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Is Russia's Vladimir Putin intent on launching a new Cold War?

Yes: Putin's rhetoric sounds jarringly like Khrushchev's

By Lawrence J. Haas

In early 2007, Defense Secretary Robert Gates opted for humor to defuse a tense situation on the world stage.

A day after Russian President Vladimir Putin harshly criticized U.S. foreign policy at a security conference in Munich, arguing that America wants to be the world's sole "master," Gates told the assembled officials, "One Cold War was quite enough."

Putin, however, does not seem to think so. From his blistering anti-American rhetoric to his strident foreign policy, the Russian president has launched what you might call "Cold War II."

Nostalgic for what he considers the good old times, Putin is working to restore a bipolar world by positioning Russia as a counter-weight to the United States, with help from like-minded nations. U.S. and Russian interests increasingly collide as Russia retreats from its brief flirtation with Western-style freedom at home while confounding U.S. goals around the world.

Putin does not hide his designs. Not since the flamboyant Nikita Khrushchev, who threatened to "bury" the United States by launching Third World "wars of national liberation," has a Russian leader so viciously lambasted America as an out-of-control superpower.

No one should be surprised. Putin is a former official of the KGB, the Soviet security service that maintained internal order during the Cold War. He has called the Soviet collapse "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" and suggested critics have exaggerated Stalin-era atrocities.

Though Russia is but a shell of the Soviet Union, Putin has restored Soviet-style rhetoric. To global audiences, he has called the United States "Comrade Wolf" and compared it to Hitler's Third Reich.

To domestic audiences, he has borrowed a tactic from the Soviet playbook by describing the United States as an aggressive behemoth that's bent on Russia's demise. That way, he can suppress domestic activists and nongovernmental organizations who are trying to reverse Russia's slide toward autocracy by portraying them as dangerous U.S. lackeys.

While the rhetoric is troubling, what's worse is the way Putin's Russia is acting on the world stage. From Europe to Central Asia, Putin is undermining U.S. policy goals, even those shared by leading European nations with which Russia once sought closer ties.

For instance, Putin's Russia continues to block the U.N. Security Council, where it has veto power, from enacting tight sanctions that might convince Iran to halt its nuclear program.

Russia also has sold tanks, jets and air defense missiles to help Iran defend itself against an attack from, say, the United States or Israel that, in the absence of those sanctions, grows increasingly likely.

Putin also has raised concerns about several key arms control and force limitation treaties with the West – such as a 1987 treaty on missiles between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, a 1990 pact on conventional forces between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and a 1991 U.S.-Russia nuclear arms treaty.

But, nothing better signifies the onset of “Cold War II” than Putin's full-throated reaction to the U.S. effort to base a missile defense system in Europe, including 10 missile interceptors in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic, to protect Europe from attack by Iran.

Putin argued that the missile defense system impedes Russia's nuclear capability, and he was unimpressed by U.S. offers to let Russia observers monitor the system. Complaining that the missile defense system jeopardizes Russia's security, he said U.S. actions were boosting chances for “mutual destruction.”

Putin also threatened to reposition its own missiles toward U.S. allies in Europe. Thus, as with the first Cold War, the world faces the specter of a Washington-Moscow stand-off, with Europe caught in between.

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