

**Why is the United States so tough on Russia? The answer may be in the Lenin's  
brochure of 1920**

**Vladimir Popov**

**ABSTRACT**

Even before the war in Ukraine of 2022 and even before the 'Russian-hackers-undermine-US-democracy' campaign of 2016, Russian-American relations had degraded to a level not seen since the 1950s. Why? Today the US has fewer ideological disagreements with Russia than it had with the USSR during the Cold War. Nowadays Russia is a capitalist market economy and a more democratic country than the USSR. Also, Russia is much weaker than the USSR – the size of its population and territory, and economic and military potential are about 60 to 80 percent of that of the Soviet Union. Its influence simply cannot be compared to the global impact of the USSR. But today the rhetoric and the actions of the US towards Russia are much harsher than they were in the 1970s, in the era of détente.

The case in point is 1968 Czechoslovakia crisis, when the USSR together with its Warsaw pact allies moved the troops into the heart of Europe, de facto replacing the old leadership of the country with a new pro-Soviet regime. Not only the West refrained from imposing sanction, it started the détente only 3 years later. But sanctions were imposed in 1980, right after the Soviet Union moved the troops into Afghanistan in 1979, and in 2014 after Crimea became part of Russia. Why the difference?

It is argued that the US and Western policy towards USSR/Russia is driven by perceptions of the political class about the prospects of the strengthening/weakening of the regime. In the 1960s it was perceived that the role of the USSR will continue to rise in the world economy and international politics, so there was a need to find *modus vivendi* and rules of co-existence, which eventually resulted in détente. In the 1980s, however, and especially in the 2010s it was perceived that the USSR/Russia is not catching up with the West economically and is likely to be on the decline, not on the rise.

**Keywords:** Russia, US, geopolitics, détente, Cold War, sanctions, catch up growth, economic competition

**JEL:** F50, F51, F52, N4.

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**The problem**

Even before the war in Ukraine of 2022 and even before the 'Russian-hackers-undermine-US-democracy' campaign of 2016, Russian-American relations had degraded to a level not seen since the 1950s. Why? Today the US has fewer ideological disagreements with Russia than it had with the USSR during the Cold War. Nowadays Russia is a capitalist market economy and a more democratic country than the USSR. Also, Russia is much weaker than the USSR – the size of its population and territory, and economic and military potential are about 60 to 80 percent of that of the Soviet Union. Its influence simply cannot be compared to the global impact of the USSR.

But today the rhetoric and the actions of the US towards Russia are much harsher than they were in the 1970s, in the era of détente. In the 1970s it was impossible to imagine either such bombast/arrogant tone of the US officials and media, or prohibition on Soviet officials to travel to the West. Even in the 1980s, when the US adopted sanctions against the USSR after the Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, and when former President Reagan was calling the USSR "the evil empire", relations did not degrade to the level seen in the 1950s, nor did they look as bad as after 2014 'Crimean sanctions'. Why the difference?

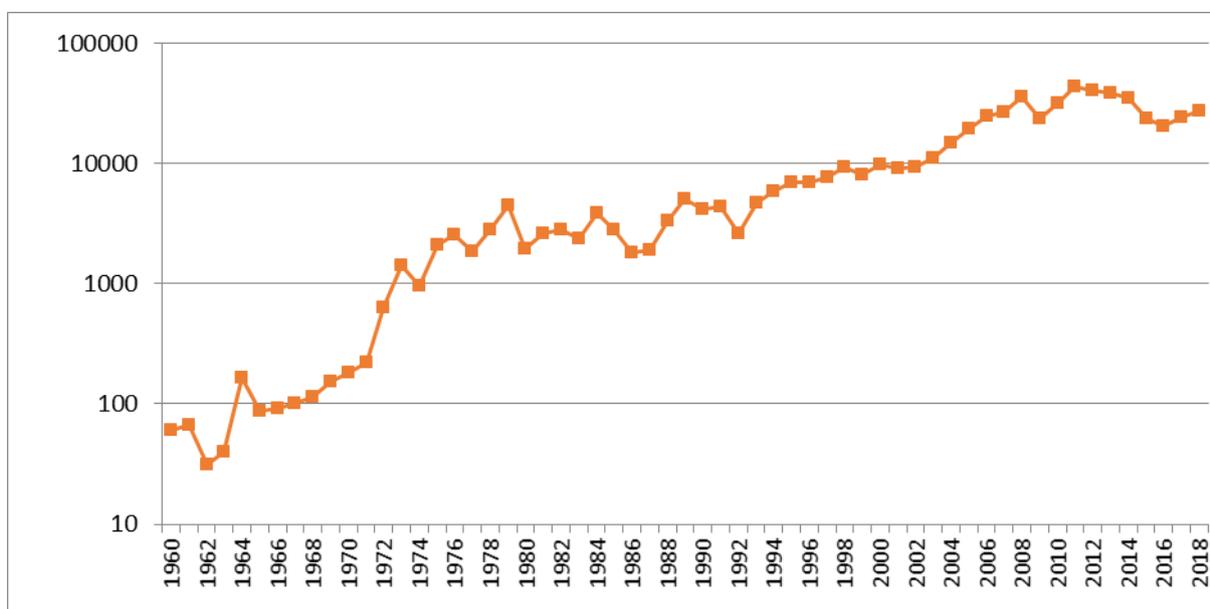
The case in point is 1968 Czechoslovakia crisis, when the USSR together with its Warsaw pact allies moved the troops into the heart of Europe, de facto replacing the old leadership of the country with a new pro-Soviet regime. Not only the West has refrained from imposing sanction after that, it started détente policy only 3 years later. However, sanctions were imposed in 1980, right after the Soviet Union moved the troops into Afghanistan in 1979, and in 2014 after Crimea became part of Russia.

Similar patterns can be observed in the dynamics of bilateral economic ties. Trade between two countries is sensitive to political climate; it is a rather accurate barometer of the state of relations. Normally trade between countries grows faster than the economy (say the volume

of GDP) of both countries and, if trade is measured in current prices (nominal dollars), its growth reflects not only volume increase, but also inflation. So under normal circumstances, trade in current dollars should expand at around 10 to 20 percent per year, which implies doubling every four to seven years. Slow growth or stagnation of trade is usually a sign that non-economic obstacles are present.

As Figure 1 shows, Soviet-US trade expanded rapidly in the 1960s-70s (increasing nearly 100 times in 20 years in nominal terms), but stagnated in the 1980s. There was some growth in the 1990s and 2000s (even though the USSR fell apart and a portion of the former Soviet foreign trade ‘remained’ in the former Soviet republics). But after peaking in 2011, trade turnover is not growing. Why did the fastest expansion of bilateral trade occur in the 1960s-70s, when the USSR was communist, non-democratic, and not even a market economy, whereas in the 1990s-2000s the growth of trade with a post-Soviet Russia that embraced capitalism and democracy was modest – and in the 2010s trade volumes even shrank?

**Figure 1. Trade turnover (export + imports) between US and USSR (Russia - since 1992) in 1960-2016 in million dollars, log scale**



Source: Juhana Aunesluoma. East-West Trade and Détente. 28 February, 2005 ([www.mv.helsinki.fi/home/miklossy/luennot/Aunesluoma.ppt](http://www.mv.helsinki.fi/home/miklossy/luennot/Aunesluoma.ppt)); Foreign Trade. United States Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4610.html>); UN Trade Statistics. Historical data 1900-1960 on international merchandise trade (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/trade/data/tables.asp>).

### **Possible explanations**

The conventional explanation of course is geopolitics, i.e. geopolitical considerations for containing Russia. When the Soviet Union / Russia moved to expand its sphere of influence in the world, the US and other Western countries adopted a harsh policy in response. Examples include the Cold War, with threats of exploding into the ‘hot war’ in the 1950s and 1960s, and the sanctions imposed on the Soviet Union after it sent troops into Afghanistan in 1979. The same could be said about the 2010-20s: US and Western sanctions were the response to the new Russian advance in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and Syria.

But think about the 1970s – the USSR was obviously gaining grounds in the world at the expense of the US: disgraceful defeat of the US in Vietnam in 1975; the Portuguese ‘Revolution of Red Carnations’, and the collapse of the last (Portuguese) Western colonial empire; less than friendly, if not hostile to the US, forces coming to power in countries all over the globe – from Angola and Mozambique to Nicaragua and Iran... Why at that time, during the 1970s, détente and normal trade relations continued despite strengthening of the Soviet geopolitical positions in the world?

The other possible explanation – “anti-Western” orientation of Russian government and society – also cannot hold because currently Russia has much less ideological splits with the West than the USSR.

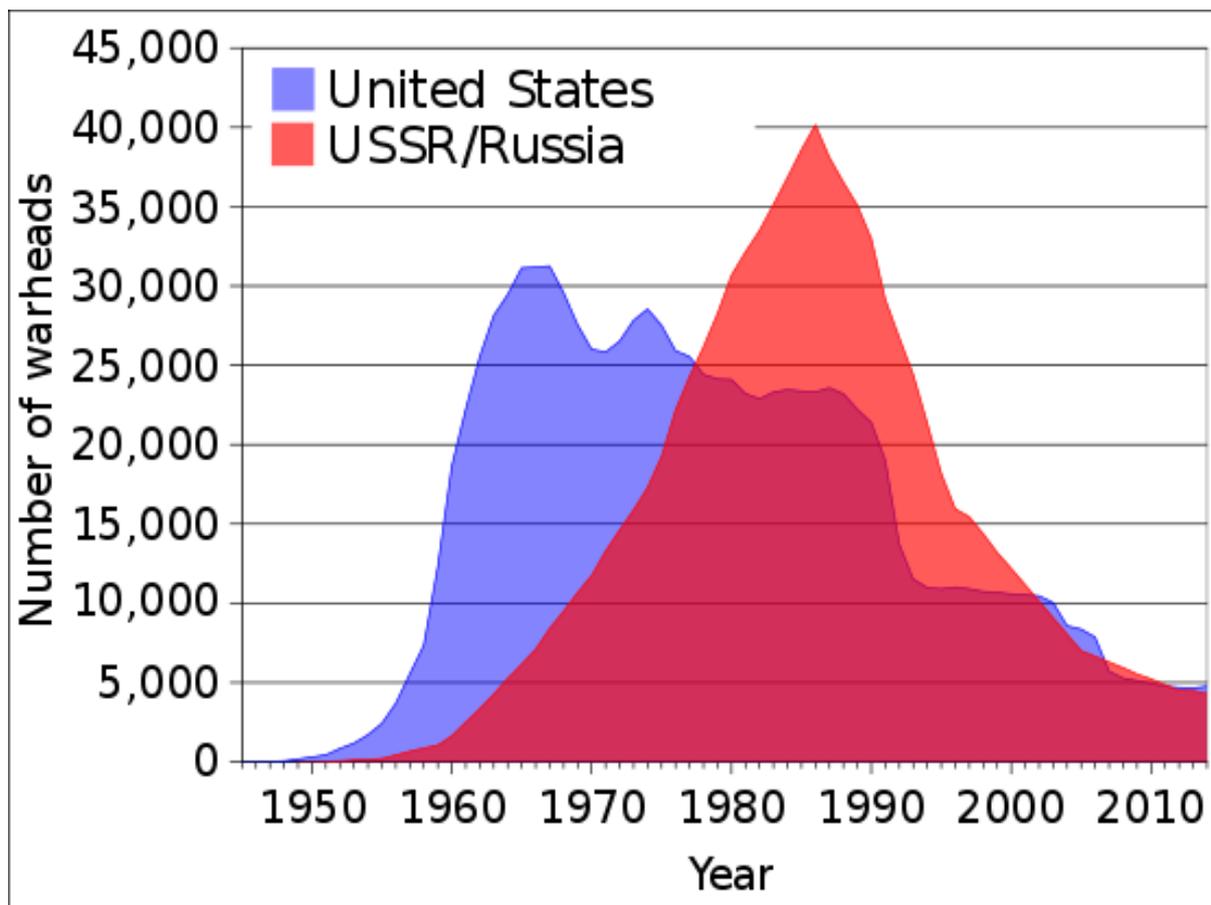
### **The working hypothesis**

The argument of this paper is that the US and Western policy towards USSR/Russia is driven by perceptions of the political class about the prospects of the strengthening/weakening of the regime. The US position versus other countries, including Russia, is determined mostly not by ideology and not by geopolitics, but rather by the changing perception of the US elite regarding the relative balance of forces now and in the future.

After the Second World War, the USSR was not regarded as a superpower. The number of Soviet strategic nuclear carriers (long range bombers, land-based and submarine-based

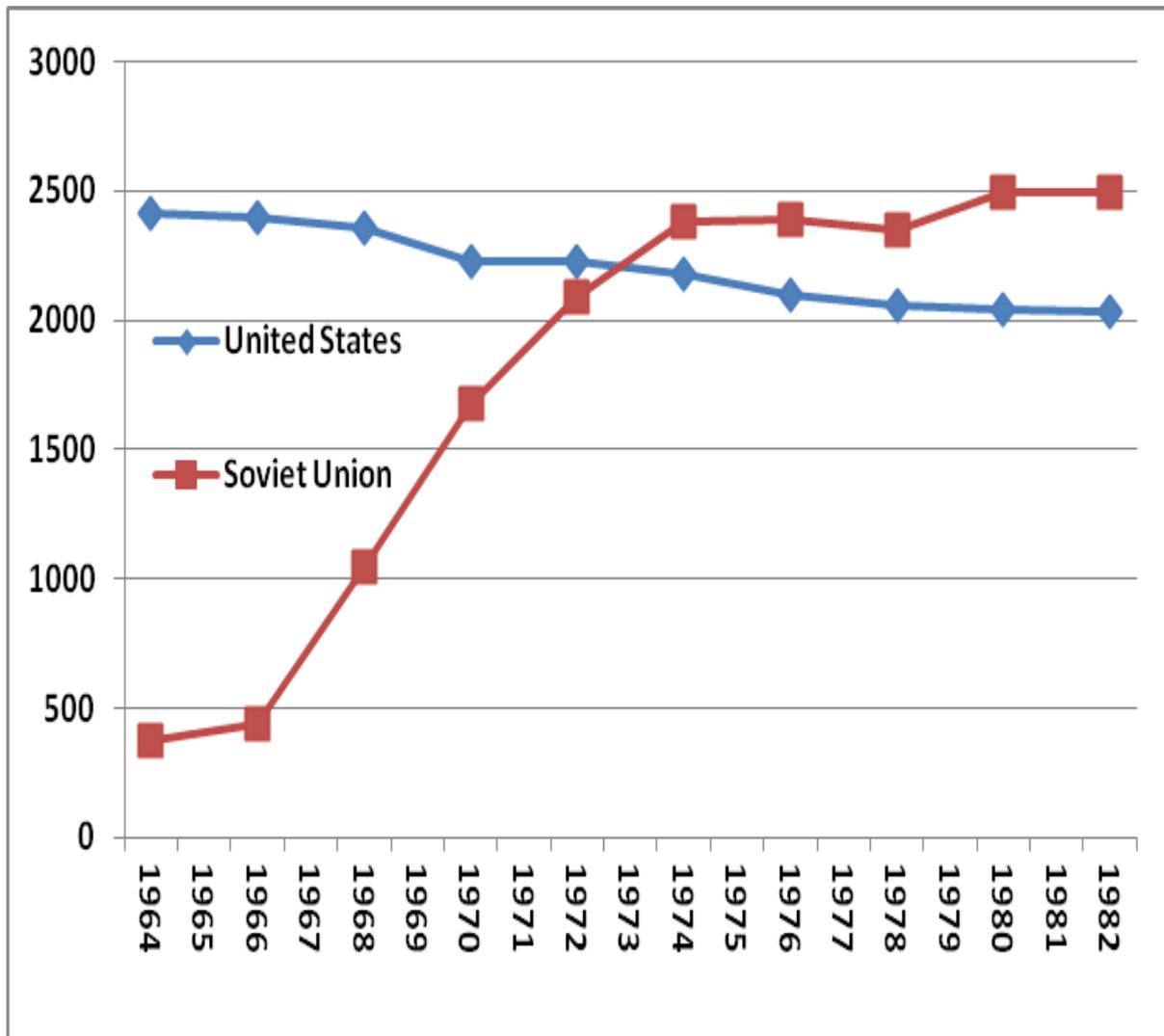
intercontinental ballistic missiles) was lower than that of the US in the 1950s-early 1960s by the order of magnitude (Figures 2, 3), so the US and the West were hoping to press the USSR into submission through Cold War tactics.

Figure 2. Number of nuclear warheads in the US and the USSR in the 1945-2014



Source: Nuclear arms race, Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear\\_arms\\_race](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_arms_race)

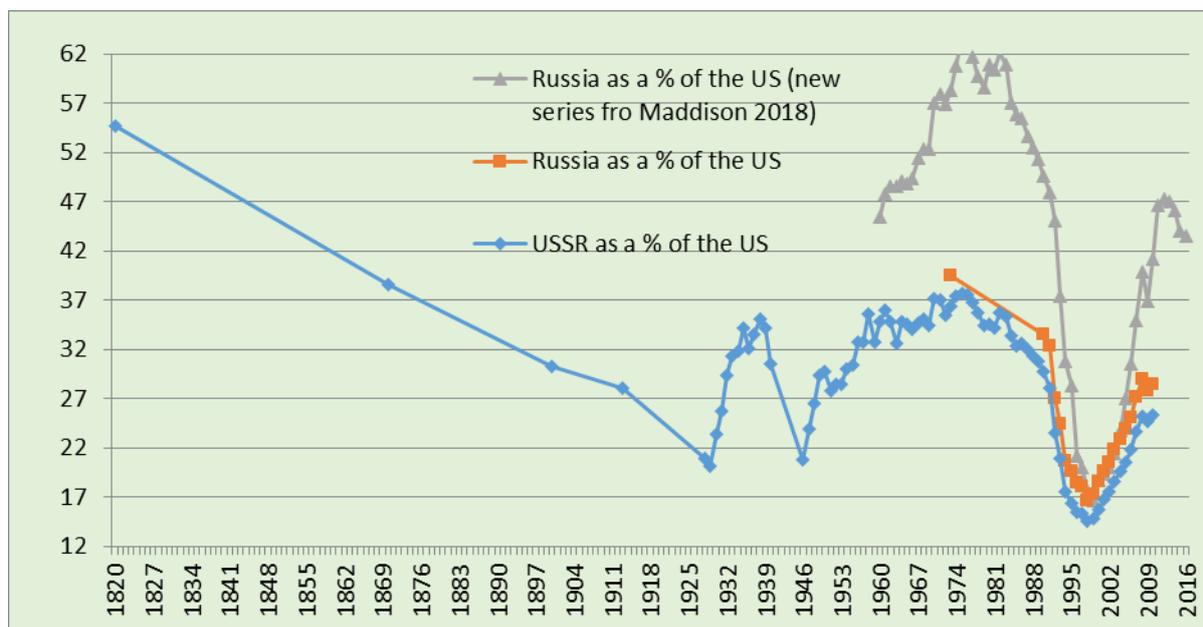
**Figure. 3. Number of strategic nuclear carriers (bombers, land-based and submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missiles) in the US and the USSR in 1964-82**



Source: Nuclear arms race, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear\\_arms\\_race](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_arms_race)

But the balance of forces was changing fast after the Second World War. For one thing, the Soviet economy in the 1950s-60s was catching up with the United States (Figure 4, Popov, 2006) and the military gap between then US and then USSR was closing down. By the end of the 1960s the number of strategic nuclear carriers in the USSR was roughly at the level held by the US (Figures 2, 3). The result was *détente*: the USSR was offering rapprochement all the time, but the US accepted it only in the 1970s, when the balance of forces started to approach parity.

Figure 4. PPP GDP per capita in the USSR and Russia, % US level



Source: Maddison Project Database 2018.

<https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2018>

After the series of crises and military conflicts (Korea, Suez, Berlin, Cuba, Vietnam, Czechoslovakia), the US and the West recognized the USSR as another superpower. By the end of the 1960s the dominant view was that the role of the USSR will continue to rise in the world economy and international politics, so there was a need to find *modus vivendi* and the rules of co-existence, which eventually resulted in *détente*. That was exactly the reasoning given by Western geopolitics pundits in the 1970s: by moving the troops into Czechoslovakia the Soviet Union showed that it is not going to accept any reduction of its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, so it would be prudent to recognize the *status quo*.

In the 1980s and beyond, and especially in the 2010s it was perceived that the USSR/Russia is not catching up with the West economically and is likely to be on the decline, not on the rise. Even more so in recent years: the American political elite probably concluded that Russia today is not catching up with the US and that Russian conventional military forces are getting more and more obsolete, which means that Russia can be contained via direct

pressure and sanctions. These sanctions were unthinkable against communist USSR in the 1970s and are unthinkable against China today, even though China is obviously less democratic than Russia and is still formally a communist country. And this is exactly because American elite expected the rise of Russia in the 1970s, and because today it expects the rise of China.

### **Lessons from Lenin's strategy**

A good analogy is the boycott of elections in the newly created State Duma (the first Russian parliament) by the Bolsheviks in 1907-08 (during and after the first Russian Revolution of 1905-07). Bolsheviks took part in the elections into the First Duma in February-March 1906, but boycotted subsequent elections. Lenin *post factum* admitted that it was a mistake because the revolutionary activity started to decline after the December 1905 Moscow uprising, whereas Bolsheviks mistakenly thought that the Revolution is going uphill<sup>1</sup>. If the wave of the revolutionary struggle started to subside, it was necessary to use all possible means of opposition against the authoritarian Tsarist regime – legal (elections into the state Duma) and illegal (preparing the new uprising).

To put it another way, it is reasonable to push hard for change, if there are chances to win and if these chances are increasing. But if chances to win are bleak, it is better to seek a compromise that would preserve the status quo. If the US political class today believes that Russia is on the decline, why bother to negotiate deals with it (the reasoning might go like this: “tomorrow we get an even better deal or get what we want without the deal”). But if Russia is on the rise, US pressure on Russia may be a mistake. “Either win or make a deal” – this principle is known at least since the time of the greatest Chinese military strategist General Sun Tzu.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Bolsheviks’ boycott of the Duma in 1906 was a mistake, although a minor and easily remediable one. The boycott of the Duma in 1907, 1908 and subsequent years was a most serious error and difficult to remedy, because, on the one hand, a very rapid rise of the revolutionary tide and its conversion into an uprising was not to be expected, and, on the other hand, the entire historical situation attendant upon the renovation of the bourgeois monarchy called for legal and illegal activities being combined” (Lenin, 1920).

So, is Russia declining or rising? It is true that economically and militarily Russia is much weaker today than the USSR was, but its potential has increased considerably in the last 20 years, as compared to the 1990s, due to higher hydrocarbon prices and modest economic growth.

Besides, even if the US is number one and will be number one in the foreseeable future, whereas Russia is weak and getting weaker, the game of pressing Russia into submission through sanctions may be risky. US pressure on Russia can result in a stand-off similar to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. At that time the USSR was willing to take a risk even though the capability of its strategic nuclear carriers was way below that of the US. Even so, the USSR won – Soviet rockets were withdrawn from Cuba (return to the *status quo*), but in addition the US promised not to invade Cuba and to withdraw its medium range missiles from Turkey. Today Russia can not only deliver unacceptable damage to the US, like the USSR in the early 1960s, but also destroy the whole globe. What makes us believe that Russia will not be willing to take the risk this time? Even North Korea and Iran with much less powerful weapons dare to challenge the US geopolitical leadership.

### **Scenarios**

The question then, is whether Russia today is weak enough and getting weaker to be pressed into submission. If it is (no matter what's the reason), it makes sense for the US and the West to behave like the winners of the Cold War, dictating the conditions of surrender. If it is not, better to find a compromise – as they usually say, “if cannot beat them, join them”.

Imagine, for the sake of argument, that the American economy and social system is losing ground and will have to yield sooner or later to competitors. Those who support such a scenario would probably say that the collapse of the USSR was not a US victory, but an internal Soviet crisis; that it was just a temporary short term blip in the long term trend of weakening the US position in the world; that the future belongs to multipolar economic and political system, where various centers (Europe, Japan, China, India, Russia, other developing countries) will have a voice, if not a veto. The US would do well to recognize such a long term trend and to peacefully adapt to new realities and find its modest place in the new multipolar world. In this case US should not try to go against the grain by expanding

NATO and containing every state – from Venezuela and Iran to Russia, China, and North Korea, but rather to accept the inevitable without risking conflict and war.

According to Immanuel Wallerstein (2007), even neoconservatives realized that in the long run the US power in the world will be inevitably challenged by the numerous competitors. The collapse of the Soviet Union may have concealed this trend for a short period of time, but in the long term the US position in the world is being continuously eroded (due to the rise of Japan and Europe after the Second World War and the rise of East Asian countries later). The 2003 invasion in Iraq was a mistake – as the argument goes, the neocons rightly concluded that the only area where the US retains an advantage is its military might, but wrongly decided to use this last advantage before it is eroded as well – this attempt only revealed the inability of the US to exercise leadership by military means alone.

Now, imagine that the US is the rising country, because it has a more advanced economic and social system. Wasn't the collapse of the USSR proof of greater competitiveness and superiority of the American system? The neoconservatives of the late 1990s (Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, etc.) publicly stated that the US won the Cold War<sup>2</sup>, so the world order should be reformed. Yes, Japan and Western Europe were catching up with the US after the Second World War, but did not catch up completely. In research and development and in innovation, in high tech industries and in the strength of the military, the US is still number one. China may be catching up in per capita income and in terms of technological development, but only inasmuch as it copies Western technologies. It has not proven its ability to independently innovate at the technological cutting edge.

So if the US is number one and will always be, it makes sense to push history in the 'right' direction by pressing Russia through the expansion of NATO, abolishing arms control treaties, implementing economic sanctions, etc. This could speed up a Russian decline and curb Russian geopolitical influence.

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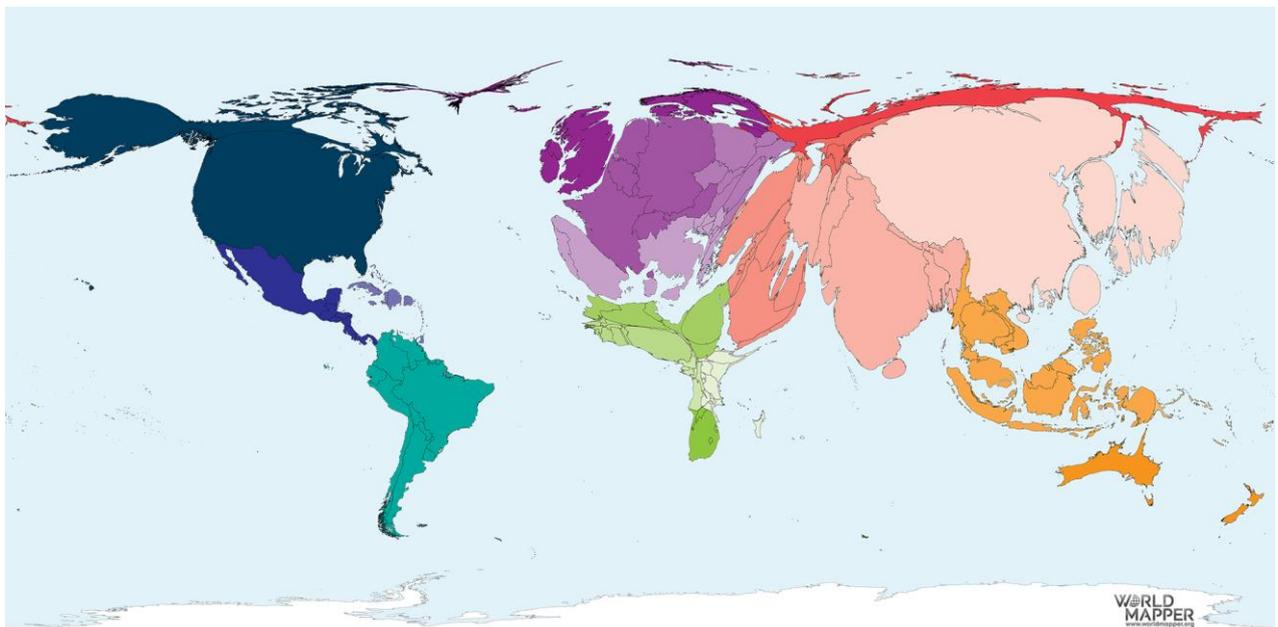
<sup>2</sup> "... The Cold War was won by the West, by the democratic West..." (Perle, 1997).

## Analysis

From the economic point of view, Russia is far from being a superpower. Its PPP GDP is only less than 3% of the world output (Figure 5). Russian population is only less than 2% of the world total and is likely to be rather stable for several decades – net immigration is not going to be enough to compensate for the natural decrease (Figure 6). Even if productivity growth will accelerate, it is unlikely that Russia will grow faster than the world and that the share of Russia in gross world product would increase (Figure 5).

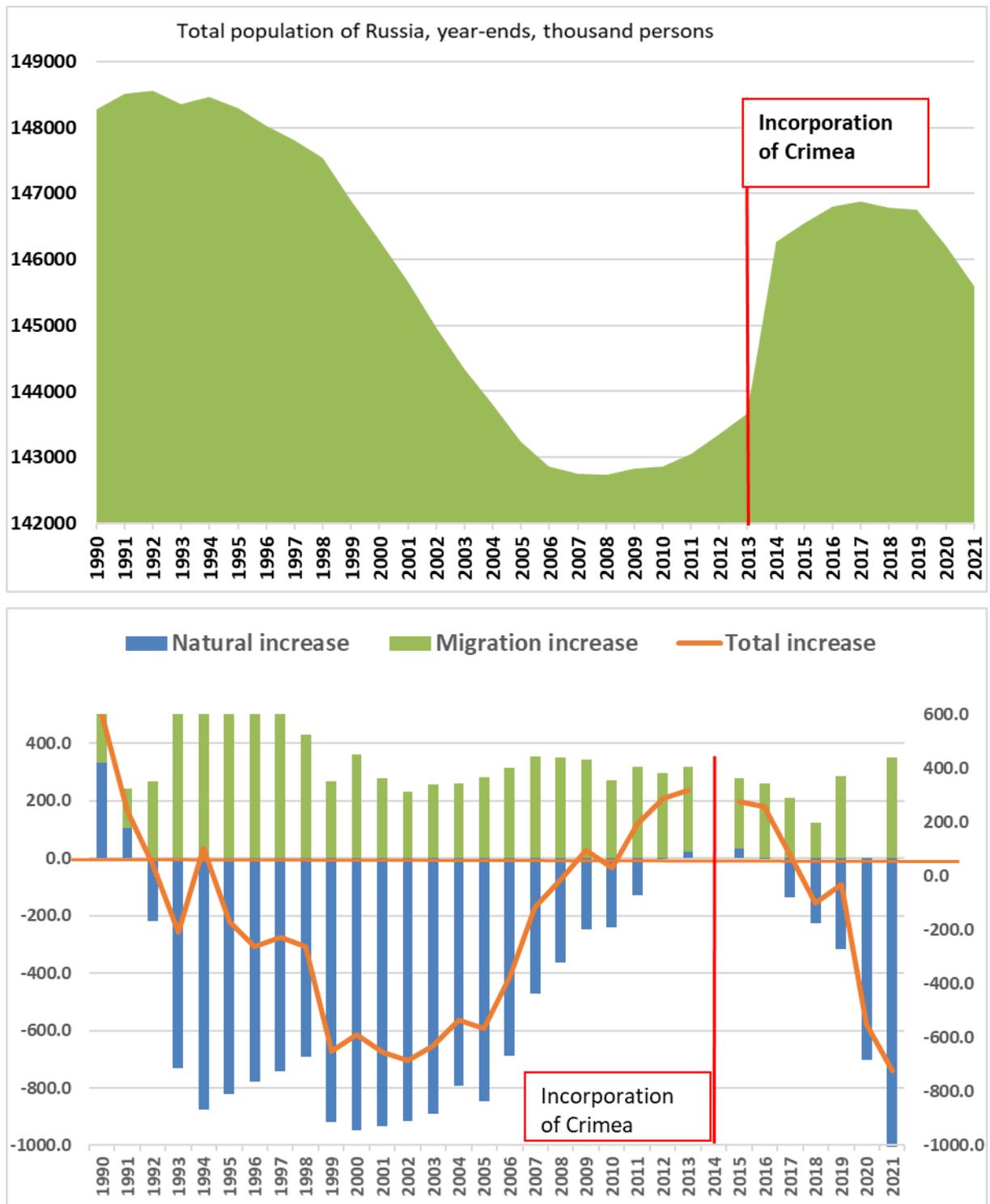
But militarily Russia will probably remain a superpower for a long time and even in the long run it is likely to retain the ability to inflict an unacceptable damage on any potential enemy.

**Figure 5. Map of the world: territory of the country is proportional to PPP GDP in 2018**



Source: World Mapper, [https://worldmapper.org/maps/gdp-2018/?sf\\_action=get\\_data&sf\\_data=results&\\_sft\\_product\\_cat=production](https://worldmapper.org/maps/gdp-2018/?sf_action=get_data&sf_data=results&_sft_product_cat=production)

**Figure 6. Russian population dynamics since 1990: total population, natural increase and migration increase, thousand persons**



Source: Rosstat.

## Conclusions

Is harsh US policy towards Russia is a far sighted strategic maneuver or a mistake? The question is whether Russia today is weak enough and getting weaker to be pressed into submission. If it is (no matter what's the reason), it makes sense for the US and the West to behave like the winners of the Cold War, dictating the conditions of surrender. If it is not, better to find a compromise: as they say, "if cannot beat them, join them".

I am sure most readers have definite views on which country is rising and which is declining, and can make their own conclusions whether harsh US policy towards Russia is a far sighted strategic maneuver or a mistake. History will tell anyway, but maybe not that soon.

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