

LESSONS FROM THE COLD WAR

By Mackubin T. Owens



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"Reputation of power is power, because it draweth with it the adherence of those that need protection," writes Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*.

Does American "credibility" in foreign policy matter? Many commentators answer in the negative. For instance, Peter Beinart, of *The Atlantic*, has contended that what he calls the "credibility fallacy" is an excuse to avoid complex discussions of America's global interests. It is all too true that foreign policy posturing is unhelpful, but as recent global events have illustrated, both America's adversaries and friends pay attention to what the United States says and does. The perception of American weakness emboldens the former and disheartens the latter.

Russia, China, Syria, and Iran all seem to act in accordance with their perceptions of U.S. resolve. Our adversaries are always probing for weakness, timidity, and uncertainty. When they encounter strength, they tend to be deterred. When they encounter weakness, they often push harder. This behavior is a logical form of geopolitical net assessment.

For instance, during the Cold War, the Soviets based their policy on an assessment of the "correlation of forces" (COF). When Soviet leaders believed that the COF was shifting in favor of the USSR, they tended to act more aggressively.

During the 1970s, the usually cautious Soviet Union began to pursue an uncharacteristically aggressive foreign policy. The Soviets sought nuclear superiority at both the strategic and theater levels, in the first case deploying the SS-18 inter-continental ballistic missile and in the second, deploying the SS-20 intermediate range ballistic missile. The Soviets also invaded Afghanistan and pursued an increasingly activist policy in Africa and Central America.

A number of analysts attributed this adventurism to the apparent belief that the trends during this decade indicated a favorable shift in the COF. Indeed, the Soviet military press during this decade was filled with numerous references to the COF. For instance in 1975, General Yevdokim Yeogovich Mal'Tsev wrote that "the correlation of world forces has changed fundamentally in favor of socialism and to the detriment of capitalism."

Soviet analysts have long disagreed about the importance of COF as a practical guide to action. In 1951 Raymond Garthoff, a prominent Soviet policy observer, summarized the concept: "The calculation of the relation of forces is a most convenient means for internally and externally rationalizing the interpretation of Marxian ideology in pure power terms." As "scientific socialists," the Soviets believed that history led inexorably to a revolutionary communist future. But following the lead of Vladimir Lenin, they believed that the Party was necessary to sustain the momentum of revolution by orchestrating actions appropriate to the historical situation. COF was an attempt to assess correctly the historical situation.

Many of those Soviet observers, who took COF seriously, attributed Soviet adventurism in the 1970s to Soviet perceptions of U.S. weaknesses—perceptions that mirror the situation today. According to this analysis, the Watergate crisis that ended the presidency of Richard Nixon, the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, the incredibly weak administration of Jimmy Carter, the decline of the U.S. defense budget, the contraction of U.S. naval force structure and the reduction of land force readiness, the abandonment of Taiwan, negotiations intended to give up control of the Panama Canal, and the Iran hostage crisis, indicated to Soviet leaders that the position of the United States relative to the USSR was weakening and that an assessment of the COF indicated that the time had come to exploit the situation. One result was the articulation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which essentially declared that no country could leave the socialist camp—there would be no counterrevolution permitted here—limiting the struggle with capitalism to the zone of the latter. The Soviet Union seemed poised to win the Cold War.

Yet a decade later, the Soviet Union was in retreat: This retreat initially may have been the sort of tactical retrenchment that characterized, say, the Brest Litovsk treaty, understood as a temporary defensive measure making it possible for the Soviet Union to fight another day. But the setbacks soon constituted a strategic retreat of a kind that Lenin or Joseph Stalin never could have imagined, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

What was the cause of this reversal? The short answer is the rejection by the American people in 1980 of President Jimmy Carter's politics of malaise and the election of Ronald Reagan. The Reagan Administration abandoned Carter's policy of playing the game of Cold War geopolitics according to the rules of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Indeed, Reagan attacked it, both directly and indirectly. An example of the former was the cost-incurring strategy of supporting anti-Soviet insurgents in Afghanistan.

But for symbolism, nothing quite matched Grenada—a small operation that nonetheless had a major impact by calling into question the viability of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Those who have ridiculed this operation have missed its impact on Soviet planners.

These explicit attempts at "roll-back" complemented an aggressive defense buildup that negated the Soviet Union's bold bid for military superiority. The defense buildup, in turn, constituted part of the most important element of the Reagan strategy: the deliberate targeting of the weak Soviet economy. Indeed, the great accomplishment of the Reagan grand strategy was to identify the Soviet economy as the "strategic center of gravity" upon which to focus its efforts. The Reagan Administration adopted an asymmetric and cost-incurring strategy to exploit the mismatch between the large and growing U.S. economy and the much smaller Soviet economy. This economic strategy included such measures as trade sanctions against the USSR and the deregulation of oil prices in the United States, which caused the OPEC cartel to crumble and the price of oil to plummet. As a result, the Soviet Union was deprived of a major source of hard currency.

At the peak of the Reagan buildup (FY1985), the United States spent 6.3 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense. Part of the reason for the declining U.S. national security burden was the continued growth of the U.S. economy during the Cold War, enabling the United States to maintain a relatively constant and robust level of defense spending during the period.

The cost of the Cold War to the USSR was substantially higher than for the United States. From the 1950s through the mid-1970s, the CIA estimated that the burden of Soviet defense spending was consistent with, or even lower than, that of the United States. For example, it was about six percent of GNP and declining. But in 1975, the CIA concluded that its earlier estimates had been in error: the ruble prices of Soviet weaponry were twice as high as previously estimated—the USSR was spending 11-13 percent of its output on defense. Some analysts argued that the figure was even higher—14-17 percent and rising.

Even the lower estimates meant that the burden of defense for the USSR was three to four times that of the United States since analysts believed that the Soviet economy was only one-half to two-thirds the size of the U.S. economy. Subsequent research has indicated that these intelligence analysts consistently overestimated the size of the Soviet economy, meaning that the relative burden of defense to the USSR was even higher than previously believed.

That the Reagan Administration stressed the economic component of grand strategy to cause the Soviet Union to collapse is suggested by a revealing passage from the first edition of the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, issued by President Reagan in 1987. According to this document, a major objective of U.S. strategy was “to force the Soviet Union to bear the brunt of its domestic economic shortcomings in order to discourage excessive Soviet military expenditures and global adventurism.”

The Reagan Administration’s cost-incurring strategy forced the USSR to expend resources the Soviet economy could not afford. The combination of the U.S. defense buildup, support for anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan, and other pressure on the Soviet economy was more than it could withstand. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of a strategy that targeted the economy.

Of course, no two cases are alike and there are many differences between the 1980s and today. But the late-Cold War era does illustrate an enduring truth of international relations. One doesn’t need to adopt the Marxist pseudo-science that underlay the COF to understand that resolve can reverse decline as it did during the Reagan presidency.

But will President Obama take the steps necessary to reverse American decline? The prospects are not auspicious. For instance, the president seems to believe that he can shame Vladimir Putin into abandoning his aggressive policies against his neighbors by lecturing him on the niceties of international norms and the importance of international institutions. But this is Immanuel Kant lecturing Niccolo Machiavelli. As the latter observed, “it is better to be feared than to be loved.” American power is a good thing, not only for the United States but for the world. But to be credible it must be exercised when necessary.

As in the 1970s, we are beginning to see the consequences of America’s abdication of power. The late Samuel Huntington described a world without America: “...a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country in shaping global affairs. The sustained international primacy of the United States is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world.”

Without a reversal of U.S. foreign policy, it is an ugly world indeed that awaits us.