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No, this is not another Cold War

Emma Ashford

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After a tumultuous nine months of tense relations with the West, Russia finished 2014 under western sanctions and with a substantially weakened currency. The Crimean peninsula is under Russian occupation, while Eastern Ukraine remains a conflict zone.

Unfortunately, too many are heralding the start of a ‘new Cold War,’ an analogy which recasts all Russian-American interactions as hostile, restricting our ability to negotiate with Russia more broadly.

The elder statesman Mikhail Gorbachev recently became the latest in a long line of commentators to publicly describe ongoing tensions between Russia and the United States as the brink of a “new Cold War.”

Senior American officials have made similar comments, including Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who in July said she believed U.S.-Russia relations had again reached a Cold War level of tension. In an impressive feat of hyperbole, Wikipedia even has an article entitled “Cold War II,” describing the recent confrontation between Russia and the West as the “Colder War.”

In reality, comparing today’s squabbles with the Cold War is foolish. Putin’s Russia may be authoritarian and corrupt, but its ideology poses little threat to the United States. More importantly, Russia is no longer a great power, nor a genuine military threat to the United States. Even with its nuclear arsenal, Russia today is at best a regional power, capable of threatening its neighbors but with neither the military nor economic might to challenge the United States.

Further, while the Soviet Union had limited economic ties with the United States and Western Europe, today’s Russian economy is strongly linked with that of Europe, one reason why this year’s sanctions have actually proved damaging.

Ultimately, today’s disagreement between Russia and the West largely centers on one issue: NATO expansion, and whether states which border Russia have the right to choose their own path. Western politicians see no reason why Ukraine cannot choose Western-style democracy and NATO membership, while Russia balks at the security ramifications of NATO expanding to

its borders. There may be disagreement between Russia and the West on other issues (i.e., Syria, or missile defense), but these are not so intractable.

Treating the Ukraine crisis as the introduction to a new Cold War owes much to the fact that peoples' views of new conflicts are informed by their understanding of prior conflicts.

Political science research demonstrates that leaders often rationalize their decisions by making analogies to prior crises.

Policymakers also frequently use historical analogies to justify their choices. This tendency is alive and well today. British Prime Minister David Cameron drew such an allusion in September, reportedly telling European leaders that they “run the risk of repeating the mistakes made in Munich in '38.”

A number of other European and U.S. policymakers have drawn similar parallels. Thus policymakers, many of whom lived through the late Cold War period, are likely to see the conflict through that lens, recasting Russia as the ‘old enemy’ and viewing the current crisis as an existential threat, even when it doesn't come close.

The Ukraine Freedom Support Act, recently signed into law, is a case in point. Although the stated purpose of the legislation is to provide support to Ukraine, the bill broadens sanctions on Russia to include other issues.

In addition to permitting the president to arm Ukraine, it directs the president to hold Russia accountable for violations of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty and to sanction any Russian company found to be selling weapons to Syria's government. Neither issue has any bearing on Russia's conduct in Ukraine and their inclusion in this bill has the potential to undermine diplomatic progress on these issues by tying them to the quagmire in Ukraine.

The more we rehash Cold War-era ideas, the more likely we are to end up in a similar standoff. Containment, for example, is being continually put forth as a solution to the situation in Ukraine. Far from a shrewd strategic vision, this mindset exemplifies the obtuse U.S. approach toward Russia, which has no clear goal other than forcing Moscow to back down. Russia's complete capitulation is improbable, yet the possibility of a negotiated solution to the Ukraine crisis remains mostly unconsidered.

It is unlikely that Russia and the West will be able to achieve a productive and cooperative relationship in the near future, even if the Ukraine crisis is solved. But relying on Cold War analogies is self-defeating, limiting our policy options and preventing constructive diplomacy in other areas of U.S.-Russian relations.

Emma Ashford is a visiting research fellow at the Cato Institute.