Editor's Note

The Cold War ended nearly 35 years ago, but the "Cold War" metaphor has shown remarkable durability in public and scholarly discourse in the years since then. Over the past decade in particular, the metaphor has become almost ubiquitous in discussions of U.S.-Russian relations (and also U.S.-China relations). Journalists and popular writers who use the metaphor of a "new Cold War" are not necessarily concerned about analytical precision. But if scholars are going to use the phrase, they need to be analytically precise. Hence, it is important to specify the distinctive features of the Cold War and to explain what made the period unique. This sort of exercise underscores why the metaphor of a "new Cold War" is inappropriate when applied to great-power relationships and conflicts that have existed since 1991, including those involving Russia.

The term "Cold War" as a descriptor of postwar U.S.-Soviet relations was used a few times in 1945, but it did not gain wider currency until early 1947, when Walter Lippmann began publishing a series of articles in *The New York Herald Tribune* that were subsequently compiled as a book, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy*. The term by that point had become bound up with the image of an "Iron Curtain" separating democratic and Communist countries in Europe, as enunciated by Winston Churchill in his speech at Westminster College in early March 1946. The Cold War coincided with the advent of the nuclear age, and the two phenomena were so closely intertwined that it is hard to imagine one without the other, but in principle the Cold War could have taken root even without the invention of nuclear weapons. As it was, the nuclear age outlived the Cold War, which lasted roughly 45 years from the end of the Second World War until the political upheavals in 1989–1991 that transformed the European continent. The Cold War had three underlying features:

(1) **bipolarity in the structure of world politics:** Two countries—the United States and the Soviet Union—were, and were seen as, vastly stronger than other countries and were therefore characterized as "superpowers," the two "poles" in a fundamentally bipolar world.
(2) **clashing ideological conceptions of the proper way to organize societies:** A deep-rooted ideological divide existed between the two superpowers, pitting Marxist-Leninist autocracy against liberal democratic capitalism.
(3) **competing spheres of influence:** Large parts of the world, above all Europe and much of East Asia, were divided into two rival camps led by the superpowers. This bifurcation sparked, or at least fueled, destructive wars in East Asia, Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and Central America.

Even with the rise of other important state actors and multinational bodies on the world scene, especially the People's Republic of China after 1949, the European

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Economic Community from the 1960s on, and Japan during the last few decades of the Cold War, the international system remained fundamentally bipolar, symbolized by the immense nuclear arsenals built by the two superpowers, numbering tens of thousands of weapons, and the millions of heavily-armed troops deployed by the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact in Europe, ready to go to war at short notice. Measurements of "polarity" devised within the Correlates of War project offer statistical confirmation that the international system during the Cold War was predominantly bipolar, even if the degree of bipolarity varied over time.

The abrupt end of the Cold War in 1989–1991 brought profound changes in global politics, including the transformation of a deeply hostile relationship between Moscow and Washington into a cooperative and even friendly partnership, especially in 1992 and early 1993, when democratization seemed to be taking hold in the newly independent Russian Federation. Many key figures in Russia dealing with foreign policy in the early 1990s were avidly supportive of close relations with the West. This new period of partnership was branded the "post–Cold War era," implying a fundamental break with post-1945 hostility. The post–Cold War partnership between the United States and Russia eroded as the 1990s wore on and as the fragile process of democratization in Russia increasingly went off track. By the time the United States and its NATO allies went to war against Serbia in 1999 to halt Slobodan Milošević's crackdown in Kosovo, U.S.-Russian relations were marred by acrimony, tension, and anger. Bilateral animosity has persisted in the two-and-a-half decades since then, particularly during the 23-and-a-half years of Vladimir Putin's tenure as the highest leader in Russia (mostly as president and for four years as prime minister). Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, coming in the wake of an 8-year-long Russian occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, escalated tensions to a new level and eliminated any prospect of accord between Russia and the West.

Disappointment with the ephemeral nature of the post–Cold War friendship has long prompted scholars, journalists, and political commentators in both Russia and the West to argue that relations between the United States and Russia have been plunged into a "new Cold War." This metaphor was used as far back as the 1990s by a few commentators (notably Stephen F. Cohen, who was intent on castigating U.S. policymakers), but it has gained much wider popularity amid the surge of East-West tensions resulting from Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014; Russia's central role in the prolonged armed conflict in eastern Ukraine starting in 2014; Russia's military intervention in Syria since 2015; the Russian government's wide-ranging interference in U.S. and European elections over the past decade; Russian military activities in African countries on behalf of kleptocratic dictators; the Russian intelligence services' use of assassins against Russian defectors and dissidents living in the West; and, above all, Russia's brutal war against Ukraine in 2022 and 2023. Articles and books proclaiming a "return to the Cold War" or a "new Cold War" have poured forth. Especially striking is the argument made by Stephen Kotkin, who until a few

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years ago had written at length about the end of the Cold War. In an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in mid-2022, Kotkin declared that "the Cold War never ended."

Although allusions to a "new Cold War" or a "Cold War [that] never ended" are now common even among reputable scholars, they lack analytical grounding. The U.S.-Russian relationship has been extremely tense and acrimonious over the past decade, especially in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but the growing enmity has not spawned the reemergence of the Cold War as it existed from the mid-1940s to the late 1980s. Even though Russia has touted its role as a great-power rival of the United States, it does not have anywhere near the same international stature, military strength, or ideological appeal that the Soviet Union once did.

One can find a few periods in the long sweep of history that bear some parallels to the Cold War (e.g., the Athens-Sparta rivalry in ancient Greece, the conflicts between European Christians and Islamic powers in the 12th and 13th centuries, the rivalry between France and England in the 17th century), but the period since 1991—or since 2014 or February 2022—is not one of them. All three core features of the Cold War are absent now, as even a cursory review will indicate.

(1) Unlike the Soviet Union, which was a global superpower and was recognized as such, Russia's standing in the world is much diminished. China for some time has been stronger—and has been widely seen as stronger—than Russia. This is even more the case now that Russia's war against Ukraine has exposed the weaknesses of the Russian armed forces. In the post–Cold War era, the United States has been the dominant power in the world, and China over the past quarter century has been the rising challenger. Russia continues to have a large nuclear arsenal capable of inflicting catastrophic damage on other countries, but the Russian armed forces' dismal performance against Ukraine starting on 24 February 2022 has underscored the limits of Russia's great-power status. The Russian military accomplished its tasks in earlier foreign conflicts against much smaller and weaker opponents (in Georgia in 1992–1993, Moldova in 1992, Tajikistan in 1994, Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, Syria in 2016–2018), but when confronted by stiff resistance from Ukrainian forces in 2022 the Russian army came across as inept, demoralized, poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly commanded. Putin had long insisted that Russia was a formidable military power, but the folly of his war against Ukraine undermined the image he had sought to foster.

Until 2022, Russia's immense natural gas reserves afforded a good deal of leverage vis-à-vis Europe, but one of the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been the concerted effort by European countries to curb their dependence on Russian energy supplies. In that respect, among others, the war weakened Russia and attenuated its claim to great-power status. Beyond that, Russia lacks the dynamism of China and cannot come close to matching the overall strength of the United States. No matter which indicators one chooses, Russia's relative power in the world over the past 30-odd years has been far short of the standing the USSR enjoyed during the Cold War.

(2) The only virulent ideology in the world now is radical Islam, which has no appeal other than among a minority of Muslims and has never been close to attaining

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the global following that Marxism once did. Even if radical Islam were to gain wider appeal (something that appears highly unlikely), the ideology is unconnected with the tensions between Russia and the West. The only ideology (or quasi-ideology) espoused by Russian President Putin and his supporters is an incoherent mishmash of so-called traditional values, including homophobia, laced with anti-Western rhetoric. The Russian government's efforts to exploit anti-Western sentiments in Third World countries had some political payoffs in early 2022 with United Nations (UN) General Assembly votes regarding Russia's war in Ukraine, but the efficacy of that tactic gradually declined, and later votes went overwhelmingly against Russia. In the 1960s and 1970s the Soviet Union had been able to exploit decolonization to inspire a wider revolt in the UN General Assembly against Western dominance, but Russia in 2022–2023 was never close to achieving that goal. Although Putin sometimes invokes other ideological trappings for the actions he takes abroad (including the chauvinistic justifications he adduced for the annexation of Crimea and the war against Ukraine), he has been more interested in consolidating his own political power and personal wealth than in developing a coherent political ideology with an appeal beyond shared resentment of Western dominance.

(3) The Iron Curtain in Europe is long gone, and the continent is now almost entirely united within NATO, the European Union (EU), the Schengen Area, and other Western institutions. All European countries other than Russia and Belarus are full members of the Council of Europe. Ukraine and Moldova have not yet been integrated into most other Western structures, and some countries in the western Balkans have not yet been admitted into NATO or the EU or both, but there is nothing like the stark divide that existed between NATO and the Warsaw Pact from 1955 through 1989. Nearly all of the European countries that have not yet gained entry into Western security and economic institutions—Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, and a few others—aspire to be admitted into those organizations in the future.

In East Asia, the situation has changed considerably less. The Korean peninsula is still divided and highly militarized, and China continues to pose a military threat to Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea and to pursue irredentist ambitions in the South China Sea. North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles poses dangers throughout Northeast Asia. But clearly the main challenge to the United States now in East Asia comes not from Russia but from China. By dint of geography, energy supply relationships, and historical ties, Russia is an influential actor in East Asia, but it plays nothing like the role that the Soviet Union once did in the region.

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The hostility between the United States and Russia over the past decade has made it hard to remember the friendly, cooperative ties that existed between the two countries in the early 1990s, when they were partners rather than rivals. Nowadays, the United States and Russia are bitter adversaries, but this does not mean they are

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engaged in a new Cold War. The same applies to the United States and China—they are rivals and often antagonistic, but they are not engaged in a new Cold War. The Cold War reflected special circumstances that are very unlikely to return in combination. The notion that "the Cold War never ended"—or that it ended but a "new Cold War" has now set in—fails to take account of the intrinsic features of the 45-year confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. History has shown that great-power rivalries are often rancorous and conflictual, but the Cold War from 1945 through 1990 was a particular form of great-power rivalry, with three defining characteristics. Analytical precision is crucial when comparing other types of great-power relationships, including the current relationship between the United States and Russia, to the Cold War. The term "Cold War" is best reserved for the all-encompassing, militarized, global struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union after 1945.

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