by this dysfunction, which came into sharpest relief with the Watergate scandal that led to Nixon's resignation.

While considering different leadership styles, we should keep in mind the fact that the same presidents sometimes achieved widely differing outcomes under similar circumstances. This reveals the influence of political experience on an administration's success and suggests that caution is warranted while assessing the role of individuals. The **John F. Kennedy** team's record is instructive. Kennedy's Bay of Pigs fiasco, in which he failed to topple the Cuban leader Fidel Castro, did not prevent him and the same group of advisers from displaying political resolve and strategic foresight during the Cuban missile crisis a year later²⁶.

Compared to the extensive history of efforts to conceptualise the US record, it is much more difficult to trace the decision-making mechanisms in the USSR and Russia. Often they have to be reconstructed bit by bit. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Soviet leaders possessed different styles of leadership and approached their own crises in distinct ways.

Joseph Stalin is credited with political foresight and a talent for modelling the international situation far into the future²⁷. He acted cautiously in the context of the USSR's post-war reconstruction and was not afraid of taking a step or two back when strongly rebuffed by the United States. Stalin believed that sooner or later another big war

²⁵ Kissinger H. *White House Years*. New York: Simon & Schuster trade paperbacks, 2011.

²⁶ Allison G.T., and Zelikow. Ph. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. 2nd ed. New York: Longman, 1999.

²⁷ Печатнов В.О. Сталин, Рузвельт, Трумэн: СССР и США в 1940-х годах: Документальные очерки. Москва: ТЕППА, 2006 (Pechatnov V.O., Stalin, Roosevelt, Truman: USSR and USA in the 1940s: Documentary Essays. Moscow, TERRA, 2006).

would come, but he was not in a hurry to escalate, being aware that the correlation of forces, both politically and militarily, was not in the USSR's favour. Despite a number of sceptical comments on the subject of the atomic bomb, he was realistic about the US achievements in this area. Exemplifying Stalin's cautious approach is the Soviet pull-out from Iran under British-US pressure, his renunciation of support for Communist actions in Greece, and his de facto recognition that the blockade of West Berlin was a failure.

But Stalin also committed grave foreign policy mistakes. Specifically, the socialist bloc paid a high price for its support of Kim Il Sung's risky gambit to take over South Korea. The Soviet leader also sanctioned an ill-prepared campaign of pressure on Turkey in the matter of the Black Sea straits, which eventually forced Ankara to join the Western bloc. The attempt to discipline the Yugoslavian leadership led to a breach with an important ally in the Balkans. Stalin's distrust of the Chinese Communists in the fight against Kuomintang is, on the contrary, an example where he misjudged opportunities. This is one of those rare cases where the Soviet leader himself acknowledged that he made a mistake.

Unlike his former boss, **Nikita Khrushchev** was more prone to succumb to emotion in policy-making, and his international extemporising often provoked major crises. A case in point is his capricious decision to deploy missiles in Cuba, which sparked off the Cuban missile crisis. While on holiday at a Black Sea resort, he was shown the coast of the Republic of Turkey looming in the distance with a comment that a nuclear strike could be launched at the USSR from there. After that Khrushchev conceived Operation Anadyr²⁸.

Despite Khrushchev's impetuosity, he had a sincere desire to defuse international tensions. But there were various international problems that prevented him from doing this. He explained the logic of his behaviour by the need "to maintain a certain level of tension" in relations. Archive documents show that voluntarism in the USSR's

²⁸ Kramer M. Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Soviet Command Authority, and the Cuban Missile Crisis: A Note // The International History Review 15. No. 4. December, 1993. P. 740–751.

strategic planning resulted in the lack of detail regarding potential responses to the West's counter-threats²⁹. Few people asked themselves this question: "What if the West turns down our demands and makes counter-moves?"

Khrushchev's "voluntarism", however reckless, was balanced by his keen political insight. Otherwise, it would be hard to explain how he managed to side-line more powerful rivals in coming to power. His insightfulness extended to foreign policy. Even if Khrushchev's decisions often set off crises, he had a keen sense of the limits of pressure and never fell under the spell of his own fierce rhetoric. Occasionally he showed flexibility in contacts not only with the United States but also recalcitrant members of the socialist camp, such as his attempt to repair relations with Yugoslavia. He also made concessions during the Polish crisis, removing Soviet functionaries from the government in Warsaw. Nevertheless, it was in relations with allies that Khrushchev made what was perhaps his principal foreign policy blunder, bringing the confrontation with China to the breaking point³⁰.

Khrushchev was succeeded by **Leonid Brezhnev**, whose style was the opposite of his predecessor's. Under Brezhnev, the USSR steered a more cautious course, seeking to avoid major flare-ups. The foreign policy process was more institutionalised, with diplomats, representatives of CPSU Central Committee departments, military officers and even expert institutions invited to take part in decision making and implementation. It is well documented that international issues, primarily those related to détente, were discussed in detail at Politburo meetings³¹. Information sharing was set up between related agencies. The new foreign policy planning process is clearly traceable in the archive documents. In

²⁹ Quenoy P. Du. The Role of Foreign Affairs in the Fall of Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964. *The International History Review* 25. No. 2. June, 2003. P. 334–356.

³⁰ Torkunov A.V., Wohlforth W.C., Martynov B.F., eds. *History of International Relations and Russian Foreign Policy in the 20th Century*. Volume 1. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

³¹ Липкин М.А. Советский Союз и интеграционные процессы в Европе: середина 1940-х – конец 1960-х годов. М.: Русский фонд содействия образованию и науке, 2016 (Lipkin M.A., *The Soviet Union and the Integration Processes in Europe: the mid-1940s – late 1960s*. Moscow, Russian Fund in Support of Education and Science, 2016).

1969, following an escalation of the USSR-PRC border conflict, a comprehensive document revising the USSR's foreign policy with all countries was approved.

But even this system was no guarantee against mistakes and miscalculations. On December 8, 1979, for example, the “smaller Politburo” composed of KGB Chairman Yury Andropov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, chief ideologist Mikhail Suslov and Defence Minister Dmitry Ustinov held a meeting in Moscow to discuss whether or not to send troops to Afghanistan. After much hesitation, the participants decided to send a limited Soviet contingent to the neighbouring country, a decision which later proved one of the USSR's greatest foreign policy failures³².

Third-country influence on crises

A matter that still needs more consideration is the role of third countries in aggravating Cold War crises. Countries allied to the superpowers as well as non-aligned states were not voiceless understudies. Not infrequently, they instigated crises or influenced their patrons in some other fashion. While the reality of bipolarity predominated, that did not rule out cases of the tail wagging the dog.

“The crisis will inevitably break out within 24 or 72 hours. And if... the imperialists conquer Cuba after all, the danger of this aggressive policy is so great that following this event the Soviet Union must not allow the emergence of circumstances, under which the imperialists' first nuclear attack will become possible”, Fidel Castro wrote to Nikita

³² Сажин В. 39 лет вводу советских войск в Афганистан. Как это было. Международная жизнь. (Sazhin V. 39 years of Soviet troops entering Afghanistan. How it was. International life) 25.12. 2018. URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/21332?ysclid=l5lboczw2d712871150>.

Khrushchev in 1962³³. In fact, he was egging the Soviet leader on to order a pre-emptive strike on the US. The quote shows one of the most important tricks third countries used to steer developments in crises between major powers. As is clear, this influence could be highly destabilising.

Meanwhile, superpowers often exerted a calming influence on their clients, among others. A case in point is the 1968 crisis in which the North Korean military seized a US reconnaissance ship, the USS Pueblo. Despite its broader confrontation with the United States, the Soviet Union mediated between Washington and Pyongyang, trying to convince them to avoid escalation.

The role of small states in the structure of great-power interaction changed radically during the latter half of the 20th century. At an early stage in the Cold War, the key players were still the leaders of the two blocs. For example, the USA and the USSR were the powers that determined the fate of Germany during the series of Berlin crises, with local political elites playing a limited role.

But as the Cold War progressed, the role of third countries expanded. Under Brezhnev, for example, the Soviet Union actually began looping in Warsaw Treaty Organisation allies on some of its foreign policy decisions. Positions held by the allies exerted considerable influence on Moscow³⁴. Leaders of the “people’s democracies” were vying for the right to discuss the USSR’s most important foreign policy actions. Shortly before the beginning of the Czechoslovak crisis in 1968, Brezhnev had to take into account the position of the leaders of the GDR, Poland and Hungary, who, amid the din of contradictory voices and views in Moscow, were favouring a tough line.

Soviet foreign policy planning became increasingly focused on how to preserve the USSR’s high status in the eyes of its allies. For

³³ Quoted after Макарычев М. Фидель Кастро. Жизнь замечательных людей. М.: Молодая гвардия, 2017 (Makarychev M., Fidel Castro. Biography Series. Moscow, Molodaya Gvardiya Publishers, 2017).

³⁴ Липкин М.А. Советский Союз и интеграционные процессы в Европе: середина 1940-х – конец 1960-х годов. М.: Русский фонд содействия образованию и науке, 2016 (Lipkin M.A., The Soviet Union and Integration Processes in Europe: mid-1940s – the late 1960s, Moscow, Russian Foundation for Science and Education, 2016).

example, Moscow thought better of joining the Asian Development Bank for fear of damaging its image in the eyes of Beijing and opening itself up to criticism that the USSR was straying from its anti-imperialist course³⁵. Occasionally the USSR itself was a drag on small countries' development. The triumph of détente and the emergence of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) triggered the start of integration talks between CMEA and the Commission of the European Communities. But the failure to establish economic ties between these two key organizations was due to the impossibility of a direct relationship between the Communities and the CMEA member states, that is, a relationship free from Soviet control. Moscow would not accept that.

The no less important role of junior allies was on display in their attempts to reform Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Poland, for example, suggested that the main guidelines and principles underlying the organisation be specified. In particular, the allies wanted to delimit the jurisdiction of CMEA as a whole and the exclusive purview of national agencies in each country (e. g. the right to determine import and export volumes corresponding to their domestic needs). At first sight, this looked like national egoism and a wish to undermine CMEA. But a detailed study of archives indicates that it was rather a proposal to optimise its performance by delimiting functions in a way that would free CMEA from getting bogged down in secondary matters.

The significance of third countries is clearly traceable in the dynamics of the alliances. It is commonly believed that a great power's allies are always satellites deprived of sovereignty. But the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis show the hegemon being led by the nose toward conflict. Besides, relations between North and South Korea show that the Cold War influenced not only interaction between the great powers but also rivalry among the other members of the competing camps. The Koreans, both in the north and south, held subordinate positions in the Soviet and Western blocs, but occasionally acted independently.

³⁵ Ibid.

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Despite the vast difference existing between the international system now and during the era of bipolarity, the lessons of 20th century crises are still applicable for today's politicians. Both Russia's National Security Strategy 2021³⁶ and the US Interim National Security Strategic Guidance 2021 speak about a return of "power rivalries" and "interstate confrontation" against the background of growing internationalisation of regional conflicts and the great powers paying increased attention thereto³⁷.

Upon consideration, the Ukraine conflict in its current phase is much more reminiscent of the Cold War crises than the interventions that occurred during the decades after the collapse of bipolarity. On the one hand, we see combat operations conducted by the forces of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics as well as Russia, on the other – operations by the armed forces of Ukraine that are getting support (military, technical, reconnaissance, information, political and economic) from NATO and the EU. This is why the Cold War record looms larger than ever before, as we enter a system of relations based on mutual hostility.

First, history shows that it is necessary to competently calculate the risks and rule out emotional decisions or comments which could provoke the opponent into taking equally ill-considered steps.

Second, the raising of stakes should be accompanied with open lines of communication with the opponent, sending signals about further intentions, and being aware of overlapping interests, in spite of the rivalry.

³⁶Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.07.2021 г. № 400 «О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации» // Президент России. 02.07.2021 (Executive Order by the President of the Russian Federation of July 2, 2021, No. 400 On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation // President of Russia. 02.07.2021). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046>.

³⁷Renewing America's Advantages. Interim National Security Strategic Guidance. The White House. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> .

Third, the tactics of artificially creating uncertainty remain are still in play. But foreign policy unpredictability should be based on an awareness of the acceptable limits of escalation.

Fourth, it is necessary to take into consideration the contradictory influence of third countries on great power struggles, including their destabilising impact on relations between bigger players.

Thus, given the return to strategic confrontation, the events of the 20th century serve as a valuable guide of sorts and a source of crisis management tools. This guide contains a lot of illustrative examples showing what practices and mechanisms proved their worth and which did not.

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