

• Author: [Vladislav Inozemtsev](#)

Presumption of confrontation



Recent events have given rise to the claim that “the world is on the verge of a new arms race and another cold war”. Russia is perceived by many politicians in the West as a resurgent “evil empire”. Are such statements well-grounded and how might this new confrontation end?

[Most political scientists](#) both in Russia and abroad are striving to convince themselves as well as others that a “cold war” has not yet started whilst referring to its definition: a form of global, ideologically motivated conflict. However, definitions pertaining to past eras do not necessarily translate automatically to today’s world and country like Russia does not necessarily have to have dozens of allies and attractive concepts in order to inflict a serious headache on the world. The country’s leadership points to the [fact](#) that: “the great power status has become a part of our genetic makeup, and so we want to be at the heart of greater Eurasia [while] the subcontinent of Europe will also belong to this Eurasia”. I believe it’s important to recognize one conspicuous fact: Vladimir Putin develops his policy based on a “presumption of confrontation” with the West. This means that the outcomes of such policy should not be underestimated and content should be considered critical here and not definitions.

One can assert with confidence that Russia and the West do not consider each other friends. They are playing a zero-sum game in a bid to divide spheres of influence, obtain allies and employ increasingly aggressive rhetoric against the enemy. Such an attitude would be more fitting of the reality of the second half of the 20th century rather than today’s global world. One should focus therefore not on whether a new “cold war” has broken out but rather on what possible outcomes the confrontation may bring.

The most pertinent question which remains unanswered is whether the parties are prepared to escalate the “cold” war to a “hot” war should it be necessary. In my opinion, the answer is obvious: they are not. And, in this case, I speak of Russia. To begin with, the broad mobilization taking place in the country today would appear merely imaginary: no one would welcome an open military conflict in which dozens of Russian soldiers are killed daily. Such an operation, even if carried out in a remote region, would surely vaporize the massive support enjoyed by the government over the course of several months. Secondly, Russia’s ability to conduct fully-fledged military operations is limited: according to experts, Russia is capable of deploying a maximum contingent 40-50 thousand soldiers at the forefront. Such numbers are insufficient to secure victory even in Syria, not to mention larger-scale conflicts. Thirdly, the possibility of embarking on a large-scale non-nuclear war was considered during the Soviet era. Taking into account the correlation between the Russian armed forces and those even of individual NATO countries nowadays, such an option would appear purely illusory and even Kim Jong-un would not go so far as to resort to a nuclear attack. All this means that the “cold war” is being waged by Russia solely in order to achieve political and not military goals.

The objective of such a policy is twofold.

The first and primary objective is to provoke the Western world as much as possible by undertaking actions which violate international law but do not prompt a retaliatory response from the West. Compare the reaction of the global community to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 to that prompted by the annexation of Crimea. Putin understands only too well that few would dare start a war against Russia and thus, he expertly takes advantage of the situation. Russia has been involved in war crimes in Syria and is cognizant of its total

impunity. At the same time, officially, Russia plays the role of helper, coming to the aide of the legitimate government in its hour of need. The Kremlin's objective is to provoke the West to take the following reactionary measures: deployment of more numerous armed detachments close to Russia's borders; increased support of neighboring countries hostile towards Moscow; increased "anti-Russian propaganda". If successful, the Kremlin will be gifted an "aggressive West" in the face of which Russians will be left with no alternative than to rally around their president. This is precisely the main aim of those who helm us towards a new "cold war" and we remain on course to reach this destination unhindered.

The second objective concerns the sphere of economics. The closer the impending military peril, the more natural the mobilization model of national economy management seems. Under these circumstances, no one would oppose increased spending on defense, the broadening of the scope of powers of state-owned corporations, tax hikes or additional restrictions on the freedom of entrepreneurship. Moreover, one should not forget that up to one third of the total number of workers employed in Russia's manufacturing industry [work](#) in the defense industry or associated enterprises. Therefore, ensuring the smooth functioning of this sector in the future constitutes a major economic and political task. Putin and his entourage [believe](#) (albeit perhaps wrongly) that defense industry expansion would provide a boost to the finance and technology sectors. Hence, the development of this industry is seemingly an overt manifestation of Russia's growing aggression.

Meanwhile, it is precisely in the economic sphere that the answer to the question *vis-à-vis* the outcome of the new confrontation between Russia and the West should be sought. Defense spending included in the federal budget rose from 209.4 billion rubles in 2001 to 3.08 trillion rubles in 2015. At the current dollar exchange rate, this amounts to an increase by more than 6.7 times, meaning military expenditure skyrocketed from 1.6% to 5.4% of GDP. Currently, Russia is on a par with Israel in terms military spending as a proportion of GDP and is eclipsing Germany 4.5-fold, China - 2.8-fold and the US - 1.6-fold also [according](#) to SIPRI. Russia seeks to restore its military presence abroad: it has already been [legitimized in Syria](#) and may well achieve the same [in other countries](#) in the coming years. Russia has consistently demonstrated its ability to develop new types of weapons (Armata-type tanks, hypersonic Zircon cruise missiles, radio-electronic weapons etc.) and carries out an increasing number of tests of new equipment.

Russia has actively relieved itself of its international obligations considered unnecessary by the Kremlin (including the agreement with the US on weapons-grade plutonium) with increased frequency of late and it sees nothing wrong in violating agreements such as the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances or the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation of May 31, 1997.

Nowadays, many analysts weigh up the costs and threats stemming from Russia's foreign military escapades in political terms. In my opinion, they are misguided with respect to the crux of the matter. Operations in Crimea, Donbas, Syria or separatist regions of Georgia [will not seriously undermine](#) Russia's economic potential. What is more, the sanctions in their current form are not causing significant harm to Russia, [on the contrary](#). Direct military clashes between Russia and Western countries in "hot spots" are possible but are unlikely to escalate into a fully-fledged war (it suffices to recall the incident involving the Russian bomber in Turkey) and so I refrain from terrifying people with talk of the expansion of Russia's military presence abroad not to mention "World War 3".

The dominant threat lies within the country itself. In addition to increased military spending (which, let me reiterate, does little to "reboot" economy which is in a state of crisis), the entire system of governance has acquired a quasi-military style - a style characterized by the tendency to put all hands on deck, inefficiency, and unscrupulousness. Planned implementation of a given process (of building the Vostochny Cosmodrome let's say) has been replaced by (as was observed in the abovementioned case) personnel reshuffles; progress in the absence of plans and schedules; meetings held at night to add a sense of drama; imprisonments and investigations; unaccomplished projects delivered "pro forma". The extra billions spent on "defending" the country against illusory threats raises little concern given the dozens of billions wasted through inefficient management and derisory "investment" decisions. Effectiveness is not a matter of concern in a "near-combat" situation. In my opinion, it is precisely the utter disregard for efficiency, inveterate in the entire "chain" of the Russian system of governance, which constitutes the key objective of Putin's policy.

The Soviet Union, pined after by the Kremlin, was involved in dozens of regional conflicts. However, this was not what determined its fate. Direct clashes with the strategic enemy may have occurred many times during the years of the first “cold war” but they did not. Military expenditure amounted to 14% of GDP in the 1960s and 1970s but this did not bring about the destruction of Soviet economy either. The collapse of the Soviet system occurred since the entire national economy gradually came to operate as a totally ineffective machine which relied heavily on injections of oil revenue. Oil revenues propped up the economy for some time, but the system collapsed as soon as they dried up.

We are reliving the past today. It has been said that no matter what kind of party the Kremlin builds, it will eventually turn out to be the Communist Party. Along similar lines, we may say that no matter how many different ways Moscow forges its relations with the West, it will eventually come up with the “cold war”. This war is now under way even though it may be considered a parody in comparison to the last one, just as United Russia is a parody of the Communist Party. Its consequences, however, shall be identical to those of the last “cold war”: destruction of the national economy, impoverishment of the masses, terrible (albeit perhaps temporary) disappointments and failed superpower ambitions. By all appearances, there is no chance of getting rid of the current regime without bankrupting the country. That is why the new arms race would appear to be a natural step towards an irrevocably changed Russia.

Western politicians should also take this into account. Neither could the Soviet Union, nor can the Russian Federation, be defeated in a military conflict. However, it is possible for them to capsize during a process which destroys their economy and society from within. This was expertly accomplished in the days of the first “cold war” and it is beginning to happen again, during this second “cold war”. Under the circumstances, the West should not strive to come to terms with Russia but rather to provoke it so that it does not deviate from its path, heaven forbid, since Russia is heading for the same fate it suffered at the end of the 1980s and military might will do little to halt its course.

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