

RETHINKING THE COLD WAR – THE US, RUSSIA, AND THE ORIGINS OF COOPERATION AND COMPETITION IN NORTHERN SMALL STATES AND THE ARCTIC

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Key findings

- This paper will address the historical origins of the place of small Northern States in a novel environment of the Cold War.
- It will also ask whether a ‘New Cold War’ creates conditions of hazard or instability for the region.

Executive summary

During the 1990s I published two monographs on the origins of the Cold War. One examined Russia and the origins of the Cold War (Stalin’s Cold War in Europe, 1943-1956) and a second analysed Russian foreign policy in more general terms. (Russia and the World since 1917) Both were products of their time. Given the end of the Cold War and optimism over change within Russia I adopted a somewhat sympathetic view of Russian foreign policy as defensive and driven by a complex set of internal ‘drivers’. Not least I highlighted economic and technological weakness, demographic frailty and continued challenges to Soviet power both at home and abroad to question any idea of Russia as a ‘super-power’. In short I depicted a weary Russia which in the post 1944 context was challenged and in many ways outwitted in regions such as the Middle East by a vibrant and energetic adversary - the United States.

Analysis

Much of the analysis rested on a type of neo-revisionist historiography which depicted the Cold War as almost occurring almost accidentally after the break down of the traditional



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'Balance of Power' in Europe. Hence the analysis of the origins of confrontation centred around the fate of Germany and countries which had a sentimental place in the hearts of Western policy makers such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. The decline of European empires, the small wars which characterised withdrawal and financial hardship were all part of the tapestry of my version of how Europe came to be reshaped in the image of Containment and the Marshall Plan. What was curious were the silences or gaps in this narration. Although Finland forms a key part of the story through notions of 'Finlandization' and great power concerns over the region in general the analysis of the small but geo strategically key areas such as the Baltic states is not given the time and literally space that would have enriched and challenged the overall narrative of endless and predetermined military competition.

What was also absent in both of these accounts was any in depth analysis of Russian and American attitudes towards the High North and the Northern states of Iceland, Denmark and Norway. Indeed although I did touch upon the Bornholm issue and the diplomatic manoeuvres over its post war status there is a striking 'gap' (common in the general Cold War literature) of discussions of US/UK basing policy in the North and the increasing importance in the period between 1946 and 1955 of 'Northern' affairs and so called small states. This period saw repeated attempts by Russian diplomats to control and contest US influence across the Baltic Sea but also in Denmark and Iceland. This is therefore a period of considerable historic interest but it also has contemporary relevance.

Conclusion

It is now commonplace to talk of a new Cold War between Russia and the West. This has arisen not just because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea but because of Russian 'expansionism' in the Arctic including the reopening of old Soviet military bases, the building of new ice breakers and the potential for oil and gas exploitation in the Arctic Sea. Russia currently engages in cyber attacks against the Nordic states and has continually pressed its claims to assets and territory across the Northern periphery of Europe. It is therefore timely to revisit the post Second World War diplomacy which established both understandings and considerable misunderstandings between Russia, the US and its Western allies over the Northern region and especially the genesis of the role of small states in creating defence structures and alliances.



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