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### **The Cold War: A Global Drama in Four Acts**

Miscommunication and distrust can turn any relationship sour. It is one thing when it involves two people. It is an entirely different level when it involves two countries, especially when they are two global superpowers – the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In a world slowly starting to recover from the scars of two consecutive world wars, the relationship between these former allies deteriorated. The key ingredients of conflict mentioned above, accompanied by a power vacuum, the threat of nuclear destruction, and sharply opposing ideologies set the stage for a global drama in four acts.

The causes of the Cold War are still debated almost 75 years later, but one can assert that it was not one but rather a buildup of occurrences that led to the animosity between the US and USSR. World War II made both superpowers set their ideological differences aside to fight the Axis, but when that common purpose culminated, the stark contrast between democratic capitalism and communism became a glaring, albeit at times perceived, threat to the other. Both the US and USSR aimed to not only expand their own influence but also prevent the other from doing so. On the US side, these goals were executed by policies and actions including the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the domino theory, military support, covert operations, and joining NATO. In opposition, the USSR took actions like joining the Warsaw Pact, stifling rebellions in satellite states and republics, providing Communist states and militias with funding and arsenal, building the Berlin Wall, and more. From alliances to military support, funding to intervention, arms race to space race, both superpowers worked to increase the sphere of influence of their respective ways of life.

Another root of the multi-decade power struggle was, well, power. After World War II left Europe in a state of slow recovery, the power vacuum set the US and USSR up to become the two superpowers. As the realist theory of international relations would claim, they both then tried to stay in and increase power, a bipolarity that one can argue kept the world “balanced.” A self-evident example of this power play can be found in the arms race and in Germany. The Yalta and Potsdam Conferences called for the split of Germany into four territories, three of which were controlled by Western democracies and one by the USSR, the city of Berlin split similarly into four parts. The USSR’s blockade between East and West Berlin sowed the seeds of distrust, sending a message to the West that they would not cooperate. The American response in the form of the Berlin Airlift further deepened that rift, signaling that the collaboration and alliance of WWII had come to an end. The Soviets were similarly put off when, in 1945, the United States revealed that it had made an atomic bomb, an insecurity heightened when two bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In response to the fear that the US could use it on them, the USSR developed their own atomic bomb by 1949, the start of a struggle for technological and military dominance that eventually led all the way to the moon.

Thus, were the two actors poised for conflict on the global stage, their objective to defend their prowess, power, and perception. As stated before, the ensuing drama can be broken into four acts, but unlike a play, the beginning and end of the acts have no clear dates or markings.

The Cold War started with a phase characterized by competition and intervention, both at home and abroad. The US policy of “containment” was enshrined when President Truman issued the Truman Doctrine, promising US assistance to any free people trying to resist attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressure. This laid the foundation for financial and military interventions throughout the Cold War and beyond, from Greece to Nicaragua to Afghanistan. Similarly, the USSR also provided military and financial aid to many states that supported communism and suppressed any revolts in their sphere of influence. This can be seen in the Hungarian Uprising and Prague Spring when the USSR defeated US-backed pro-democracy protests and installed communist leaders loyal to Moscow. Another conflict that put the US and USSR on opposing sides was the Korean War, with the US supporting South Korea and the USSR backing North Korea. The ensuing battle took the lives of millions and did little to change the status quo. The need to have intel on what the “enemy” is planning led to the creation of the CIA, the KGB, and the MI6, among others. Not only did the CIA gather the needed intel, but activated by the domino theory, it also served “containment” policy through covert operations to oust communist leaders in developing countries. The intervention policy created the system that currently allows for over 800 US military bases in 80 countries across the world. At home, the “Red Scare” spread across the United States, a paranoia magnified by McCarthyism. People accused of a connection to communism were blacklisted, defamed, isolated, and executed.

Aggression and escalation defined the next period of the Cold War, a phase where the two superpowers toed the line of another world war. Not only had the arms race escalated from atomic bombs in the 1940s to hydrogen bombs in the 1950s, but the range of the contest had also stretched across the Earth with intercontinental ballistic missiles and beyond the Earth with the space race. Three major events put the world on edge because of how close they brought the two countries to military confrontation. The mass exodus from East to West Berlin made the USSR build the Berlin Wall in 1961, an action that resulted in reprehension from JFK to Khrushchev. The same leaders were again at odds over actions in Cuba during the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis, two crises whose stakes were increased by the nuclear weapons at play. Next is the Vietnam War, which like the Korean war, cast the US alongside South Vietnam and the Soviets with the North Vietnam Vietcong. The war resulted in a huge death toll, fervent anti-war sentiment in the US and a Vietnam united under communism.

The following phase of détente and rapprochement provided a temporary relaxation of US-USSR tensions. Landmark treaties made under Nixon and Brezhnev altered the warpath from confrontation to compromise. Both sides agreed that the threat of nuclear destruction was a grave one, signing treaties to limit nuclear weapons production, reduce arsenal, or ban manufacturing completely. Some key treaties included the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitations Talk I and II. The Vietnam War also subsided with the ceasefire in 1973, leading to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. The 1975 Helsinki Agreement created clarity on Eastern European borders, and the Arab-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1979 put an end to the Yom Kippur War between US-backed Israel and Soviet-backed Egypt and Syria. In the USSR, Gorbachev brought a new openness to democracy, capitalism, and the West through his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The feelings of compromise and openness, however, did not last long.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Reagan era brought an end to détente, starting a phase of fervid nationalism and deterioration. The Afghanistan invasion in 1979 drew international criticism as well as US and UN intervention in the form of sanctions, boycotts, military, missiles, and aid for the Mujaheddin. Reagan’s election in 1980 led to the rebranding of

the USSR as the “Evil Empire.” The US again become home to anti-communist fervor, a change evident in foreign policy as well. The Reagan administration sent cruise missiles into Eastern Europe, stopped trade with the USSR, and ramped up defense spending for the un-realized Strategic Defense Initiative. Concurrently, Gorbachev’s new policies were not working out well, and the growing wave of democracy in Eastern Europe accompanied by war spending in Afghanistan forced the USSR to crumble. This phase, and the Cold War, came to an end in 1989 against a backdrop of a fallen Berlin Wall, troops being pulled out of Afghanistan, and free elections in Eastern Europe.

The Cold War may have ended in 1989, but the foreign policy cornerstones it created continue to shape US relations with and impact on Russia, Europe, and the rest of the world.

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