

# National Security Strategy: The Strategy of Containment

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January 1, 2014

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**Overview** We have studied some of the problems that the Soviet Union was interested in resolving. We now turn to the American analysis of Soviet conduct that underpinned the strategy of containment that the U.S. would pursue throughout the Cold War. We identify several serious defects in the logic, and ask whether alternatives were available. We then turn to several early examples of Russian behavior that illustrate the flaws in the doctrine but which were not picked up on by American policy-makers. We then discuss the reasons for this failure.

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We now know a little bit about where the Soviet Union was coming from and what problems its leaders thought most important. Recall that the formative experience of the communist state included coping with external aggression and internal disorder. Whenever the Soviets could not use force, they compromised, often capitulated. But everything else they solved with repression and the Red Army. The two main lessons Stalin took from the early years were (a) the West would jump at any chance to strangle the USSR, and (b) the nation could gear up for prosperity and build the communist utopia only through rapid self-sufficient industrialization.

From the late 1920s, the USSR began modernizing its military, throwing vast amounts of resources into an enormous armaments program. In secret cooperation with Germany (which was prohibited from having an army after World War I and was not supposed to have tanks), the Russians began developing new tanks, planes, artillery, and military doctrine. In short, the only way to survive the “capitalist encirclement” was to be strong, and Stalin was determined that the Soviet Union would be strong enough.

None of this could be had on the cheap, and the government began forced collectivization to ensure that the industrial workers were well-fed and clothed. The repression of the peasants was one of the most brutal and sordid episodes in the construction of the new state. It was repeated four decades later by the Chinese, with similarly disastrous consequences.

To ensure the loyalty of the armed forces, Stalin instituted bloody purges in the late 1930s, which destroyed the officer-corps and rendered the army leaderless. The consequences could be easily seen in the pathetic performance early in the Winter War with Finland in 1939, and during the first year of the war with Germany.

But despite all this, the Russians prevailed in the war. And now they found themselves facing a new opponent—the United States. This new enemy seemed determined to prevent the USSR from getting the two things it desired most: security and reconstruction. The two things deemed vital by its leaders and indeed deserved by the right of victory for which the Russians had paid dearly. Why were the Americans bent on such confrontation? Because of the way they perceived the Soviets. Unfortunately, there was no way for the Soviets to disabuse the Americans of their perceptions, and no way for the Americans to reassure the Russians either. The Cold War came about because of the clashing interests of the two giant nations, and because during the crucial formative years of this antagonism, there was no way to overcome to problems of asymmetric information.

As we have seen, American distrust of the Soviets went back to the October Revolution. Overt hostility lasted until 1933 when Roosevelt finally recognized the USSR, almost a decade after the rest of the world. Forced by circumstance into an alliance with Stalin, the West benefitted from the victory in Europe. Roosevelt seemed wise enough to acknowledge at least some need for accommodation with the victorious Soviets in Europe, but he died and the newcomer Truman was not up to the tasks of finer diplomacy.

The new president was an anti-communist who hated the Soviets and would suffer no extension of their influence beyond their borders. Byrnes, who failed to gain the Vice Presidency in Roosevelt's last election campaign, was also an ardent anti-communist politician who found in Truman a ready recipient of his views. His influence was pervasive and he was instrumental in the formulation of several exceptionally important policies, like the decision to use the nuclear weapons.

## **1 The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb**

The decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan was of historical importance and resulted in much of the apprehension the Soviet Union suffered after the war was over. The traditional account is that Truman decided to use the nukes to save American lives whose number has varied over the years from a low of about 150,000 to a high of over 1 million. The story goes like this: the dogged Japanese defense of Okinawa had demonstrated how costly it would be to conquer the home islands, which were scheduled for invasion in November 1945. So, Truman jumped at the opportunity to shorten the war and the U.S. won when the Japanese surrendered rather than face more devastation by the nuclear weapons.

The story, as it stands, misses several things. Japan was a defeated country as early as 1943, and everyone knew it, including most of the Japanese military. By 1945, its position had become untenable. The U.S. air raids had destroyed most of its economy, there was no fuel, no materials, no ships, nothing that Japan could use against the Americans. So why were the Japanese fighting instead of surrendering?

Because they hoped either to get the USSR to mediate some acceptable peace, or, failing that, to impose on the Americans costs sufficiently grievous to cause the U.S. to offer better terms. Recall that the Allies had agreed to seek unconditional surrender and this was made known to the Japanese. Many speculated that one condition that the U.S. could agree to was to allow the Japanese Emperor to retain his throne as a figurehead. Whether a promise not to harm the emperor would have sufficed to get the fanatical military commanders to agree to cease hostilities is, however, an open and debatable question.

The Japanese therefore pinned their hopes on the defense of the home islands and on Soviet mediation. The vaunted Kwantung Army was stationed in Manchuria and seemed a formidable defense force, at least in numbers of troops. While preparing for defense, the Japanese tried to approach Stalin to broker the peace. Stalin refused, wanting a part in the settlement for himself. He had promised Roosevelt back in January that the USSR would enter the Pacific War within three months after the end of the war in Europe; that is, some time around the middle of August. Stalin was therefore holding out for this moment where the victorious Red Army would provide him with some bargaining leverage and claims to spoils of conquest.

The Americans, who had broken the Japanese code, knew all about these over-

tures even though Stalin failed to transmit them. They knew the Japanese were ready to talk peace, but they would have none of it unless it was unconditional. So, the U.S. resolved to fight the war to the end. When Truman went to Potsdam in the summer of 1945, his main goal was to secure from Stalin the intervention commitment that Stalin had made to Roosevelt. Truman got Stalin's reassurances and wrote a triumphant letter to his wife where he boasted that this would save American lives.

For his part, Stalin was preparing to break the Non-Aggression Pact the USSR had signed with Japan after Khalkhin Gol, and which had kept the peace in the Far East between the two states throughout the war. Everyone knew very well that the entry of the USSR into the war would mean the rapid collapse of Japan, and perhaps its immediate surrender.

Then, while at Potsdam, Truman received news of the Trinity test in Alamogordo, New Mexico. The plutonium bomb worked and the U.S. was now officially in possession of the deadliest weapon ever devised by humanity. Truman casually informed Stalin about it, but the latter did not show any interest. He had already been very well informed (better than Truman) about the Manhattan Project through his spies. However, Stalin did not know that the U.S. was planning on using the atomic bomb in Japan.

The decision to use it was nearly automatic. There was never really much discussion whether the U.S. should use the bomb, only how and where. Although scientists had a pretty good idea about the strength of the blast itself, nobody really knew the long-term consequences or the damage radioactive fallout would cause. Byrnes was an especially strong advocate of the new weapon and ignored the nuclear scientists who tried to tell him that using the nuke in Japan without telling the Russians would be dangerous because it would frighten them and would cause a nuclear arms race. Byrnes, who saw everything in strictly political electoral terms, argued with Truman that the Americans would never forgive him if they believed that there was a way to save American lives that he chose not to use. Truman agreed in principle. However, it is not clear why this argument could be used to justify doing the bombing as a surprise to the Russians. The scientists, whom Byrnes had dismissed as crackpots, turned out to be absolutely right in their predictions. The Soviets were scared and they did immediately step up the race to get the bomb for themselves.

The July Potsdam Declaration reiterated the Allied commitment to unconditional surrender, dashing the Japanese hope for a Soviet mediation. The order to use the atomic bomb went back to Washington before the Japanese rejected the declaration. Truman himself hurried back, determined that the U.S. should now win the war without the pesky Russians, whose intervention was no longer necessary.

The first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. It killed 70,000 of its inhabitants and vaporized much of the city. Untold numbers of civilians died later from the radiation fallout. Violence toward civilians was nothing new at this

point in the war. Both sides had engaged in decidedly vicious behavior aimed at exterminating enemy civilians in large numbers, a development in warfare distinctly new and quite regrettable. The Nazis murdered people by the millions, and the Allies murdered people by the millions as well. The well-known fire-bombings of Dresden and Tokyo are just two examples. In fact, the fire-bombing worked so well that the Navy did not want to use the atomic bomb: the destruction could be had with conventional bombs too! The fire-bombing of Tokyo did kill more people than each of the atomic bombs.

The nuclear devastation was total, made even worse by the fact that Hiroshima, like Nagasaki, was purposefully spared by the U.S. air force from bombing so that the full impact of the new weapon could be studied in an unspoiled environment. The targeting committee had carefully picked and preserved four cities for the purpose. The goal was not to destroy military installations, but kill civilians in order to frighten the government and break the morale of the resistance. The ancient capital of Kyoto was one of the chosen cities, which the committee picked because its citizens were thought to be more intelligent, and hence better able to appreciate the full horror of the devastation.

The destruction of Hiroshima did not produce the desired effect. The Japanese were confused, thinking that the Americans were using petrol and burning them somehow. Nobody could imagine the terrible power of the nuclear weapon. The peace party in the government tried to convene the military council and talk about the consequence of the blast, but the commanders refused, saying that this was just a propaganda ploy by the Americans and that at any rate they were ready to fight to defend the homeland.

Stalin was just as surprised by the nuke as the Japanese. Instead of August 15, which was the scheduled date for the Soviet invasion, he ordered the Red Army to advance into Manchuria on the 8th. The superior Soviet troops made mincemeat of the Kwantung Army in hours. The last hope for a better peace through imposition of high costs or Soviet mediation that the Japanese had harbored was shattered. Upon receiving the news of the Soviet invasion and the collapse of the best army, the Japanese government convened to discuss surrender.

While the talks were going on, the news of the destruction of Nagasaki by the second atomic bomb arrived, strengthening Emperor's resolve sufficiently to enable him to order the military to surrender. On August 15, Japan capitulated unconditionally to the Americans. Although the Emperor was allowed to keep his throne, the promise was never made in public (it could not have been made for the American people would treat any concessions to the Japanese as treason). The war in the Pacific was over.

The one side unhappy about the situation was the USSR. They were deprived of any role in the settlement of the Japanese question by the preemption of the Americans. Furthermore, the U.S. revealed itself as not only possessing nuclear capability, but also as being ready and willing to use it. The Russians were afraid,

upset, and suspicious. No wonder that the scientists' predictions came true when the Soviets started a nuclear race that would consume both countries for the next 40 years.

## 2 The Doctrine of Containment

The most famous analysis of Soviet behavior and goals appeared in July 1947 in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. It was anonymous, signed by "X," but its author quickly became known. His name was George Kennan, a Soviet specialist, and a career diplomat at the State Department. The Truman administration took to heart his warnings, and the doctrine of containment Kennan championed became the fundamental strategy of the country throughout the Cold War.

Kennan actually wrote another important piece known as the "Long Telegram," which he sent on February 22, 1946 from Moscow. You should read both analyses, which are on the course website. We shall cover the telegram briefly and then look in some detail at the article.

The telegram is divided into five parts of which the first and the last are perhaps most important. Kennan argued that (a) the Soviets live in "capitalist encirclement" and (2) even though capitalist wars were inevitable, the Soviet Union might benefit from them and from using sympathetic elements in the West. Thus, everything must be done to further Soviet interests, especially by splitting Western powers and supporting sympathizers among the population.

**NOTE: draw parallels with later NSC-69 and its idea to undermine USSR from within!**

This is not earth-shattering stuff. In fact, if one removes the references to Marxism, Kennan's summary boils down to the following: the Soviets perceive the West as hostile and they will pursue what's in their best interest by trying to cope with this hostility with divide-and-conquer strategies. As we've seen, there were some reasons for the Soviet perception of western hostility—they were double-crossed several times, bullied, and otherwise treated in a manner inconsistent not only with their legitimate interests but even with the high moral claims of the Western powers. After all, the U.S. had suffered in the war the least of the Big Three but gained the most. As for the second part, any policy maker who works contrary to the interests of his own country would be quartered in just about every place in the world, the West included.

From these relatively free of controversy premises, however, Kennan reached a startling conclusion—there can be no permanent peaceful coexistence between communism and capitalism. Why?

Kennan cited Stalin's speech from 1927, in which Stalin had articulated the basics of Marxism-Leninism. He said that socialism and capitalism will form two centers in world politics and each will draw to itself various adherents. He concluded that

whoever wins the battle for the world economy will decide the fate of capitalism and socialism.

Kennan argued that even though, in principle, peaceful coexistence was possible, the Soviets would not see it, leaving no room for compromise with them. One might wonder whether there was a way to impress on the Soviets that compromise was desirable if peaceful coexistence was, in fact, possible. A strategy of reassurance and partial accommodation might do so unless the adversary was irretrievably committed to a policy that made peaceful coexistence impossible. This is exactly what Kennan thought the communists were like: fanatics that could not be reasoned with. It therefore followed that the Soviet Union was committed forever to the destruction of the U.S.

Since there was nothing one could do about changing the communists, the U.S. must adopt a position of force, with all the firmness and vigor it could muster. In the end, the U.S. had to do more or less exactly what Kennan had accused the Russians of doing, including propaganda sponsored by the government, manipulation, lack of compromise, and faith in one's own righteousness.

"The Sources of Soviet Conduct" presented a more extensive analysis along the same lines, in which he attempted a better integration of ideology and security politics. He summarized the basic tenets of communism as follows:

1. the most important factor that determines public life is the economic system, especially who owns the means of production and who owns his labor;
2. the capitalist system is bad because the owners of capital invariably exploit the working class and the system does not distribute the material goods fairly
3. capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction because its success is premised on ever-expanding demands for markets and resources, which eventually will result in imperialism and lead to conflict among the imperial powers
4. the inter-capitalist war will lead to revolutions and the working-class will take over the means of production (communism).

For people who may have been used to thinking about communism in wholly negative terms it will come as a surprise that almost everything above was true at the time the doctrine was invented. Workers did tend to live in abysmal conditions all around the world, the Western states were competing for colonies, and this was producing frequent armed clashes. Some even thought that World War I was the imperialist war that Marxism-Leninism was prophesying. Not surprisingly, to many the doctrine appeared basically sound. The point here is not to say that communism is good or that capitalism is bad. The point is that Kennan chose to emphasize not the economic aspects of the doctrine (arguably the most important ones) but the

very last step in it: the claim that capitalism will not perish on its own and will need a revolutionary push.

Kennan thought that communists had concentrated on revolution instead of development. When they seized power in Russia in 1917, they did not know what to do. Despite Lenin's New Economic Policy which relaxed the initial communication, his successor Stalin was, in Kennan's words, an insecure man whose "brand of fanaticism, unmodified by any of the Anglo-Saxon traditions of compromise, was too fierce and too jealous to envisage any permanent sharing of power." It was this that caused the widespread repression.

But, as I noted before, repression began during the civil war and escalated in earnest with collectivization, which was driven by the need to industrialize quickly and protect the country. The severity and brutality of this process alienated many and the army, an entity on which the regime depended for survival, also became suspect. Stalin repressed the military as well—the process was self-perpetuating until it was halted by the fear it generated. People had become docile and unwilling to challenge the authority of the state. Only then could the state relax a bit (as it did).

Suppression was exceedingly brutal, there's no question about it. It was unlike anything that had happened or even could happen in a democratic country. But is the difference between capitalism and communism? After all, there are authoritarian regimes in capitalist states—and these tend to be quite repressive as well, and there are democracies with strong socialist leanings, like Sweden, and these tend to be quite peaceful and non-repressive.

Perhaps the difference was not capitalism vs. communism but democracy vs. totalitarianism. Perhaps repression was necessary at the beginning, perhaps some repression was also necessary for the rapid industrialization. However, it was by no means obvious that the Soviet Union had to stay totalitarian forever, and maybe one should not be quick in equating the economic system with the political organization, especially in the long term. On the other hand, it is not hard to see why people in the West were really worried about that connection at the time, long-term prospects in particular appeared quite grim. It is probably easy to see today that economic development probably does lead to democracy in the long run. However, the first half of the 20th century had demonstrated quite the opposite: totalitarian (USSR) and authoritarian (Nazism) regimes had delivered economic development very quickly compared to the feeble democracies. Policy makers had no way of knowing that democracy could even survive against the dynamic economic and military expansion of non-democracies. It is worth bearing all this in mind when you think about where these people were coming from.

Kennan concludes that the Soviet leaders would never be able to dispense with the apparatus of suppression. Furthermore, these leaders could never deviate from the precepts of communism, for doing so would undermine their claims to legitimacy. But this was false both in practice (as we shall see in the Iran and China

cases) and theory—if you controlled everything, you could legitimize almost anything. Kennan perceived ideology as a wrapper and thought that it could only be used to legitimize dictatorial powers and hence disallow accommodation with the West. But communist ideology is very flexible—you can rationalize just about any policy you want to adopt for other reasons (security or economic). Lenin had no trouble rationalizing giving up the most important part of the country to the Germans in 1918; Stalin had no trouble justifying the Nazi-Soviet pact despite the oft-repeated antagonistic positions between the two; neither did the Russians have any problems abandoning Mao or the Iranian communists. All of this was always, without exception, justified in good Marxist-Leninist language. Ideology could easily go either way.

It is also worth pondering for the moment the linking of repression and legitimacy. If a regime is legitimate, it should not need to coerce what it demands from the people. That's what legitimacy means, otherwise it is simple coercion. If the communist government is legitimate (in the sense that this status is granted to it by the citizens), then the need for coercion would vanish. Conversely, if it is not legitimate, then it would certainly need to repress in order to stay in power. Hence, we have a contradiction: either the government represses because it is actually illegitimate—in which case it is unclear why ideology should remain inflexible (as it is apparently not working to legitimize the regime as is), or it will become legitimate—in which case it is unclear why it would need to continue repressing the citizens. Kennan never solved (or even addressed) this apparent contradiction, but it should be clear that he needs both permanent repression and ideological constancy to establish his conclusions.

From these premises, Kennan reasons that the basic antagonism (1) resulted from the communist ideology, and (2) would remain forever. Thus, the “Kremlin’s conduct of foreign policy: the secretiveness, the lack of frankness, the duplicity, the war suspiciousness, and the basic unfriendliness of purpose” all were here and here to stay with no chance of change in sight.

**basically K says USSR ideologue, never to be trusted: so US would not reassure and would not believe any signals of reassurance until it uses his interpretation**

He then discusses the concept of the Kremlin’s infallibility. He notes that “truth is not a constant but is actually created... by the Soviet leaders themselves. It may vary from week to week, from month to month.” If this was so (and it was—the ideological wrapper helped), then it should have been possible to find a *modus vivendi* with the Russians: whatever their present truth happens to be, if they see a good enough deal, the Soviets could find some new truth tomorrow to justify that deal; and the new truth will be just as good Marxist-Leninist as the old. But this is not what Kennan concludes. Instead, he reasons that “the accumulative effect of these factors is to give to the whole subordinate apparatus of Soviet power an unshakable stubbornness and steadfastness in its orientation.” (While it is true that

only the Kremlin could change policy, especially in the realm of diplomacy, it's not clear how this is different from other countries. No state allows its diplomats to do things that the government doesn't like or agree to.)

Another important component of Kennan's analysis is the notion that the Russians do not operate on a fine schedule. Even though their philosophy tells them that communism must eventually triumph over capitalism, it says nothing about when this would happen. There was no pressure to engineer world revolutions (unlike what many thought the Soviet Union was sworn to do, and unlike the Chinese who did later promote such revolutions, much to Soviet dislike) and the foreign policies could require "great caution and flexibility," as they did. Because the Soviets do not work on a deadline, they could afford temporary setbacks in their gradual movement toward their ultimate goal. As Kennan put it, the Soviets would feel "no compunction about retreating in the face of superior force." In other words, the U.S. could rely on force, if it was necessary, without being afraid that the Russians would become unreasonable. His best-known summary of Soviet policy is worth repeating:

The Kremlin has no compunction about retreating in the face of superior force. And being under the compulsion of no timetable, it does not get panicky under the necessity of such retreat. Its political action is a fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. Its main concern is to make sure that it has filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power. But if it finds unassailable barriers in its path, it accepts these philosophically and accommodates itself to them. The main thing is that there should always be pressure, increasing constant pressure, toward the desired goal. There is no trace of any feeling in Soviet psychology that goal must be reached at any given time...

In these circumstances it is clear that the main element of any United States' policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies...

[T]he Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points."

Since such a policy could not be discouraged by any individual victory, the U.S. had to constantly discourage the Soviets. Thus Kennan recommended an open-ended policy of military and economic confrontation with the Soviets at any point in the world where they seemed to be trying to gain or expand their influence. If one imagines the Soviet expansion as a fluid trying to fill up a room, then one would

expect it to flow around obstacles, following the path of least resistance. It would stop when an obstacle gets thrown up in its way, but it will then try to find another way to flow. In a sense, one would have to keep throwing obstacles at every point where the fluid seems to be making headway to prevent it from filling up the room.

In a sense, containment was not an aggressive policy for it was basically reactive in nature. The U.S. would not go around looking for communists to hunt but instead would mind its own business until it sees evidence of attempted expansion. It would then have to react vigorously, possibly with threats to use force or some limited application of force, to get the communists to abandon their attempt at expansion. Note how this assumes that the U.S. would be able to identify correctly such expansionist attempts; that it wouldn't, for example, mistake a nationalist uprising for a communist coup. It also leaves the definition of what constitutes an attempt of expansion in the hands of policy makers who are both subjective and prone to thinking in worst-case terms. Their task would be especially difficult because, as Kennan argued, these attempts at expansion will not be too aggressive in themselves. Almost certainly not aggressive enough to reveal the nature of the attempt, at least not if the Soviets are not prepared to follow through. The reason is that if it is a probe, then the Soviets would want to retreat and claim plausible deniability for reasons of prestige, if nothing else. The probes would be murky, cautious, and eminently deniable, making their identification very hard indeed.

Kennan was optimistic about the end of this competition, however. The analogy with the fluid helps see why: one must only keep containing it while there is pressure to expand. But this requires internal dynamism and ability to do so. If the Soviet Union runs out of steam, to mix some metaphors here, then the pressure would ease. Kennan reasoned that in the end the West would win because its economy was stronger and its political system was better. It would not happen in the foreseeable future, and the U.S. "must regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner in the political arena." But to help the process along, the U.S. should also seek to influence the internal developments in the Soviet Union and turn public opinion against its communist government. Thus, in addition to the open-ended commitment to counter with force the Russians anywhere around the world at any time, he thought it would be possible to work simultaneously to destroy their political system from within, through economic and political means not unlike the ones he had accused the Soviets of using in his long Telegram.

### **3 Alternatives to Containment**

Despite its flaws, containment had an appeal that some of the alternatives did not. It was not overly aggressive for it did not seek to start a war or destroy communism in one. It was also not a do-nothing policy that would abandon the world to its own devices. As a middle way between doing too much (which was very risky

and potentially extremely costly) or doing too little (which could have seriously deleterious long-term consequences), containment promised some sort of balance. But was it the only way to achieve it?

In Kennan's view, the Soviet ideology and economic system essentially committed them to a policy that would be antagonistic to the U.S., meaning that world politics had become a zero-sum game: every gain for one side meant an automatic loss for the other. In these games, there is no way to cooperate for cooperation requires some degree of commonality of interests. There have to be gains to be divided in a way that does not necessarily hurt one or both actors.

There are at least two possibilities to consider here. First, it could be that world politics was not zero-sum although not in a way that could profit either actor. For instance, it could be that some countries could be non-Communist and anti-American (Libya), or Communist and anti-Soviet (Albania, China, Yugoslavia), or anti-democratic but pro-American (Saudi Arabia, Egypt), or would be neither pro-American nor pro-Communist (much of Latin America). In other words, if the world is not easily divided into two hostile camps, then there should be little reason to worry that one or the other power would gobble it up. With containment, the tendency would be to interpret any challenge to a pro-American position as evidence of communist expansion, with the result that in its effort to prevent the Soviet Union from "filling ever nook and cranny in the basin of world politics," the U.S. would end up trying to fill those nooks and crannies itself. (The Soviets, who did not have much illusions about the extent to which some of the "fraternal" regimes actually disliked them, had a better grasp on the cold and harsh reality of the situation.)

Second, it could be that world politics really is not zero-sum in a way that could profit both actors. At the very basic level, for instance, they had a common interest in cooperating to avoid general war between themselves. Plausibly, they could find basis for cooperation on other issues, such as restricting nuclear proliferation or limiting the testing and stockpiling of nuclear weapons. The policy of containment would necessarily make many of these possibilities difficult to explore for the basic reason that it denied that genuine common interests existed (anything that looked like one was in reality a temporary truce until the communists found another way to expand), and that reactions should be vigorous and threaten force (or else the communists would not retreat). Both of these features were likely to sour the relations, greatly diminishing the prospects of cooperation even if there were any.

But were there any alternatives to containment? Let's review what the U.S. believed about the Soviets and what it wanted to achieve. The USSR was a country that had just emerged from the most serious war ever fought. It was badly scarred, in need of reconstruction and security, and it yet was denied its fundamental right to create a protective barrier between itself and the hostile Western Europe. In addition to its security requirements that ran counter to the interests of the Westerners who were loath to see such a large chunk of Europe fall into Soviet hands, the communist economic system was incompatible with the globalization goals of the U.S.

One alternative to containment was *isolationism*: abandon Europe to its own destiny, much like the U.S. had done after the end of the First World War. Retreating in isolationism, however, was simply not seen as an option at the time. Most people believed that it was this retreat from the world that contributed to the massive economic collapse in the 1920s that produced Nazism and yet another war. With the decline of the British Empire (which was completely wrecked financially), the United States really had no ally in Europe powerful enough to help prevent encroachments on its interests. Europe had to be helped (we shall see next time how), and that meant dealing with the Soviet Union.

Another alternative to containment was *rollback*, the forceful ejection of the Soviets from any territory outside of the USSR. There was no stomach for such an aggressive policy, however. Most Americans had been taught by war propaganda to regard the Russians as allies. An abrupt switch to hostility would not go over well with the public, especially when it would mean hundreds of thousands troops not returning home but dying in swamps across Europe for no good reason. The Red Army was too powerful to be swept aside, and the European allies would probably be uncooperative to say the least.

But abandonment (too little) and rollback (too much) were not the only alternatives. Some experienced analysts in the U.S. argued strongly against containment. Among the most prominent was Walter Lippman, who wrote a short book called *The Cold War* where he argued that what appeared as Communist expansion was actually the result of traditional Russian quest for security. Lippman argued that ideology had always been secondary and used after the fact in order to justify policies based mostly on economic thinking and designed to prevent certain threats. Lippman reasoned that the Soviets could be bargained with and predicted that the consequences of containment would be “unending intervention in all the countries that are supposed to ‘contain’ the Soviet Union.” Instead of getting the Red Army out of Europe by inducing the Soviets to withdraw, a threatening posture would ensure that the Red Army would stay to protect Soviet interests.

*Engagement* (bargain with the Soviets) was then the third alternative that some very perceptive and respected analysts suggested at the time. Negotiation was possible as long as the U.S. was prepared (like Britain) to recognize some security concerns the Russians had. Meeting them half way would have opened the road to constructive interaction. But Lippman was ignored—the Truman administration adopted containment as the overarching long-term strategy for the U.S. It ignored evidence that it could reason with the Soviets and concentrated on countering the Communist threat everywhere, mostly by military means. One huge problem with Lippman’s approach is that it could prove to be very costly if he was wrong about the Soviets. A policy of limited accommodation would enable them to expand their influence to a degree that could make it very difficult to counter should they then decide to exploit the advantage. Without more evidence about their ultimate goal, such a policy would be self-defeating in the long run. In fact, as we shall see,

some of the evidence the West did observe justified their thinking about the Soviets about being fundamentally hostile but also opportunistic: they would try to expand on the cheap but would not risk major confrontations in doing so, i.e., exactly as containment envisioned them doing.

It is difficult to be confident about the degree to which containment solved the problems it was premised on and caused these problems. As we shall see, once a policy is predicated on an assumption of basic hostility of the opponent, the vigorous actions it prescribes in dealing with encroachments could very well provoke exactly the type of responses that could justify the original premise. This could be so even if the opponent was not actually hostile to begin with. As the U.S. began countering what looked like Soviet expansionist attempts throughout the world, the Soviet Union perceived the U.S. as attempting to fill every nook and cranny, encircling the USSR, and encroaching on Soviet interests everywhere. With a hostile American opponent like this, more vigorous counter-action would be necessary for the Americans appeared a little too ready to use force or threaten to do so in order to settle disputes.

Our problem is that we may never know what “really” the Soviets wanted and what “really” the American ultimate goal was. But in a sense, that is precisely the explanation of the Cold War: it is this uncertainty that caused policy-makers on both sides to take prudential actions that appeared necessary given what they believed their adversary was up to. To complicate matters further, as we shall shortly see, the evidence furnished by observable behavior was interpreted within the framework of mind that already existed, and in the absence of credible information about the reasons the other acted the way it did, there was no way to correct the mounting misperception. This made the policies of the superpowers self-fulfilling prophecies in which earlier acts provoked reactions that were then used to justify retrospectively the premises on which those earlier actions were taken. As an explanation, this can suffice, but if one is after “what could have been,” then it might be unsatisfactory.

## **4 Early Soviet Behavior**

We now turn to three early confrontations before Soviet attitude had hardened against the Americans and before the Americans had become resolved to implement containment. All three illustrate how interested the Soviets were in their security, and how relatively uninterested they were in ideological expansion. In two important cases, the Soviets betrayed fellow communists in order to gain economic and security advantages from capitalists. In the third, they attempted to secure concession from Turkey and retreated when they realized that they were risking war. That was a genuine probe but had nothing to do with ideology.

#### **4.1 Soviet Betrayal of Mao**

By the end of World War II, the communists under Mao Tse-tung (Zedong) controlled about 1/5 of China. They had been outnumbered 5 to 1 in 1935 by the nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek. But their influence and numbers were steadily growing because of woeful mismanagement and corruption of Chiang's government. The U.S. poured over a billion dollars in aid to Chiang, which he squandered instead of allaying the peasants' problems. The peasants comprised 4/5 of the population and when they began turning to Mao, the communists gained ground.

The U.S. was afraid that with Soviet support, the communists would triumph. So Truman developed a policy of separating Mao from Moscow. In return for substantial concessions in Asia (lease of Port Arthur, joint Sino-Soviet operation of the vitally important and lucrative Chinese Eastern and South Manchurian railroads, possession of Southern Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands), Stalin signed a Treaty of Friendship and Alliance with Chiang and instructed Mao to collaborate with him.

Mao was furious: it had become obvious that the Soviet Union preferred a chaotic and divided China (which couldn't threaten the Soviet Union) to a united China, even if it meant unification under supposedly fraternal communists. Contrary to what an ideological interpretation would require, Stalin did not support the communists in China. There was another, also political, reason for this: if China became united and Communist, then, as the most numerous nation, it could challenge the USSR for primacy in the communist camp.

As a side note, it is puzzling that U.S. analysts ignored this potential source of discord as well as the great bitterness produced by the Soviet betrayal when they later insisted on treating the Soviet Union and China as a communist monolith as opposed to two countries jealously guarding their security and prestige despite happening to share the same ideology. It is puzzling because it was the U.S., after all, that had engineered the first rift. It would take several decades before it would attempt to do so again, this time by befriending China.

#### **4.2 Soviet Betrayal of the Azeri Communists in Iran**

The Soviets also betrayed another friendly ally, this time in Iran. In this case, Stalin actually encouraged the fellow communists to revolt so that he could abandon them when they had served their purpose.

Throughout the war Iran had provided a crucially important land route for American supplies traveling to the Soviet Union. In 1942, the Big Three had agreed to, and occupied Iran jointly to ensure that this line remained open. In 1943, at the conference in Tehran, Indochina was also placed under the three-power trusteeship (which produced the divisions of Vietnam and Korea). FDR assured Stalin several times that Russian interests in post-war Iran would be adequately protected.

And important interests they were. Iran had vast oil reserves, especially in the South. By 1946, British Shell and two American companies (Sindair Oil, Standard Vacuum) had obtained significant oil concessions in the South from the pro-Western Shah. Now the Russians demanded equal treatment in the North: They wanted oil concessions approximately equal to those of the British. The Shah refused.

The Soviets, whose army was still in North Iran, decided not to coerce the Shah with military threats. Instead, they resolved on putting political pressure through the Iranian parliament. The parliament, however, was pro-Western and the Iranian communist party, the Tudeh, which took its orders from Moscow did not have much influence. Certainly not enough to swing a vote in Soviet favor. So, the Soviets had to find a way of getting enough sympathetic Iranians elected to the parliament.

They did two things. First, they created a new communist party in Northern Iran with a base among the Azerbaijanian population there (Azerbaijan itself, which borders on Iran, was a Soviet republic and part of the USSR). This they did despite the bitter opposition of the traditional communist party which saw nothing but a rival in the new creation. Second, the Soviets allowed a revolt in Northern Iran and then refused to permit the Shah's troops to access the region to put it down. This was also intended to bring pressure on the Shah to agree to the concessions. Quite tellingly, the Soviets absolutely refused to support any pro-independence movement in the region (there was much talk among the Azerbaijani Iranians of separating from Iran). What's more, Stalin expressly forbade any such actions and refused talk about incorporating the region into southern Azerbaijan.

The U.S. State Department became very concerned. It was widely believed that the Soviets were on the move, acquiring territories that would get them to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean (i.e. what the Tsars and Tsaritsas had tried for centuries). Washington decided to bring the Iranian case to the U.N. and also get tough on the Soviets. The U.N. initiative foundered among acrimonious recrimination in the new Security Council. Secretary of State Byrnes then threatened the Soviets to withdraw from the country or else.

While the diplomatic exchanges were going on, the distressed Shah agreed to a deal with the Russians: the Soviets would withdraw their troops and drop the demand for concessions, and the Iranians would set up a joint stock oil company with majority Soviet ownership. The company was to be approved by the new parliament within 6 months. The Soviets accepted and decided to withdraw before the U.S. threats were announced. Still, since the troop withdrawal took time, the timing of the action (March 1946), made it look as if the USSR had bowed to American pressure and had acted under duress.

Recently declassified Soviet documents show that this was not the case: the Russians had simply secured a promise to obtain what they wanted. When the Red Army withdrew, the Shah's troops put down the revolt by drowning it in blood. When the Azerbaijani communist leader wrote to Stalin and accused him of betrayal, Stalin shrugged it off and responded that the revolt was necessary to bring

pressure on the Shah and was thus for good communist cause. He also noted that the Red Army could not stay for, as he added for good measure, it was needed to defend the revolutionary cause elsewhere.

Thus, the Iranian communists were abandoned. Within several months, the nationalist parliament rejected the joint company. The Iranians had double-crossed the Soviets. What's worse, the Soviet Union had suffered a major diplomatic setback because in diplomacy appearances count and it appeared that it was the U.S. threat that caused the Soviets to withdraw. The British and the Americans kept their oil concessions. The Soviets did not try to re-invade Iran to impose a resolution and having betrayed their allies in the North, they could not hope for much support for other strategies either. It was an unmitigated disaster.

### **4.3 Soviet Probe: The Turkish Crisis**

The Russians suffered another blow in Turkey. The two countries had often quarreled (going back to the times when one was the Russian empire and the other the Ottoman Empire) over control of the Turkish straits — Bosphorus and Dardanelles, the straits that connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The straits were vitally important to the Russians because they provided the single sea line from their only warm water port of Sevastopol to the trade routes of the Mediterranean (and from there—to the rest of the world). Blocking the straits meant that no supplies could be shipped to Russia and this had caused the Russians to lose a major war with Britain and France in 1854 (the Crimean War). Naturally, then, the Soviets were quite concerned with the straits as well.

In early 1945 Stalin revived the demand for partnership with the Turks in the control of the straits. Both FDR and Churchill had reassured Stalin that they recognized the Russian need for access to the Mediterranean. (Note the common theme, while the war lasted, everyone wanted the Red Army to go on fighting. Once the war was over, everybody wanted it to disappear). By 1945, just like in Iran, they had changed their minds.

In June 1945, the Soviets presented their terms to the Turks. They were rather extravagant: in addition to a revision of the convention governing the straits (which would be acceptable), they also demanded the cession of two provinces, and joint defense of the straits (that is, military bases on Turkish soil). The Turks rejected the demand and prepared to fight. This demand was almost certainly a probe: the Soviets wanted to know just how much they could extract on the cheap. Britain, whose interests were most directly threatened by Soviets moves in the Middle East, was too weak to fight. The question, therefore, boiled down to estimating just how far the U.S. was prepared to go. There was, of course, much danger in a successful Soviet fait accompli: the Baltic states were absorbed after the USSR first placed military bases there. British intelligence reported ominous movements of Soviets troops in Rumania and Bulgaria, with rumors of an imminent surprise attack on

Turkey.

The initial war scare of early 1946 went by and the crisis eased up a bit (even as the US had begun planning for World War III and the Soviets maintained their hostile tone in the press toward Turkey and continued naval maneuvers off its coast) until August 7, 1946. On this date, a Soviet note again demanded a revision of the convention governing the straits and their joint defense. Interestingly, this actually represented a recession from the initial terms because no mention was made of the two provinces. However, the U.S. policy-makers, beleaguered for months by a torrent of dispatches regarding suspicious Soviet troops movements in the area, went into crisis mode.

Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson interpreted this as a threat to Germany and an attempt to dominate Turkey. Acheson advised that if Turkey was allowed to be intimidated, “the whole Near and Middle East” would collapse—the so-called *Domino Theory*. If the Middle East was allowed to fall, Britain would have to fight or lose its empire, and given its military weakness relative to the Soviets, it would probably acquiesce to the latter, leading to the collapse of the last bulwark against Soviet expansion in Eurasia. In other words, unless the U.S. made a stand in Turkey, it would have to fight the Russians after they have conquered the entire continent. Accordingly, Truman’s administration began earnest preparations for war. As the President put it, “we might as well find out whether the Russians were bent on world conquest now as in five or ten years.” Based on the reports arriving in Washington (as it will turn out later, the crucial one from British intelligence was erroneous), the administration’s fear of Soviet invasion of Turkey was well justified. Correspondingly, the American preparation for war over Turkey was genuine.

The U.S. reinforced the American naval unit in the Mediterranean and “FDR,” the most powerful U.S. carrier, moved into the area. However, it was perhaps the information about Truman’s resolve to stand firm that Stalin received from his spy in Washington that clinched the non-aggression deal. On September 24, Stalin abruptly turned conciliatory, claimed that there was absolutely no danger of war, and affirmed his belief in peaceful coexistence. The crisis was suddenly over, and the Soviet attempt to dominate Turkey had failed.

In the U.S., the crisis reinforced the impression from the Iranian case: the Soviets were attempting to expand, but would retreat in front of determined resistance and the threat of force. The Soviets, who thought that their sacrifices in the war entitled them to at least the same concessions as the Western Allies were getting, were thwarted.

The Soviet probes pushed the Americans, who were until then quite pragmatic and somewhat willing to overlook even the communist takeover of Eastern Europe, into a confrontational position for there appeared to be no limit to Soviet designs. It was a bizarre policy for Stalin to pursue given that available evidence reveals no preparations for war with Turkey. It must have been a blow to communist doctrine too: after all, it envisioned that the two capitalist states (U.S. and Britain) should

come into imperialist conflict over the Middle East, and the USSR would be able to exploit this inevitable antagonism to its advantage. The Turkey episode did the opposite: it consolidated the Anglo-American bloc and served to move Turkey ever closer to the West. This crisis was another unmitigated disaster for the Soviets.

## 5 Conclusion: The Origins of the Cold War

The Russians felt (and were) entitled to gains from their victory in Europe. They wanted a protective belt that would erect a barrier through the route traditionally used by Western armies invading Russian territory. They wanted to be able to extract compensation from the conquered German lands and use the resources to rebuild the country. They wanted access to shipping lanes through the Mediterranean, which implied control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus. They were denied any role in the settlement in the Far East. Although the USSR declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria, the Americans were careful to exclude everyone but themselves from the disposition of the Empire of Japan. When the Russians pressed to get their security barrier, recognizing in return British influence in Greece, they were opposed at every step.

As you can see, this interpretation sees the USSR as a **security-seeking**, rather than an ideologue, country whose main interests were in ensuring its safety from perceived Western hostility and possible future aggression, and who wanted to rebuild its economy, preferably with the help of reparations from the conquered territories in Germany. In terms of security, the Soviets wanted a buffer of friendly states to protect them in the West, and since history had shown that democracies would turn anti-Soviet, they wanted to install communist governments that would depend on Moscow for their existence, and would therefore be counted upon to be loyal. It bears repeating that Central and Eastern Europeans did not find this logic compelling, they would rather live in a democratic capitalist state than under the Russian boot. So this explanation does nothing to condone Soviet actions, it is an attempt to understand them.

The other possible interpretation was that the USSR was an **ideology-driven** revolutionary force that was unrelentingly hostile to the basic political and economic organization of Western societies, and that would exploit every opportunity to undermine them until the entire world is converted to its preferred social and economic organization. Despite concessions in China that enraged their fellow communists, the Soviets were perceived as being bent on exporting their ideology. When they did not press their advantage in Iran, they were thought to have backed down because of American threats. When they first pressured Turkey over the straits and then retreated, they were believed to have attempted expansionism, and their attempt was thought frustrated by vigorous American action.

All of this does not mean, of course, that the Soviets were all kosher, even if they

subordinated ideology to power politics. For one, Stalin's ruthless interpretation of "balance of power" meant that he probably expected the world to be divided into spheres of influence and control, with the USSR grabbing not just significant chunks of Europe, but also the Middle East, and Asia. Just as he was prepared to recognize Western interests in their own "zones," he fully expected to be given a free hand in what he considered his own playground. Recalling his assertion about the imposition of one's social system on populations one controls, this invariably meant the expansion of Soviet-controlled communism in these territories.

Although there were legitimate security concerns, it was not at all clear just how far the buffer would have to extend to make the Soviets feel adequately protected. For example, did it mean that Turkey should be part of their sphere? Or Iran? It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Stalin would attempt to grab as much territories (or influence) as possible, as long as that could be done without risking war with the United States and justified in the name of security. While the Iranian case seems to have been an instance where the Russians retreated because of the promises they had been able to extract from the Iranians, the Turkish case almost certainly represents a withdrawal due to a realization that America was going to stand firm.

In the end, Soviet actions only convinced the Americans that they were dealing with a crafty opponent who would test every possible weakness in Western defenses. An opponent who would stop at nothing in its quest for world domination. An opponent whose ideology and goals were thoroughly incompatible with the American way of life. Such an opponent had to be neutralized. But his Red Army was too strong. Therefore, it had to be contained through the use of force or the threats to use force because this was the only language it understood.

**Note how American containment effort also strengthens Soviet perception that they are threatened, so it pushes them to try to fill nooks/crannies to prevent encirclement.**

In an important sense, the Russians did understand only force but because their problems were so important that they could not simply give in without a try. Furthermore, the willingness to use force that the U.S. displayed early on perpetuated the Soviet belief that the Western camp was irreconcilably opposed to the existence of the USSR. That it was bent on denying it the basic fruits of victory the Red Army had won at great sacrifice. The Soviets became convinced that the only way to claim their reward was through a show of strength, a contest with the West. Such a contest would inevitably have a military dimension because the Americans apparently would not hesitate to use force in pursuit of their interests. Thus, the Soviets had to reply in kind. But when they did try the language of force, they only confirmed American suspicions that they were a crafty enemy who would never stop until it has conquered the world.

So why did all of this happen? Was there a way to distinguish a security-seeking USSR with whom accommodation was possible from an ideology-driven one with

whom compromise was impossible? Conversely, was there a way for the Soviets to distinguish an ideology-driven West that was bent on its destruction from a security-minded West whose fears it was possible to allay? The tragedy of the period is that it was very unlikely for such mutual revelation to happen: the Cold War could have been, in large part, a consequence not of ideological aggressiveness on either side, but on security concerns, asymmetric information about one's own preferences, and an inability to build confidence and credibly reveal that information to the other side.

Imagine the American perspective: the USSR can be either security-seeking or expansionist (two types), and we are uncertain as to which type we are facing. We would want to accommodate the former, but want to resist the latter. We are likely to dismiss statements of its leaders claiming that they are not interested in world revolution: words are cheap, and an expansionist would have incentives to lie and conceal his true motives so that he does not have to deal with immediate opposition. The only way the USSR could credibly signal to the US its type was to take actions that an expansionist would not take: separating strategies would then convey the necessary information to the Americans, much like we have seen it happen in our crisis escalation game.

Unfortunately, much like in our crisis escalation game, the actions of a security-seeking USSR were almost wholly consistent with actions that an expansionist ideological enemy would take: undermining governments, installing puppet regimes through force, suspicions of the West, and unwillingness to retreat when pressured. In other words, this was pooling behavior, and hence no new information was being conveyed. The Americans had to depend on their priors and interpret Soviet behavior in their light. Only a costly signal by a security-seeking USSR would work—for example, letting Poland go democratic—but precisely because such a thing was so costly due to the risk the Russians thought it carried that they were unwilling to try it. This, coupled with the unfortunate timing of several incidents we have seen and with the more adventurous probes, meant that the only cases where their behavior could have been perceived as an attempt to find an accommodation would produce the exact opposite result as they were interpreted as attempts to expand that were only prevented by the threat of force.

The other way to demonstrate desire for peaceful coexistence was to actually coexist in peace, and let the weight of accumulated experience work as evidence of one's intentions. This almost happened in the 1960-70s, but this was twenty years in the future, so one cannot blame the Americans for now being willing to take the risk. And a grave risk it seemed at the time: the dynamic communist state not only survived the brutal war, but it emerged victorious, and with a triumphant military machine that nobody could challenge. Its basic philosophy seemed vindicated, and it was expected to assert itself globally in a way it could not have done before. Since its fundamental economic organization was absolutely contrary to market capitalism and its political organization to democracy, further encroachments on

the world scene were deemed inimical to U.S. interests.

For their own part, the Russians could not have seen that the West probably did not desire the destruction of the USSR. Sure, there was plenty of fervent anti-communist talk that sometimes turned bellicose (as there was plenty of fervent anti-capitalist talk that sometimes turned bellicose in the USSR). But fundamentally, it seems highly unlikely that the West would want to spend billions to confront one of the mightiest military forces in the world (soon in possession of nuclear weapons). In fact, as I argued above, if the West could be persuaded that the Soviets posed no danger, it was very likely that they would actually seek some less confrontational way of dealing with them.

But how was the West to convey all this to the Russians? Put yourself in Soviet shoes now. You might be facing one of two types of America: security-seeking type who needs to be reassured and with whom you can deal, and an ideology-driven one who wants to destroy you. Of course, you would discount any verbal statements on principles and democracy, and would insist on some action that would demonstrate the true preferences and intent of the U.S., action that would separate the security-seeking type from the ideologue. As before, this would need to be a costly signal, something that an ideologue would not do under any circumstances. For example, recognizing the basic security interests of the Soviets in Europe and in the Middle East, interests that must have appeared to the Russians to be self-evident. However, given its priors, the U.S. judged the risks required for such separation to be too high, practically ensuring that the Soviets would infer that it is the ideologue who is pooling with the security-seeking type.

After the Second World War, it was not at all clear that the Americans would supplant the British and French in their various possessions and commitments around the world. From the Soviet perspective, it made a lot of sense to probe the extent to which the West would reassert its prewar preeminence in the Near East and Asia. The necessity to screen out whether America was truly committed meant engaging in risky actions that would rest its resolve without actually causing war. If the probe worked, then the Soviets could enjoy the fruits of victory on the cheap. If it failed, then they could turn to better strategies, or try elsewhere... almost no harm done. But great harm was done, for every succeeding probe would simply reinforce American suspicions about fanatic ideologically-driven expansion regardless of the actual reasons for retreat.

People always want to apportion blame for unpleasant historical events. The historiography of the Cold War is no exception. The reasoning provided here should show why blaming either the Americans or the Soviets for that protracted confrontation is far from straightforward. We can never know what could have been had alternative policies been pursued. We cannot use outcomes that happened decades after the 1940s to reason back and infer that the same policies would have succeeded in that environment as well. It is entirely possible that the preferences of one or both antagonists evolved over time, making possible actions that had been previously

unthinkable.

The traditional view in the West was that the Soviet Union was an expansionist ideologue that confronted a security-seeking West. The revisionist histories of the 1960s asserted that the opposite was true: a security-seeking Soviet Union was driven to self-defense by the imperialist expansionist policies of the West. The post-revisionist histories simply split the difference and blamed both sides equally: power politics was bad whether it was pursued for capitalist or communist reasons. The post-post-revisionist view is that neither side was to blame: it was all a grand misunderstanding, a tragic spiral of hostility arising from misperception, lack of communication, and mistakes.

In my view, we simply cannot tell which of these versions is correct. And in a way, it does not matter. The relevant questions are (1) why the Cold War happened, and (2) could it have been averted? What the “objective reality” was in terms of preferences matters only peripherally for the answers for the simple reasons that the Cold War happened because policy-makers pursued certain policies, and these were based on images of the opponent that might have been only tenuously connected to that objective reality. One might wish to argue that these images were wrong, and indeed that is what the various schools of thought have been doing for decades, but for an explanation of the Cold War, it is not necessary. For that, we need to explain why policy-makers made the choices they did.

The uncertainties, the risks, and the complexities that confront policy-makers were inherent in the international environment in which they operated. Things that appear as mistakes in retrospect were probably regarded as the safer courses of action at the time. It is worth emphasizing that if we were to find ourselves back then, knowing only what these policy-makers knew at the time they made their decisions, we would very likely reach similar conclusions and implement similar policies. Sometimes no amount of wishful thinking and rationality can avoid ending up in situations that are bad for everyone involved.

Notice that to answer the second question, we also do not actually need to ascertain the “true” preferences of the two sides. If we could show that whatever their preferences, the informational and strategic constraints under which they operated would have forced the actors into essentially the same behavior, then the Cold War would have been unavoidable.

Since we have assumed that if one actor is an expansionist ideologue, the other would prefer to confront him regardless of his own preferences, the Cold War could have only been avoided, in principle, if neither was an ideologue. So let us assume, for the sake of argument, that this was so. By our reasoning, the outbreak of the Cold War was intimately connected to the actors’ inability to reveal their preferences to each other. Neither side could credibly promise the other that its goal did not include the destruction of its opponent. Political statements made on both sides only served to fan the flames of mutual distrust. It is possible that had the Soviets and the Americans known about each other’s preferences, they could have avoided

the Cold War. But they did not. In these circumstances, costly signaling would have been the only solution, and it was judged too risky by both sides. In the final analysis, both share responsibility for the conflict, and neither one is to blame. I don't know what is more depressing: knowing that the war could have been, in principle, avoidable, or that there are situations where nothing can help avoid the bad outcome.

One must wonder why the Soviets attempted several rather clumsy probes so early on: they must have known how these would be interpreted in the West. The Turkish fiasco seems especially puzzling unless Stalin really thought that the Americans would not prop the faltering British Empire. When it comes to the morality of their actions, on the other hand, there is no question that Soviet rule—no matter how well-justified by security concerns—was repugnant and hated by all on whom it was imposed. Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs would all resist it, and each Soviet satellite would turn West at first opportunity.

It is worth pausing a little here to reflect about the state of the world at the dawn of the Cold War. First, both sides talked about freedom but meant different things by it. The West's idea, defined in terms of political rights and civil freedoms, was a far cry from the communist notion which defines it in terms of the "greater whole." Where we in the West talk about individual liberty, communists talk about duty to the state. Where we think of fairness as equality of opportunity, communists think of it in terms of equality of outcome. Consider now an underprivileged and poor member of some society. Where we try to appeal to an abstract idea of political rights, the communists offer tangible economic benefits. We offer an opportunity for people to lift themselves out of their misery, the communists offer to redistribute wealth by taking from those who have a lot and giving it to those who have none. No wonder that such an appeal would tend to go over well with the poor who would have no idea about the social and political system that these promises inevitably entail.

Second, from our vantage point, democracy is triumphant. Communism, Marxism-Leninism, and other totalitarian systems appear irretrievably discredited. For us, it may be puzzling why the West worried so much about such obviously inefficient systems that were doomed to perish in the long run. Well, rewind to the first half of the 20th century and you will find a world in which "democracy" is a dirty word. The world's self-styled democracies were struggling with the Great Depression, had severe economic disparities, a lot of discontent among the working and the poor strata who were generally effectively disenfranchised. The supposedly civilized Europeans had fought the most devastating war in history up to that point for no discernible reason. During the post-war period, the incredible economic and social dynamism of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union offered tantalizing alternatives to that decadent bourgeois model. Since nobody really knew what was really happening inside these societies (especially the latter), fascism and communism appealed to a great many people in the West. It was not at all obvious that these systems were

as rotten as they turned out to be, so there was a very good reason to worry that the people could be seduced by apparently simple answers that democracy seemed unable to provide. And in fact, many were seduced, in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia, the ideas of the fascists and the communists found favorably inclined recipients who were ready to spill a lot of blood to achieve their goals.

It is worth keeping in mind that the 20th century these people lived in was profoundly different from the 20th century we inherited.