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# The Rise of a New Hegemonic Conflict: UNITED STATES and USSR 1945-1950

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Keith E. Patton

“There are now two great nations in the world which, starting from different points, seem to be advancing toward the same goal: the Russians and the Anglo-Americans. Both have grown in obscurity, and while the world’s attention was occupied elsewhere, they have suddenly taken their place among the leading nations, making the world take note of their birth and of their greatness almost at the same instant. Their point of departure is different and their paths diverse; nevertheless, each seems called by some secret desire of Providence one day to hold in its hands the destinies of half the world.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” - Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, III:31-33

“we must first examine our own political aim and that of the enemy. We must gauge the character and abilities of its government and do the same in regard to our own. Finally, we must evaluate the political sympathies of other states” – Clausewitz, *On War*, pg. 585-586

From 1945 to 1950, as World War II drew to a close and the Cold War began, Soviet leaders did a better job assessing the United States as their adversary. First, they were able to exploit United States ideology to consolidate their gains without resistance. Second, the United States’ reactive strategy of containment was based on a flawed reassessment. Third, the USSR was better able to undermine United States strategy. While the United States did assess some aspects of the struggle astutely, and eventually triumphed, it was despite rather than because of the imperfect early assessments.

## Ideology: Isolationism, and International Liberalism vs. Realpolitik

“A hegemonic war generally involves all of the states in a system... the fundamental issues to be decided are the leadership and structure of the international system.” Robert Gilpin, *Theory of Hegemonic Warfare*, pg.601

“Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” – *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Vol. II, pp. 224*

“It follows that it was not a very remarkable action [to] accept an empire that was offered us, and refused to give it up under the pressure of three of the strongest motives, fear, honor, and interest” - Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 1.76 (pg.43)

As victory in World War II (WW-II) dawned, the USSR adroitly assessed the United States would proceed with a sense of optimism in the belief that that peace depended on the spread of democracy, national interests were compatible with international norms, and states would hold to the same ethical standards as people.<sup>1</sup> The USSR was able to exploit this naiveté of a democracy newly arriving on the international stage. First, the USSR self-assessed its strategic requirements and determined how far the USSR could go without overextension. These actions were in the tradition of historical European Realpolitik diplomacy. Second, the USSR correctly assessed it could count on United States international liberalism not to intervene effectively. Third, the USSR was able to use Realpolitik to exploit United States internationalism.

The USSR was motivated by Thucydides’ primal motives of fear, honor, and interest, rebranded by Colin Gray as fear, culture, and interest.<sup>2</sup> Having just fought a terrible war in which it was only able to survive with Western aid, the USSR dreaded being in such a position ever again. To forestall reoccurrence, the Soviet Union strategy was to bifurcate Germany to prevent its resurgence, recover reparations to reestablish its peacetime economy, and establish buffer states all along its periphery to insulate the Soviet Union from threats. In many ways, this was similar to how

European peace had been secured before: reducing the power of the losing nation, extracting reparations and establishing buffers. The USSR pressed its military advantage at the end of WW-II to seize as much buffer territory as possible and consolidate its power before the United States could intervene. When the USSR seemed to push too far in Greece and Turkey, and with recalcitrant Yugoslavia, it was able to extricate herself without being politically or militarily overextended. In the end, the USSR got what it wanted: Soviet borders were secure from European threats and its only effective rival was an ocean away.

The USSR also correctly assessed it could rely on United States' character to provide time to consolidate Soviet security. The United States was an isolationist and reluctant hegemonic power. At the end of World War I (WW-I), the United States was economically and militarily poised to become a superpower.<sup>3</sup> The United States was a champion of self-determination via Wilson's fourteen points and the League of Nations at the conclusion of WW-I. However, the United States did not forcibly back the fourteen points, nor join the League of Nations it championed. Defying the logic of ancient Athens, the United States walked away from the potential of empire.<sup>4</sup> The culture of the people did not embrace overseas entanglements. In WW-II, the United States again was a reluctant power, once again joining the conflict late and only after being attacked. The United States pursued the war methodically and did not surge forward during the land war in Europe when it could have. During the formative years of the Cold War, the USSR shrewdly assessed that it could press its early advantages due to United States political reluctance to interfere, and military inability to interfere without rearmament.

The USSR assessment led to exploiting the United States' concepts of international liberalism. For the Soviet Union, security was based on elimination of challengers, balance of

power, and Realpolitik. The United States believed security was built on the liberal values of collective, not individual, good. Consistent with its efforts after WW-I, the United States pushed for a multilateral, democratic approach to the ordering of the post-WW-II world. The United States naively hoped the USSR would abide by liberal and multilateral ideals, such as those embodied in the Atlantic Charter. The charter was to create a balance of power in which four nations (US, UK, USSR, and China) would serve as the stewards of world peace, or at least in their spheres of influence. Stalin, like Russian Tsar Alexander I before him, simply told the United States what it wanted to hear, and planned to do what Stalin wanted.<sup>5</sup> As Stalin told his foreign minister, who was concerned with allowing democratic elections in Eastern Europe, “We can deal with it in our own way later. The point is correlation of forces.”<sup>6</sup> The United States desire for liberal self-determination was satisfied, but with Soviet troops occupying Eastern Europe, it was relatively easy for Stalin to ensure leaders to his liking ascended to power in countries liberated from Nazi rule.

The US, eager to draw down after the war, had no will to interfere effectively. The Soviet Union surmised that the United States and its partners would be too preoccupied with Japan or establishing order on their own side to notice the Iron Curtain descending. While the United States struggled for a liberal international order, the USSR played hard power with the guns of its troops and began reordering Eastern Europe far more to its liking. The United States was slow to recognize this and respond.

## United States Failures in the Early Cold War: Flawed Reassessment

“The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking.” Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* 88-89

“The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable” – Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 1.23 (pg.16)

Just as Sparta realized that its former ally Athens had turned its league into a rival empire after the war against Persia, the United States realized the USSR’s recovery from WW-II was rapidly creating a new authoritarian hegemonic rival. The United States needed to reassess its erstwhile ally. However, the reassessment had several key flaws. One, it relied on the overly optimistic projection of United States nuclear dominance. Two, it saw the USSR as a puppet-master over cohesive world communism. Third, the reassessment was also poorly applied as the United States intervened in areas not deemed essential to United States security, such as Korea.

The United States incorrectly assumed that it would maintain a nuclear monopoly for a generation.<sup>7</sup> This mistake was compounded by the United States’ incorrectly assessing that its superiority would make the USSR more malleable in negotiations.<sup>8</sup> The USSR correctly interpreted the United States nuclear monopoly as an existential threat and hardened their negotiation stance. Thus, the flawed United States assessment was a dangerous illusion that contributed to, and intensified, the Cold War.<sup>9</sup> With the United States nuclear monopoly broken after only four years, the USSR was able to exert far greater control over the escalation ladder of conflict. The USSR could use revolution, conventional war, limited war, or total war with nuclear weapons and the United States did not perceive it had superiority in any after the Soviet test. Even if the United States maintained nuclear superiority, historical strategic bombing campaigns suggested that the

results would fail to deliver a Clauswitzian decisive victory..<sup>10</sup> Had the United States assessed that the USSR would develop nuclear weapons quickly, she might have been able to lessen the political shock by investing more in both conventional military forces and civil defense to reduce the risk.

Another key failure of the United States assessment at the beginning of the Cold War was that it saw global Communism as a cohesive block controlled from Moscow. While Stalin desired such a system, it did not exist. During WW-II, Communist leaders like Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong had found common cause with the United States, just as Stalin had. Stalin dismissed Mao's movement as not being real Communists and "followers to marginal communism" in remarks to a US ambassador..<sup>11</sup> A US ambassador correctly evaluated the Chinese nationalists as a "short term investment" lacking "the intelligence or political strength to run postwar China.."..<sup>12</sup> At the conclusion of WW-II, Mao felt betrayed by the USSR's lack of support..<sup>13</sup> All of this should have led to an assessment that Soviet allies could be peeled away. After the war, the United States had an opportunity to be on better terms with Mao by not actively opposing him. Instead, the Chinese Communists felt the United States became a double-dealer instead of an honest broker..<sup>14</sup> The United States missed an opportunity to pry an ally away from Russia.

Finally, the United States' reassessment correctly identified several centers of industrial-military capability as being critical to United States security..<sup>15</sup> Despite this assessment, the United States intervened and fought wars outside these regions, incorrectly applying containment strategy globally rather than regionally. While the assessment was correct, its application was tragically flawed and drew the United States into conventional conflicts that further degraded its conventional military power and drained it economically, which was required for long-term stability and survival. The USSR did not make these assessment errors, letting proxy powers fight at far less direct cost.

The United States' reassessment failed to understand the nature of the Cold War conflict on which it was embarking, resulting in the United States fighting where unnecessary and with means inappropriate to the ends. The United States exacerbated USSR insecurities and raised the stakes of conflict while making diplomatic resolution less likely. The most damning evidence is that the author of the United States' assessment and strategy, George Kennan, disowned the military-centric view of containment. He considered this faulty assessment of how to counter the USSR as leading to a long and unnecessary Cold War..<sup>16</sup>

### International Dimension: Defeating the Enemy's Strategy

"You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield" – Col Summers, US Army on the Vietnam War

"That may be so. But it is also irrelevant." – Col Tu, North Vietnamese Army

"Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy." - Sun Tzu III-2

"Now when a Hegemonic King attacks a powerful state he makes it impossible for the enemy to concentrate. He overawes the enemy and prevents his allies from joining him." - Sun Tzu XI-52

Using its superior assessment, the USSR was better able to undermine the United States strategy than the United States was able to undermine the USSR's. The United States did not have an effective counter for communist revolutions. The United States spent billions trying to contain communism, yet Communism expanded with far less effort from the USSR. This USSR was an inheritor of the balance-of-power policies and great-power politicking of its Tsarist past. While the Tsars were not always successful, there was a long tradition of Russian European and hinterland diplomacy to draw upon. The United States was learning a new game in international diplomacy.

The United States' assessment did not have an effective a remedy for the Soviets' preferred method of expansion, internal revolution, without violating US internationalist liberalism ideals.



The United States expected liberal state self-determination to create a community of likeminded nations. By supporting insurgencies in Asia, Africa, South America, and the Middle East, the USSR was able force the United States to choose between supporting self-determination, and seeming hypocritical as it helped repress popular movements. In many cases, countries fell to communism in the coming decades. Some resisted, but none were reclaimed from communism. The USSR's superior assessment enabled these victories.

The USSR also assessed that world communism would triumph with little effort applied from Moscow. This assessment allowed the USSR to feel it was far less imperative to apply economic or military force to achieve its ends. It also allowed the USSR to conserve its resources, while the United States spent blood and treasure attempting to stem the perceived inevitable result. Indeed the United States wasted billions of dollars trying to prop up the nationalist Chinese and other countries..<sup>17</sup>

Responding militarily, and suppressing self-determination when it appeared to lean toward Communism, undermined United States strengths and played to the Soviet strategy. The USSR employed a form of offshore balancing against the United States. Ignoring Clausewitz's dictum, the United States response to the USSR was opening additional theaters with neither high probability of success nor the possibility of great rewards..<sup>18</sup> While other empires collapsed after WW-II because the imperial governments were unable or unwilling to hold them together, the Soviet empire was born despite US efforts. The fact that World War Three did not commence was because in Soviet foreign minister Molotov's words "...you had to know when to stop. I believe in this respect Stalin kept well within his limits".<sup>19</sup> The USSR correctly assessed where and when to push.

## United States Reassessment and Resurgence

“America’s conquests are made with the plowshare, Russia’s with the sword. To attain their aims, the former relies on personal interest and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of individuals. The latter in a sense concentrates the whole power of society in one man.” Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835

“Lastly, even the final decision of a whole war is not always to be regarded as absolute. The conquered state often sees in it only a passing evil, which may be repaired in after times by means of political combinations. How much this also must modify the degree of tension and the vigor of the efforts made is evident in itself..” Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, pg.80

While the USSR made a better assessment of the United States as an adversary than vice versa, in fact, the USSR failed on several important aspects and the United States succeeded. The USSR’s assessment focused too much on the short term, while in the long term the United States’ strategy proved successful. This was due to Soviet faith in inevitable victory, its missed assessment of the United States response, and policies that undermined Soviet control. As MacArthur would note, “there is no substitute for victory”.<sup>20</sup>

The foremost flaw in the USSR’s assessment was the assumption of the inevitability of its victory. Soviet ideology taught that capitalist democracies could not survive very long now that the revolution was underway. This belief seemed vindicated as Mao unexpectedly displaced the Nationalists in China, and then Ho Chi Minh seized power in Vietnam before the French returned. Communist movements grew in Europe. Belief in inevitable revolutions led the USSR to focus on aggressive military programs to defend its shortterm interests while the western world disintegrated. This focus on military over civilian economic growth fatally weakened the USSR in the long term. The United States widened its economic lead, which allowed it to close the military gap.

The USSR also failed to assess the United States' reaction to Soviet efforts to establish a security buffer. Stalin's policies of repression in Poland and East Germany, intimidation of Turkey, Berlin Blockade, and attempts to make Iran a client state turned latent fears of the Soviet Union into war scares for the United States. These policies helped foment the Cold War that would have been better avoided. The USSR was less prepared to endure in such a long term contest than the United States.

Not only did the Soviet repression generate fear in the West, but it also did not provide a stable security buffer for the USSR. Like Athens' using force to quell rebellious Poli, the USSR had to crack down on its satellite states from time to time. They were not true allies, but slaves to the Soviet system, slaves ready to rebel if given a chance. This contrasts with the US efforts via the Marshall Plan and other programs to build up willing allies. Unlike winning great powers before her, the United States spent her treasure to build up her defeated adversaries rather than demanding economic reparations. The United States made itself a more desirable partner through soft power than the oppressive Soviet regime, creating a reinforcing economic system. The USSR's assessment was fatally flawed in that it drastically overestimated the ability of Communism to spread into capitalist societies and its economic ability to survive until it did.

Forty years later, the Cold War was over, the USSR had collapsed under the economic strain of its efforts, and the United States stood alone as a global hegemon. One can say the United States assessment, despite its flaws, was far better than that of the USSR, based on the simple fact that she won and the USSR lost. The United States continued to develop economically and militarily, and the USSR collapsed due to grain and oil shortages..<sup>21</sup>

However, the Soviet's errors in assessment were more understandable than the ones the United States made. The USSR had good reason to believe its own rhetoric about the inevitable collapse of western imperial capitalism. The United States also feared imminent conflict, causing both to focus on the short term. Within a few years multiple countries became communist, while few embraced liberal internationalism. The USSR had to accept the economic risks and employ authoritarian control to survive in the short term. To have loosened control of satellites and focused on internal economics could have led to internal chaos, and the loss of her critical security buffer, while leaving the USSR vulnerable to either the death spasms of the west, or predatory counter revolutionary attacks. As the heart and rock of world communism, the USSR could not be left open to that vulnerability.

The USSR had been dependent on western aid during the war, and had no economic carrots to improve either its citizens' lives or those of the buffer states. The USSR had to seize economic assets from the buffer states to help its own economy, and seizures required occupation to enforce. These actions were both in the nature of Soviet ideology and required for survival. Success in the Cold War was not due to a superior United States assessment of its adversary; it was in spite of it. The United States employed the plowshare too little, and too late, to make a decisive difference at the end of WW-II. Like the British at the end of WW-I, the United States failed to weaken the USSR by detaching its satellites in Eastern Europe, Baltic nations, and the Caucasus.<sup>22</sup> US plowshares were later beaten into swords to wage war in Korea and Vietnam and to aid military efforts in Algeria and elsewhere. It was long after 1950 that the United States was able to reassess again and began playing the USSR and PRC off against one another, and the seeds of the Marshall

Plan began to bear fruit. The United States' assessment and strategy was superior due to lessons learned during the early years, and decades, of the Cold War, not at its beginning.

## Conclusion

The hegemonic struggle between the United States and the USSR had its roots in the decades before the Truman doctrine marked its start. The USSR better assessed its adversary and began taking actions to order the world as it wished before the United States realized what was happening. The USSR correctly assessed that the United States would not effectively resist Soviet Realpolitik domination of Eastern Europe. The United States, following a foreign policy based on idealism and pragmatism, miss assessed the USSR as being a potentially stabilizing partner in the post-war world. After the United States realized the growing threat of the USSR, the initial reassessment went too far, misunderstanding the level of control the USSR had over Communist movements and the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. This, in turn, caused the United States to push back aggressively and commit military force in theaters of peripheral value, or against opponents that could be co-opted. Even the United States' eventual success did not excuse the wasted time, talent, and treasure caused by the miss-assessments. That the USSR, an economically weak and ironfisted hegemon, was only able to endure as long as it did is partially a testament to the early effective assessments its leaders made.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pg.30

<sup>2</sup> Colin Gray “Mission Impossible, fear, culture, and interest: peacemaking 1943-1949” in *The Making of Peace* edited by Williamson Murray and Jim Lacey pg.266

<sup>3</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pg. 35

<sup>4</sup> Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 1.76 (pg.43)

<sup>5</sup> Professor Kevin McCranie, presentation to CNW at NWC, “Winning the Peace”, 26 AMR 2018

<sup>6</sup> *Molotov Remembers*, pg.51 *We Now Know*, pg 16

<sup>7</sup> Greg Herken “A Most Deadly Illusion: The Atomic Secret and American Nuclear Weapons Policy, 1945-1950. Pg.51

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, .pg73

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pg.75

<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win*. Pg. 316

<sup>11</sup> S.C.M. Paine, *The Wars For Asia*, Pg.238

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, Pg.234

<sup>13</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao’s China & the Cold War*, pg. 28

<sup>14</sup> Paine, pg.269

<sup>15</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pg.29

<sup>16</sup> Kennan “My thoughts about containment were of course distorted by the people who understood it and pursued it exclusively as a military concept; and I think that that, as much as any other cause, led to [the] 40 years of unnecessary, fearfully expensive and disoriented process of the Cold War.”

[http://www.johndclare.net/cold\\_war7\\_Kennan\\_interview.htm](http://www.johndclare.net/cold_war7_Kennan_interview.htm)

<sup>17</sup> Williamson Murray and Jim Lacey, *The Making of Peace*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pg. 278, 311

<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, pg. 618



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<sup>19</sup> *Molotov Remembers*, p.59 quoted in *We Now Know* pg 30

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Brodie, “Nuclear Weapons and Changing Strategic Outlooks”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 13, no. 12 (February 1957). Pg. 9

<sup>21</sup> Yegor Gaidar, “The Soviet Collapse: Grain and Oil,” posted version of a speech given at the American Enterprise Institute (April 2007). [http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/20070419\\_Gaidar.pdf](http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/20070419_Gaidar.pdf) Accessed 1 April 2018

<sup>22</sup> David Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, Pg.412