

# Why is the United States So Tough on Russia? The Answer May Be in Lenin's Brochure of 1920

By **Vladimir Popov**, July 31, 2017

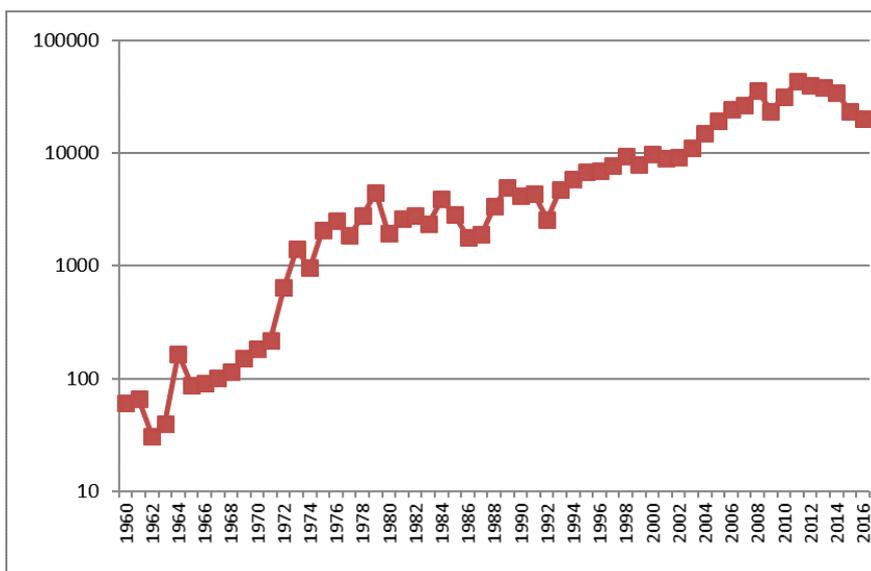
Even before the 'Russian-hackers-undermine-US-democracy' campaign, Russian-American relations had degraded to a level not seen since the 1950s. Why? Today the US has fewer ideological disagreements with Russia than it had with the USSR during the Cold War. Today Russia is a capitalist market economy 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 a bombast/arrogant tone of 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, during a time 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 the 2014 'Crimean sanctions'. Why the difference?

Similar patterns can be observed in bilateral economic ties. Trade between any two countries is sensitive to the political climate; it is a rather accurate barometer of 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 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.

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 constantly falling. Why did the fastest expansion of bilateral trade occur in the 1960s-70s, when the USSR was communist, undemocratic, and not 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 between US and USSR (Russia – since 1992) in 1960-2016 in million dollars, log scale**



Sources: 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**

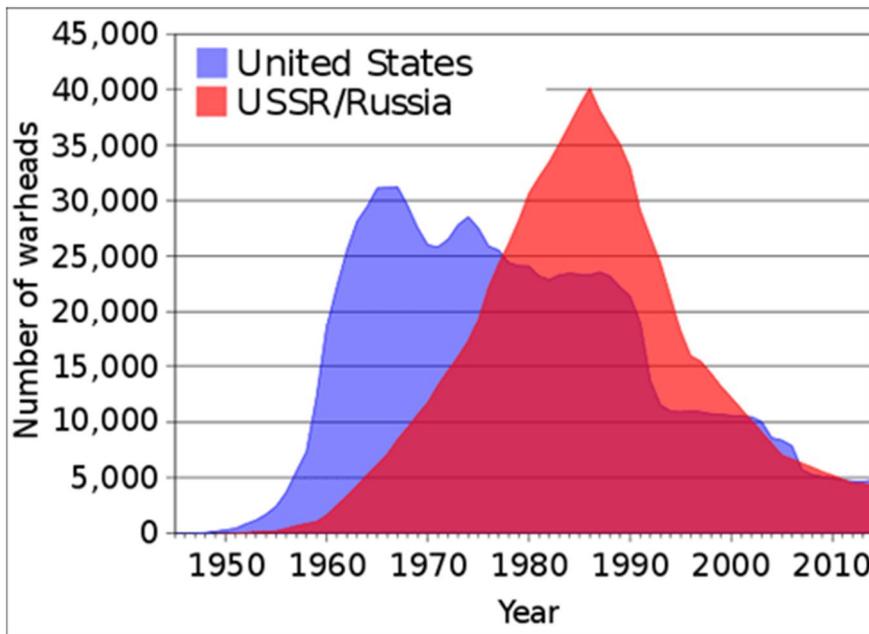
One explanation of course is geopolitics, i.e. geopolitical considerations for containing Russia. When the Soviet Union or Russia moved to expand its sphere of influence in the world, the US and other Western countries became especially harsh in response. Examples include the Cold War, with threats of exploding into a ‘hot war’ in the 1950s and 1960s, and the sanctions placed against the Soviet Union after it sent troops into Afghanistan in 1979.

The same could be said about the 2010s: 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 ground in the world at the expense of the US: the 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; regimes that were less than friendly, if not hostile to the US, coming to power in countries all over the globe – from Angola and Mozambique to Nicaragua and Iran... Why then, did détente and normal trade relations in the 1970s continue, despite the strengthening of the Soviet geopolitical positions in the world?

## **The working hypothesis**

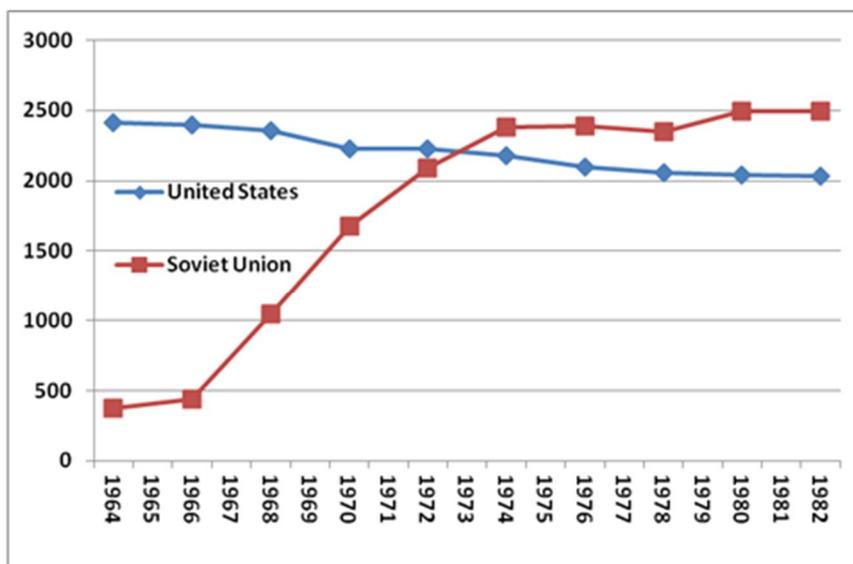
The working hypothesis I am putting forward here is that the US position is primarily determined not by ideology and not by geopolitics, but rather by the changing perception of the US elite regarding the relative balance of forces now, and in the future. After the Second World War, the USSR was not regarded as a superpower. The number of Soviet nuclear warheads (Figure 2) and strategic nuclear carriers (long range bombers, land-based and submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missiles – Figure 3) was lower than those of the US in the 1950s-early 1960s by the order of magnitude, 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 USSR, 1945-2014**



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

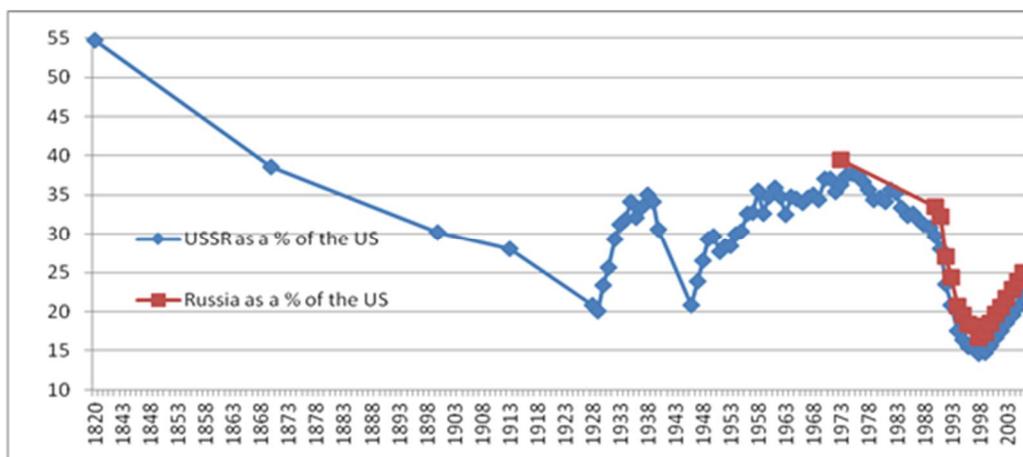
**Figure 3. Number of strategic nuclear carriers (bombers, land-based, and submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missiles) in the US and the USSR, 1964-82**



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

But the Soviet economy in the 1950s-60s was catching up with the United States (even though from the mid-1960s the Soviet economy slowed down, as seen in Figure 4). By the end of the 1960s the number of strategic nuclear carriers in the USSR was roughly at the level held by the US. 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 Russia/USSR as a % of the US level**



Source: Maddison project: <http://www.ggdgc.net/maddison/maddison-project/home.html>

Today the US political elite probably think that Russia is not catching up with the US and that Russian strategic nuclear forces are getting more and more obsolete, meaning Russia can be contained via direct pressure and sanctions. These sanctions were unthinkable against communist USSR in 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 USSR in the 1970s, and today they expect 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 1906-08 (during and after the first Russian Revolution of 1905-07). 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 a 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 (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 of strategy is known since the time of the famous Chinese military strategist General Sun Tzu.

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 15 years, as compared to the 1990s, due to higher hydrocarbon prices and modest economic growth.

Besides, even if the US is number one globally 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*). 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, with much less powerful weapons, dares to challenge US geopolitical leadership.

## **Scenarios**

The question then, is whether Russia is currently weak enough and getting weaker so to be pressed into submission. If it is (no matter what 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 you 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, and that the future belongs to either European, Chinese, or BRICS-type pluralistic economic and social systems.

The US would do well to recognise 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 the 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. Rather the US should accept the inevitable, without risking conflict and war.

The neoconservatives of the late 1990s (Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, etc.) publicly stated that the US won the Cold War. However, according to a different interpretation they actually realised that the US position in the world in the long term is in fact eroding (due to the rise of Japan and Europe after the Second World War and the rise of other East Asian countries later). Military might, they concluded, is the only area where the US retains an advantage. So, this last advantage should be used before it is eroded as well. They advocated a harsh line with regards to Russia and other countries, not because of right or wrong judgments about the past, but because they believed it is wrong not to use the last advantage that the US still has today. Such a strategy though, is utterly dangerous and can yield results only in the short-term, not in the long-term.

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? 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, goes such reasoning.

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 Russia's decline and curb Russian geopolitical influence.

## **Conclusions**

I am sure most readers have definite views of which country is rising and which is declining, and can make their own conclusions whether a harsh US policy towards Russia

is a far sighted strategic maneuver or a mistake. History will tell anyway, but maybe not that soon.

Endnotes:

[1] Full quote: “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, V. (1920). “Left-Wing” Communism: an Infantile Disorder”. – Collected Works, 1964. Progress Publishers, USSR, 1964, Volume 31, pp. 17-118.