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Why New US Cold War with Russia Now

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BERLIN, Aug 9 2017 (IPS) - Even before the imposition of new sanctions on Russia by Donald Trump and the ongoing fuss over Russian hackers undermining US democracy, Russian-American relations had deteriorated to a level not seen since the 1950s. Why?



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Political ideology

After all, the US has fewer ideological disagreements with Russia than with the USSR. Russia now has a capitalist economy and is more democratic than the USSR. Russia is also much weaker than the USSR – its population and territory are about 60 to 80 percent of the Soviet Union, and its economic and military might has been considerably diminished, so it poses much less of a threat to the US than the USSR.

However, US rhetoric and actions towards Russia are much more belligerent now than during the 1970s, or in the 1980s, when the US imposed sanctions against the USSR after Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. Even when President Reagan was calling the USSR ‘the evil empire’, relations did not deteriorate as much as in recent years.

Bilateral economic relations have taken a similar turn for the worse. Soviet-US trade expanded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, nominally increasing nearly a hundred-fold in two decades, before plateauing in the 1980s. There was some growth in the 1990s and 2000s after the USSR fell apart, but after peaking in 2011, trade has been falling.

Why did the fastest expansion of bilateral trade occur in the 1960s and 1970s? After all, the USSR was not a market economy, and also ‘communist’. By contrast, US trade growth with post-Soviet, capitalist and democratic Russia over the next two decades was modest, before actually shrinking in the last half decade.

Geopolitics?

One popular explanation is geopolitical considerations. It is argued that when a hostile power tries to expand its influence, the US, the rest of the West and hence, NATO respond strongly.

Examples cited include the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, and sanctions against the Soviet Union after it invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The same could be said about more recent Western sanctions in response to Russian advances in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine and Syria.

But the 1970s contradicts this argument. After all, the USSR was gaining ground at US expense in Indochina, the former Portuguese colonies, Nicaragua and other developing countries. Why then did détente and trade grow in the 1970s?

US as #1

The US position is not primarily determined by either ideology or geopolitics, but rather, by the changing US establishment view of the balance of power. After the devastation of the Second World War, the USSR was hardly a superpower, so the US expected to press the USSR, its erstwhile ally, into submission through the Cold War.

But the Soviet Union began closing the gap with the United States in terms of productivity, per capita income and military strength in the 1950s and 1960s. Even though its economy slowed from the mid-1960s, the USSR had caught up in many respects, enough to qualify as the other superpower. The result was détente. Although the USSR had been offering rapprochement after the Second World War, the US only accepted détente in the 1970s, as the military gap closed.

Today, the US establishment knows that the Russian economy have fallen far behind since the 1980s while its military is getting more obsolete. The strategic conclusion appears to be that Russia can be contained via direct pressure and sanctions, something unthinkable against the communist USSR in the 1970s or China today, even though China is less democratic than Russia and still led by a communist party.

Playing with fire

Economically and militarily, Russia is undoubtedly relatively much weaker today than the USSR was. But its capacity has recovered considerably in the new century from the 1990s, with modest growth reversing the economic devastation of the Yeltsin presidency.

And even if it is true that the US is now an unchallenged ‘number one’, and will remain dominant in the foreseeable future, while Russia is not only weak, but also getting relatively weaker, the current effort of pressing Russia into submission has risks.

US pressure on Russia can result in a stand-off comparable to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, which the USSR was willing to risk at that time, even though its military capability was well behind that of the US. Eventually, not only were Soviet missiles withdrawn from Cuba, a return to the status quo ante, but the US also promised not only not to invade Cuba, but also to withdraw its medium range missiles from Turkey.

True, Russia is relatively weaker today, but it still has tremendous destructive capacity. One only has to remember that North Korea, with much less military capacity, has successfully withstood US pressure for decades. However, as US economic dominance in the world has been eroding since the Second World War, and its military superiority is the main source of US advantage, the temptation will remain to use this superiority before it is eroded as well.