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Grand strategies in the Cold War

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Wars have been around for a very long time. Grand strategies for fighting wars – if by "grand strategy" one understands the calculated use of available means in the pursuit of desired ends – have probably been around almost as long; but our record of them dates back to only the fifth century BCE when Herodotus and Thucydides set out to chronicle systematically how the great wars of their age had been fought. We do have, however, in the greatest of all poems, mythologized memories of a war fought centuries earlier, none of whose participants appear to have known how to write. But they did know about the need to connect ends with means: "Put heads together," Homer has wise Nestor admonishing the Achaeans at a desperate moment in the long siege of Troy, "if strategy's any use."[1]

The ancient Greeks made no sharp distinction between war and peace. Wars could last for years, even decades; they could pause, however, to allow the sowing and harvesting of crops, or for the conduct of games. The modern state system, which dates from the seventeenth century, was meant to stake out boundaries that did not exist in the era of Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides: nations were either to be at war or they were not. But the boundaries blurred again during the Cold War, a struggle that went on longer than the Trojan, Persian, and Peloponnesian wars put together. The stakes, to be sure, were higher. The geographical scope of the competition was much wider. In its fundamental aspects, however, the Cold War more closely resembled the ancient Greek wars than it did those of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.

It is hardly surprising, then, that grand strategies dominated Cold War statecraft. They could no longer be deployed when military operations began, and retired when hostilities ended. Nor could such strategies remain static,

1 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 371. For the illiteracy of Homer's characters, see Bernard Knox's introduction to this edition, 7–8.

for the Cold War's particular combination of limited violence with long duration required responding not only to the actions of adversaries but also to the constraints of resources, the demands of constituencies, and the persistent recalcitrance of reality when theory is applied to it. The grand strategies of the United States, the Soviet Union, and their allies therefore evolved in relation to one another, much as competitive species do within common ecosystems.

Here too an ancient Greek provides a guide. Thucydides' great history of the Peloponnesian War gives equal weight to the strategies of all its belligerents, to the ways in which each shaped the other, and to the manner in which none escaped the unexpected. Even more strikingly, Thucydides does this with *us* in mind: he writes for "those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it."[2]

Stalin's grand strategy

Before there can be a grand strategy there must be a need for one: a conflict that goes beyond the normal disputes of international relations, for which diplomacy is the remedy. Because *we* know that the Cold War followed World War II, it is easy to assume that the leaders of the victorious coalition knew this too and were preparing for the struggle that lay before them. This was not the case. Indeed, it is doubtful that any of those leaders, prior to 1945, anticipated a "cold war" as we have come to understand that term – with the sole exception of Iosif Stalin.

We do not often think of Stalin as a grand strategist, but perhaps we should. He rose to the top in the Kremlin hierarchy by systematically eliminating rivals who underestimated him. He transformed the Soviet Union from an agrarian state into an industrial great power. He then led that state from a devastating military defeat to an overwhelming triumph in less than four years. When World War II ended, Stalin had been in power for almost two decades: he alone among postwar leaders had had the time, the experience, and the uncontested authority to shape a long-term plan for the future.

Stalin's strategy had several objectives, the first of which was to continue the acceleration of history his predecessor Vladimir Ilich Lenin had begun. Karl Marx had identified class conflict as the mechanism that would cause

2 Robert B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, revised edition of the Richard Crawley translation (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 16.

capitalism to give way to socialism and then to Communism, at which point states would wither away. But Marx had been as vague about when this would happen as he had been precise about where it would occur: in the great industrial societies of Europe. Lenin sought to hasten the process by starting a revolution from the top down in Russia, with the expectation that it would spark revolutions from the bottom up in Germany, Britain, and other countries in which workers were supposedly waiting to overthrow their capitalist masters. They had not done so, however, by the time Lenin died in 1924.

That disappointment led Stalin toward another method of advancing the Communist cause: he would industrialize Russia, and then use it as a base from which to spread revolution elsewhere. He undertook this process during the 1930s with little regard for the human or material costs. He also knew, though, that his accomplishments would mean little unless the USSR was safe from external attack. One could hardly expect capitalists to welcome the emergence of a strong socialist state whose goal it was to end their own existence.

This led to the second of Stalin's objectives: a fusion of traditional Russian imperialism with Marxist–Leninist ideology. Lenin regarded imperialism as the highest form of capitalism, but since capitalism was doomed he thought imperialism was also. He never saw the reconstruction of empire as a way to speed the destruction of capitalism. Stalin's strategy, however, required extending the Soviet Union's boundaries as far as possible, for with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan on the rise, the international environment was hardly benign. The most plausible justification was to claim all the lands the Russian tsars had once possessed, together with spheres of influence beyond them that would allow only "friendly" neighbors.

From this perspective, Stalin's apparent inconsistencies between 1935 and 1945 – his call for the League of Nations to resist the aggressors, his support for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, his 1939 "non-aggression" pact with Adolf Hitler, his alliance with the United States and Great Britain after Germany attacked in 1941, his determination to retain his wartime gains after the war – reflected a single underlying priority, which was to ensure the safety of the Soviet state, the base from which the international proletarian revolution would in time spread. Imperialism now had a revolutionary purpose.

The third and final objective in Stalin's grand strategy was to await the self-destruction of capitalism. Stalin firmly believed, as had Lenin, that "internal contradictions" arising from an inability to resolve economic crises would produce rivalries among capitalist states which would eventually lead them to attack one another. The two world wars had arisen, after all, from just such

causes: why should there not be a third that would bring about capitalism's demise once and for all?

Until that happened, the Soviet Union would rebuild its strength, absorbing the new possessions victory had brought it while letting the United States, Great Britain, and the other capitalist countries stumble into the next war. It was a curiously passive program for a revolutionary, but it reflected Stalin's conviction that the forces of history were on his side: the "science" of Marxism–Leninism guaranteed it. At no point did he share the capitalists' interest in a stable postwar order. Such a system could only come, he believed, with a victory for Communism everywhere. It was in this sense, then, that Stalin anticipated a "cold war," and developed a grand strategy for conducting it.

Roosevelt's response

No equally comprehensive strategy for confronting the Soviet Union emerged anywhere in the capitalist world before 1945. One reason was the absence of a single manager for the global economy, Britain having relinquished that role after World War I, and the United States not having yet assumed it. The rise of authoritarianism in Italy, Germany, and Japan further fragmented capitalism. By the mid-1930s, the remaining European democracies were too preoccupied with the Great Depression to devise common approaches in foreign affairs – beyond the vague hope that appeasing the fascists might somehow satisfy them. Stalin's diagnosis in this sense was correct: divisions among capitalists prevented their devising a plan comparable to his own.

Despite their power, the Americans during these years were particularly purposeless. Woodrow Wilson had called, in response to the Bolshevik Revolution, for a new international order based upon principles of collective security, political self-determination, and economic integration. Before he even left the White House, however, the United States had reverted to its traditional posture of avoiding entanglements beyond its hemisphere. It thereby dodged the responsibility for defending ideas it valued – democracy and capitalism – at a time when no other state had the strength to do so. Franklin D. Roosevelt had hoped to revive Wilson's cause after becoming president in 1933, but he made domestic economic recovery the greater priority, while the appeasement policies of the British and the French left him little basis upon which to seek an end to American isolationism.

All of this changed with Hitler's seizure of Czechoslovakia in 1939, the outbreak of war in Europe later that year, and the fall of Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France to the Germans in the spring of 1940.

By this time, Roosevelt had a grand strategy: it was to do everything possible to save Britain, defeat Germany, and contain Japan. That meant *cooperating* with the Soviet Union, however, because Hitler's invasion in June 1941 had made that country an informal ally of the British and the Americans. Germany's declaration of war on the United States following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor closed the circle, creating the Grand Alliance.

It was almost as if Roosevelt had foreseen these events, for from the moment he extended diplomatic recognition to the USSR in 1933, he had sought to bring it within a shared international system. He consistently assumed the best of Stalin's intentions, even when the Kremlin dictator – with his brutal purges and his cynical pact with Hitler – made this difficult. After they became wartime allies, Roosevelt deferred generously to Stalin's postwar territorial demands. But he also expected Stalin to respect an American design for a postwar world that would combine great power collaboration with a new set of international institutions – most significantly the United Nations – based on Wilsonian principles.

Was Roosevelt naïve? It is difficult to say for sure because his death, in April 1945, prevents our knowing what he would have done once it became clear that Stalin was no Wilsonian. We do know, though, that Roosevelt left his successor, Harry S. Truman, in a strong position to confront the Soviet Union if that should become necessary. Roosevelt had kept wartime casualties to a minimum, relying on the Red Army to do most of the fighting against the Germans. He had agreed to few, if any, territorial changes that Stalin could not have brought about on his own. He had doubled the size of the American economy during a war that had devastated the economies of most other belligerents – including that of the USSR – and he had authorized the building of an atomic bomb. Roosevelt's did not seem, to Stalin, to have been a naïve grand strategy.

None of this changes, however, a fundamental asymmetry. Roosevelt allowed for the possibility that a "cold war" might not happen. Stalin regarded it as inevitable.

Kennan and containment

But no grand strategy fails to produce feedback. What if Stalin's own brutality – the harsh nature of his dictatorship and the unilateral manner in which he had imposed Soviet influence in Eastern and Central Europe – should frighten other Europeans into settling their differences? What if the United States should commit itself to reviving capitalism and democracy among them?

For someone who used fear with such success in gaining and consolidating power, Stalin was strangely oblivious to the possibility that fear might rally his adversaries.

The chief wartime priority of the United States and Britain had been to secure the Eurasian balance of power against future threats like those of 1914 and 1939–41. Stalin shared that objective to the extent that it meant defeating and totally disarming Germany and Japan. By the spring of 1946, however, the Soviet Union itself seemed, to the Americans and their West European allies, to be threatening postwar stability.

Few officials in Washington, London, or Paris expected a Soviet military attack, but there were fears that war-weary Europeans – recalling the prewar failures of capitalism and democracy – might vote their own Communist parties into power, in effect *inviting* the Soviet Union to dominate them. The crisis was one of confidence, in the absence of which any positive program might prevail. The Truman administration had made it clear that it was not going to be another Harding administration: that however frustrating the European situation might be, it would not produce yet another American withdrawal from overseas responsibilities. But that was only a promise. It was not a strategy for countering European despair.

It fell to George F. Kennan, an American Foreign Service expert on Russian history and Soviet ideology, to show how such a strategy might work. Kennan agreed with Marx, Lenin, and Stalin that industrialized states held the key to power in the modern world, but he did not accept their view that capitalism carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Stalin's own system, he pointed out, contained more serious "internal contradictions." These included its lack of legitimacy – the fact that it had never risked free multiparty elections – together with the tendency of all multinational empires to overexpand, provoke resistance, and break apart. Here Kennan cited Gibbon on Rome.[3] He could as easily have invoked Thucydides on Athens.

Democracy embodied legitimacy, Kennan pointed out, and that made it stronger than most of its practitioners realized. If they could muster the self-confidence in their institutions that Stalin claimed to have in his – and if they could keep remaining centers of industrial power from falling under his control – then future Soviet leaders could hardly continue to see history as on their side. The United States and its allies would have found a path between renewed appeasement and a new world war.

3 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1967), 129–30.

That was the *theory* behind what Kennan called "containment," but it took leadership to put it into practice. This came in June 1947 when the Truman administration offered Europeans the resources necessary to rebuild their economies and revive their societies. The Marshall Plan's beneficiaries in turn agreed to subordinate their historic rivalries to the common *European* task of reconstruction, integration, and democratization. That meant including an old enemy – the western parts of Germany then under British, American, and French occupation – within the new Europe. The United States in 1948 embraced a similar set of priorities for occupied Japan.

Stalin had not expected any of this because Leninist theory said it could not happen: capitalists were supposed to fight, not help, one another. Caught off guard, he authorized a Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, denounced Yugoslav Communists for insubordination, and blockaded the city of West Berlin. These measures backfired: they ensured public support for the Marshall Plan within the United States, they hastened the creation of a democratic capitalist West German state, and they led the other European democracies to request inclusion within a formal military alliance organized by the United States. Meanwhile Josef Broz Tito's regime in Belgrade survived – with discreet American help – thereby showing that international Communism could fragment, just as Stalin had expected international capitalism to do.

With the success of the Marshall Plan, the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the rehabilitation of West Germany and Japan, and the Yugoslav defection, Stalin's strategy of exploiting capitalist rivalries lay in ruins. His "scientific" theory had run up against an emotional reality, which was that the Soviet Union frightened the capitalists – even some other Communists – more than the capitalists did each other. All that the Americans and their allies needed to do henceforth, Kennan claimed, was to wait for a Soviet leader to detect this fact, abandon his nation's revolutionary-imperial aspirations, and transform the USSR into a satisfied member of the international system. History, it appeared, was not on Stalin's side after all.

The global Cold War

Kennan too, though, failed to anticipate feedback, notably the risk that selective containment – protecting only the industrial regions of Western Europe and Japan – might not sustain self-confidence within the democracies over however long it might take for Soviet behavior to change. Self-confidence is an *emotion*, which Kennan hoped to produce through *rational* argument. So had Pericles when he advised the Athenians to rely exclusively on their

naval strength and the wealth it brought them, while watching impassively from atop their walls as the Spartans ravaged their countryside.[4] Strategy depends as much on morale as on logic, and Pericles found the Athenians unready for the path he meant to follow. Kennan's experience was similar.

Containment, Kennan acknowledged, was like walking a tightrope. It was an economical way to cross an abyss, but it was important not to look down. That meant maintaining composure when Stalin succeeded – unexpectedly early – in building his own atomic bomb. It meant not worrying about Communist victories in non-industrial regions like China, where Mao Zedong had defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and was poised to take power. Neither of these developments significantly shifted the global geopolitical balance, Kennan argued at the end of 1949: deterrence would still work, Mao might not follow Moscow's orders, and even if he did China would absorb whoever tried to run it. The United States should simply stick to reviving capitalism and planting democracy in Western Europe and Japan – lest it too succumb, as the Soviet Union had, to imperial temptations.

But the Americans were no more prepared than the Athenians had been to suffer setbacks with equanimity. The Truman administration, under congressional pressure, had to agree to build a thermonuclear bomb, a weapon so powerful that war planners had no idea how it might be used. The president also commissioned a reassessment of containment, NSC-68, which concluded that no parts of the world were now peripheral, that no means of protecting them could now be ruled out, and that the existing defense budget was woefully inadequate. Then, in June 1950, the North Koreans invaded South Korea, a country whose defense no one in Washington had regarded as a vital interest. Now everyone, including even Kennan, believed it to be.

Historians have generally argued that Stalin blundered in authorizing this attack. He had not expected the United States to intervene; when it did military spending tripled, while Truman used the crisis to justify rearming the West Germans and stationing American troops permanently in Europe. From the Soviet leader's perspective, however, Korea also brought benefits. The United States suffered major military reversals there without using the atomic bomb. Chinese involvement ended any hope in Washington that Mao might become another Tito. And the war convinced Truman and his advisers that the authors of NSC-68 were right: any part of the world threatened or even apparently threatened by international Communism – industrial or not – would have to be protected.

4 Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides*, 98, 125.

So the Americans, like the ancient Greeks, lost the self-confidence to leave anything undefended. They gained in its place the insecurity that accompanies expansion: "fear [was] our principal motive," Thucydides has the Athenians tell the Spartans. '[I]t appeared no longer safe to give up our empire; especially as all who left us would fall to you."[5] From a strategy meant to retain the initiative by distinguishing vital from peripheral interests, the United States shifted to one that yielded the initiative to its enemies. Wherever *they* chose to challenge, it would have to respond.

Stalemate: ideology

Therein lay the makings of a grand strategic stalemate, like the one that perpetuated the Peloponnesian War. Its roots lay in frustrated hopes: those of Soviet leaders that capitalism would collapse; those of American leaders that it would be enough simply to ensure that capitalism survived. The Cold War shifted now to strategies for breaking this stalemate, none of which proved decisive. Their effect instead was to stabilize and therefore prolong the Cold War – to transform it into a new international system that closely resembled a very old one.

The first of these efforts focused on reforming Marxism–Leninism. Stalin saw little need to make his dictatorship popular because he assumed that capitalist economic crashes and the wars they produced would do that for him. But as his successors watched the growing prosperity and political legitimacy of postwar capitalism, they lost any illusions that its self-destruction was imminent. Instead, they began wondering how their own system was going to sustain itself and spread its influence if it could not demonstrably improve the lives of the people who lived under it.

The problem became clear as early as June 1953 when workers in East Germany – the very class, according to Marx, that should have most welcomed Communist Party rule – instead rebelled against it. The Red Army quickly crushed the uprising and the hardline East German leader Walter Ulbricht survived, but the experience convinced Nikita Khrushchev, soon to emerge as the Soviet Union's new leader, that "socialism" had to be given "a human face." That meant disavowing Stalin and promising something better – even if still within the framework of a command economy and one-party rule.

5 *Ibid.*, 43. Compare with Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 445.

Conceding the necessity of reform, though, made it hard to control the pace. Khrushchev's attacks on Stalin's legacy – most dramatically his February 1956 "secret" speech – had the unintended effect of encouraging attacks on Soviet authority, for how could the two be separated? By the end of that year, Khrushchev had narrowly avoided a revolution in Poland, only to face one in Hungary that he suppressed by harsher means than Stalin had ever employed in that region. Meanwhile, an open border with West Berlin was allowing millions of East Germans to emigrate. When Khrushchev and Ulbricht built a wall to prevent this in 1961, they gave up any pretense that the people they governed preferred "socialism" over democratic capitalism. The Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern and Central Europe would remain, but only against the wishes of those included within it.

Khrushchev's reforms provoked an equally unanticipated response from the Chinese, a people he could not shoot down or wall in. It had been one thing for Tito to challenge Stalin and stay in power: Yugoslavia was a small country, and the Soviet dictator's influence within the international Communist movement remained dominant. It was quite another thing for the volatile and inexperienced Khrushchev to condemn Stalin without consulting Mao, the leader of the most significant revolution since Lenin's who now ruled the world's most populous country – and who had patterned his leadership on the example Stalin had set. With the Sino-Soviet split, the fragmentation of international Communism became irreversible just as the revival of market capitalism and democratic politics was also becoming so.

Leonid Brezhnev and Aleksei Kosygin, Khrushchev's successors, did no better. Having encouraged reforms in Czechoslovakia, they concluded in 1968 that these had gone too far and ended them with yet another military intervention. It was the Soviet Union's right, they claimed, to intervene whenever "socialism" seemed to be in danger. But the Brezhnev Doctrine frightened whatever Marxist sympathizers were left in Europe, while Mao saw it as aimed at China and began preparing for war with the USSR. By the end of the decade, the Communist world had two centers whose hostility toward one another was at least as great as that of each toward the capitalists they had sworn to overthrow.

However well-intentioned it may have been, then, Khrushchev's strategy of reforming Marxism–Leninism instead diminished its legitimacy and shattered its unity. It showed that any withering away of state authority – or any wavering of resolve among leaders – could cause that ideology itself to implode. This was disconcerting indeed for ruling Communist parties because it suggested that change carried within itself the seeds of *their* own destruction.