Back to the Wall: Myths and Mistakes that Made the Ukraine Crisis

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The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the subsequent end of the Cold War had been attended by expectations of a new era of reconciliation and healing in Europe. Instead, on the 25th anniversary of the dismantling of the dividing line across Germany and Europe, Ukraine announced plans to build a new wall along its 2,295 kilometre-long border with Russia. On 16 June 2014 the head of the National Security and Defence Council, Andrei Parubiy, stated that building the wall would ‘avoid any future provocations from the Russian side’. The Ukrainian prime minister, Arseny Yatsenyuk, on 5 September 2014 announced that a draft plan, imaginatively named ‘Wall’, had been adopted and construction of the fortifications began soon after. In the first instance there would be a four-metre wide and two-metre deep ditch equipped with electronic systems. This was an attempt physically to separate Ukraine from Russia, and reflected the deeper psychological and political gulf between the two countries. It also demonstrated that a new iron curtain threatened to divide Europe, no longer ‘from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic’, as Winston Churchill put it in his speech announcing the Cold War in Fulton, Missouri, on 5 March 1946, but from Narva on the Baltic to Mariupol on the Sea of Azov. Defenders of the new wall argue that this one is different, designed no longer to oppress people within its confines, but like the Great Wall of China, to keep the barbarians out; or like the Separation Wall in Palestine, to defend civilians. Some 274 people died along the Berlin Wall between its construction in August 1961 to its dismantling in November 1989, whereas already thousands have died in Ukraine. Walls and war have returned to the continent.

After more than a year of conflict, the causes of the Ukrainian crisis remain bitterly contested. As analysts and power brokers on both sides argue vehemently in favour of their interpretation of recent events, one essential point is often overlooked: the conflict is rooted in decisions made long before any fighting broke out. To fully understand what provoked the gravest geopolitical crisis of our time—a necessary first step if we hope to pull back from the brink of a profound disaster—we must regard it as an outgrowth of two events that helped shape the course of the twentieth century and continue to resonate today. The Yalta Conference of 4-11 February 1945, held in the Livadia palace on the peninsula’s south coast, and the Malta Summit of 2-3 December 1989, held on two ships off Marsaxlokk Harbour, are either long-forgotten or poorly understood by many in

1 Iana Koretska, ‘Changes to terrorism law give Ukraine forces fighting chance to defeat Eastern insurgency’, Kyiv Post, 20 June 2014.
the West. Though they were quite different in substance and historical context, both meetings sought (and ultimately failed) to produce a more stable European security order. The Ukrainian crisis is only the latest symptom of the long-term failure to reconcile the various interests on the European continent.

The myth of Yalta

In February 1945, when the fate of the small European countries was trapped between the advancing Red Army and Western forces, leaders representing the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union gathered in Yalta to forge a postwar peace for Europe. Among other things, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Churchill and Joseph Stalin accepted the idea of European pluralism—different social systems would have to learn how to live side by side without coming into conflict. There would also be geopolitical pluralism. The great powers would manage European affairs by taking into account the realities of power and the interests of others. This meant granting Stalin effective control over most of the territories liberated by the Red Army.

Of course, as Jacques Rupnik argues, ‘For the nations of the Other Europe Yalta is the “original sin”, the founding myth of a divided Europe. It has become synonymous with Sovietization and with the disappearance of the very notion of Central Europe’. In short, ‘Europe divided by non-European superpowers: that is the potent myth of Yalta’. Yalta also reflected the fissures in the Atlantic alliance. Already from 1943 a rift had appeared in relations between Churchill and Roosevelt, and at the Teheran conference in November 1943 the American president ‘ostentatiously courted Stalin and was cool to Churchill, seeking to demonstrate that the Americans and the British were not “ganging up” against the Russians. From the American point of view, this was perfectly reasonable. By the end of the war the Soviet Union was going to be a stronger power than Britain, playing a greater role in world affairs, and it was a shrewd move to come to terms with the rising star’.

The Yalta conference confirmed a mutual understanding that the Soviet Union was a great power whose interests would henceforth have to be taken into account. It is for this reason that Yalta was so much appreciated by the Soviet Union, and has attained something of a mythological status in Russia today. This year’s seventieth anniversary of the Yalta meeting is being celebrated by numerous conferences and events.

A definition of myth is that it is a way of freezing time. In that respect, the Russian myth of Yalta is a way of permanently confirming Russia’s status as a great power. The Yalta conference settled a whole range of detailed issues, including borders in Eastern Europe, spheres of influence, democratic elections in Poland and plans to create the United Nations. But above all it recognized that Red Army victories in the war gave the Soviet Union the right to be treated as an

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equal in deciding global issues. It is this status that Vladimir Putin has tried to restore. He has complained endlessly that in the post–Cold War years Russian views have been ignored, just as President Boris Yeltsin did before him, and any later Russian leader will do as well.

**From Yalta to Malta and back**

The turning point was the Malta Summit, which brought together Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and American President George H. W. Bush, a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November. The meeting represented another moment when the great powers held the fate of Europe in their hands. This time, however, the diplomatic and strategic balance of power had shifted. Although no agreements were signed at the Malta summit, the two leaders had a chance to review the rapid changes taking place in the continent. The Malta summit is conventionally taken as the moment when the Cold War ended. As Gorbachev put it at the concluding press conference, ‘The world is leaving one epoch and entering another. We are at the beginning of a long road to a lasting, peaceful era. The threat of force, mistrust, psychological and ideological struggle should all be things of the past’. Bush, too, was positive: We can realise a lasting peace and transform the East-West relationship to one of enduring co-operation. That is the future that Chairman Gorbachev and I began right here in Malta.

Gorbachev understood that the Cold War stand-off between the Soviet Union and the Western powers served to undermine the development of both. When he came to power at the head of the Soviet Union in 1985, he quickly signalled his commitment to serious domestic reform. In 1986, he launched what he called ‘perestroika,’ the ‘restructuring’ of the Soviet system, which became a grand exercise in trying to create a ‘humane, democratic socialism’. Gorbachev encountered a sympathetic although tough interlocutor in the person of President Ronald Reagan, and soon the tensions of the Cold War began to ease. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the end of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, it seemed that a new era of peace was at hand, reinforced by the reunification of the European continent. Gorbachev envisaged that Russia would remain a great power, but now one that worked cooperatively with the West.

On 6 July 1989, in an address to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France, Gorbachev had outlined his ideas for a ‘Common European Home’ and with that of a different vision for post–Cold War Europe. Now commonly described as ‘Greater Europe’, the idea lays out a programme for geopolitical and normative pluralism in Europe. Gorbachev argued eloquently and forcefully that different systems could coexist peacefully. A few months later, at the Malta meeting Gorbachev argued for the transcendence of Yalta and Malta. He called for the

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7 This was the programmatic declaration of the 28th Congress of the CPSU, ‘K gumannomu, demokraticheskomu sotsializmu’ (Moscow, Politizdat, 1990)
creation of a new dynamic in European international relations that would encompass the interests of both the small and great powers. This would be a multipolar Europe with space for experimentation and diversity. The tragedy of the Malta Summit is that Gorbachev was not talking about these ideas with European leaders but with the president of the United States. Unlike at Yalta, there was no Churchill to speak on behalf of Europe. Not surprisingly, the idea of a ‘greater Europe’ was the last thing that Bush wished to talk about, since it would signal precisely what America had long feared: a split between the European and American wings of the Atlantic alliance.

As the Eastern Europe countries one by one shook off Soviet power and dismantled the communist system, Gorbachev made it clear at Malta that the Soviet Union would not intervene in the various revolutions. As Archie Brown puts it, ‘Bush had been convinced in the course of the preceding months – as the Soviet leadership made clear that it would not intervene militarily to put a stop to regime change in Eastern Europe – that the new thinking was being matched by a completely new pattern of behaviour’. In other words, the ‘Brezhnev doctrine’ of limited sovereignty had been replaced by what the Soviet foreign ministry spokesman Gennady Gerasimov called the ‘Sinatra doctrine’ – ‘letting the East Europeans do it their way’.8

This built on the Helsinki Final Act of August 1975. Helsinki had confirmed Yalta, above all the borders and the framework for the conduct of relations between the great powers, but at the same time Helsinki’s ‘third basket’ package of human rights commitments provided a mechanism for the transcendence of Yalta. It also established a particular method for Yalta’s transcendence, which itself ultimately proved corrosive of post-Cold War international relationships. The emphasis on human rights at Helsinki and its legacy in the CSCE and the OSCE began the shift from the realist focus on structural relations between great powers, the principle of Yalta, to systemic issues, the question of regime type and the associated emphasis on normative values. Already in his study what he dubbed the ‘twenty years’ crisis’, E. H. Carr had critiqued the inherent hypocrisies and double standards inherent in this sort of ‘idealist’ politics.9 In the end, critique of Russia’s systemic failings in the post-Cold War era would establish the framework for the denigration of its interests, provoking a dramatic decline in the quality of contemporary diplomacy. This ultimately was the basis for the twenty-five years of the ‘cold peace’ between the Malta meeting in 1989 and the Maidan revolution in Kiev in 2014.

The opportunity for a common victory that Gorbachev presented at Malta was squandered. Perceiving the decline of Soviet power, Bush seized the opportunity to strengthen US dominance. Although the personal relationship with Gorbachev was a strong one, and Bush was acutely sensitive of the Soviet leader’s accumulating domestic problems and the growing wave of criticism of his policies, the shift in the balance of power was palpable. The Soviet Union had

now effectively become a hostage of American good will, something that the hard-nosed American domestic constituencies would only ration out for tangible advantage. Thus, over the course of the summit the pattern of post–Cold War politics was established, and the conditions were created that ultimately exploded in Ukraine in 2014. Instead of an equitable and inclusive post-Cold War settlement, an honourable draw, which was so much desired by Gorbachev, the Cold War ended in a sharply asymmetrical manner. Rather than establishing a new framework for the conduct of power relations, the ‘missed opportunity’ approach to the Malta summit argues that all it did was register the change in the balance of power. This created the conditions for a quarter century of the cold peace, which ended in a new Cold War. This was as predictable as it was avoidable. The writing was long on the wall – and what the writing said was that the wall would be coming back. The medium was indeed the message.

The Malta meeting is considered the repudiation of the Yalta conference, a symbolic turning point in East-West relations. In other words, the summit was a moment of power transition. The Atlantic powers appeared to triumph, and Russia entered a long period of decline. The retreat only began to be reversed when Putin rose to power in 2000. No less profoundly, Malta was also a moment of transition from the geopolitical pluralism that was symbolized by Yalta (in other words, a system made up of a number of great powers) to a unipolar security order in Europe. This was accompanied by the delegitimation of systemic alternatives. Normative pluralism came to an end (in other words, there would no longer be variety of social systems, in this case the liberal capitalism of the West and the more humane and democratic socialism that Gorbachev sought to build in the Soviet Union), and instead the virtues of a particular type of liberal capitalism were proclaimed as universal. The western experience of democracy, itself the product of a long process of historical evolution and torn by some powerful social and political contradictions, became the ‘gold standard’ for the rest of humanity. Thus Malta represents the mythological moment when geopolitical and systemic pluralism died in Europe.

**Triumphalism and the asymmetrical end of the Cold War**

Everything that has happened in the quarter century since the Malta meeting is little more than a playing out of the decisions taken at that time. The West assumed a victory that effectively extinguished the hope of a true partnership with Russia. Under President Bill Clinton NATO began an enlargement that brought it to the very borders of Russia, and the West nurtured its own myth of the ‘end of history.’ There were serious attempts to downplay the triumphalist rhetoric and to engage with Russia, but this too often was perceived to be condescending when it was not derogatory. Menon and Rumer, in their recent study of the Ukraine crisis, note that Europe had learned the lesson of the

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catastrophic mistakes made after the First World War by imposing the humiliating Versailles peace on Germany. They note that after 1918 ‘the major powers failed in one crucial respect: they failed to devise a blueprint for Europe that would have enmeshed the vanquished nation – Germany – in a new European security network’. The price for the failure was the Second World War, ‘but [Europe] learned the lesson of the previous disaster and, after 1945, secured Germany in the web of transatlantic institutions, thus ensuring its role as the model European citizen’.\(^{11}\) It was this lesson that was forgotten after Malta.

While Germany’s place in Europe, after the initial period of reconstruction and in conditions of Cold War, was never in question, Menon and Rumer continue,

That was not the case with Russia after 1991. Its place in post-Cold War Europe, whole and free, has always been tenuous. NATO membership for Russia was never seriously considered, and if it came up. It was only as a far-fetched, theoretical possibility. Devising a new security arrangement to replace both Cold War structures – the Warsaw Pact and NATO – was never considered either. There was never any question as to NATO’s future after the Cold War: it would continue, period.\(^{12}\)

Not only would NATO continue, but it would expand all the way to Russia’s borders. The alliance was caught in a logical trap: enlargement was not intended to threaten Russia, but in the absence of an effective mode of reconciliation, enlargement inevitably became a hedging strategy in case Russia reverted to what was assumed to be some sort of innately aggressive and threatening stance; but the very act of enlargement provoked a negative reaction that became more assertive and ultimately threatening. As I argued in my study of the Ukraine crisis, ‘NATO exists to manage the risks created by its existence’.\(^{13}\) Various structures were devised to manage the risks and mitigate the potential sense of threat. Russia was included in NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme in 1994; the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations in May 1997 ‘defined the goals and mechanisms of consultation’, including the creation of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council and a NATO commitment not to station troops permanently in the newly-acceded countries; and in 2002 the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was established as a forum to advance cooperation. None of these mechanisms worked in moments of crisis – just when they were most needed.

All of these were mere palliatives in the absence of a coherent strategy vis-à-vis Russia. In practical terms three options were available. First, full-scale engagement, which could have taken the form of Russia joining a transformed NATO or equivalent structure, as an equal founding member; or the abolition of

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\(^{12}\) Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 160.

NATO and the strengthening of the OSCE or some equivalent as the supreme security body on the continent. Moscow at various points showed a willingness to engage in either of these variants.

The second option was to adopt a *hedging* strategy, which effectively entailed the strengthening and enlargement of Western institutions, while trying to mitigate the effects on Russia and other neighbours. This is effectively the position adopted by NATO, but also by the European Union. Despite all the talk of ‘partnership’, from the very beginning Russia was an indigestible and alien entity for the ‘wider Europe’ model of development, whereby the Brussels-centric world would encompass the smaller states of Central and Southeastern Europe and find some way of managing the relationship with those left outside, above all through various mechanisms of ‘external governance’. Thus, as the president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, put it on 6 December 2002, they would ‘share everything with the Union but institutions’.14 Designed to prevent new dividing lines between the EU and its neighbours, the idea was to create a ‘ring of friends’ engaged in an integration process that would not necessarily result in accession, a policy that resulted in the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004. In 2009 this assumed a pronounced geopolitical aspect with the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in May of that year. It was no accident that the Ukraine crisis was provoked by President Viktor Yanukovych’s decision in November 2013 to postpone signing the Association Agreement with the EU.

The third option was a *transformation* of the type envisaged by Gorbachev. One variant of this was the conscious strategy of creating a ‘greater Europe’, which itself could take many forms.15 One of these was the creation of a ‘union of unions’, whereby the EU and Russia would create some sort of pan-continental union, including some sort of Eurasian union. This would have created a dynamism whereby the logic of conflict on the continent would be transcended, based on economic and security integration of the sort applied to Germany and Japan after the Second World War. Countries in the lands ‘in between’ could join the EU if they met the appropriate conditions, or remain part of the pan-European construction. Either way, they would not be faced with a stark choice between the EU or Eurasia, and new dividing lines by definition would have been avoided. This would have been an effective ‘mode of reconciliation’. The problem with this model, however, was that this model of European development would not only have transcended the logic of conflict on the continent, but it would also have transcended the need for the Atlantic security community in its traditional form. In other words, America’s role in European affairs would have changed. This is one reason why all ideas for the transformation of European politics have been condemned as part of the traditional Russian attempt to drive a ‘wedge’ between the two wings of the Atlantic alliance.

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15 For an exploration, see Alexei A. Gromyko and V. P. Fëdorova (eds), Bol’shaya Evropa: Idei, real’nost’, perspektivy (Moscow, Ves’ mir, 2014).
For this reason the hedging strategy predominated. As Menon and Rumer note, its advocates 'have no grounds to lament that engagement with Russia has failed, as their own advocacy of hedging undercut engagement's prospects'.

Gorbachev, who had done so much to bring the original Cold War to an end, could only lament in his speech on the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall on 8 November 214 that trust had been eroded, ‘the trust that was created by hard work and mutual effort in the process of ending the cold war. Trust – without which international relations in the global world are inconceivable’. He noted that the roots of the current crisis lay in the events of the 1990s, and argued that

Instead of building new mechanisms and institutions of European security and pursuing a major demilitarization of European politics – as promised, incidentally, in NATO’s London Declaration – the West, and particularly the United States, declared victory in the Cold War. Euphoria and triumphalism went to the heads of Western leaders. Taking advantage of Russia’s weakening and the lack of a counterweight, they claimed monopoly leadership and domination in the world, refusing to heed words of caution from many of those present here. The events of the past few months are consequences of short-sighted policies, of seeking to impose one’s will and *faits accomplis* while ignoring the interests of one’s partners.

There can be few more damning indictments of the pattern of post-Cold War international relations.

**Reflection on post-Cold War order**

Any engagement strategy based on a transformative dynamic of European international relations faced some formidable challenges. Not least among them was the prevalent view among the Atlantic powers that Russia was not an equal in political terms (a similar pattern is now playing out with China). The tension between structural and systemic approaches to the conduct of post-Cold War international relations is exacerbated in the Russian case by the obvious mismatch in economic, military and ‘soft power’ capacity. The main source of equality is in the nuclear arsenals and equal voting rights as permanent members of the UN Security Council. However, if Yalta, and its attendant crude power politics had really been overcome, then international society would be made up of equal powers, whatever their size and capacities. But, as noted, Malta did not represent the politics of transcendence, but only a power shift within the framework of the politics of Yalta.

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The fundamental tension is that between hegemonic and pluralist representations of global stability. A strong argument can be made that the United States has contributed to the pacification of potential conflicts in both Europe and Asia in the post-war years. The overwhelming predominance of conventional power resources, accompanied by the liberal internationalist ideology and institutions of global governance, has provided the framework for many states to develop and thrive in conditions of relative peace. However, the question now arises whether a tipping point has been reached. Does US hegemonic leadership today provoke as many conflicts as it resolves? It is clear that in the Ukraine crisis American policy has not been conducive to a peaceful resolution, and in fact may have prolonged and intensified the conflict. Above all, American triumphalism created the conditions in which the conflict unrolled. In Asia, too, there are many who question America’s commitment to the role of ‘honest broker’. Equally, commitment to traditional forms of the Atlantic alliance foreclosed the option of pan-European unification, and thus helped create the new dividing lines of today.

Of course, we also need to examine the degree to which Russia now constitutes a ‘threat’, to its neighbours and to the existing system of international law. The notion of threat needs not only to be contextualised but also ‘historicised’. By historicised I mean the attempt to understand not only the immediate context but also the broader pattern of historical change and structure of international politics that focuses on a particular moment. In this case, we need to understand how Russia’s enthusiastic embrace of Atlanticist values in the early 1990s, and Putin’s attempts to join NATO and the EU in the early 2000s, has given way to such profound alienation. This is, after all, a major puzzle. The Atlanticist orientation was never hegemonic in Russia, unlike in such countries as Poland, and was challenged by great power statists like Yevgeny Primakov in the 1990s, yet the broad policy of international integration and adaptation to international norms retained the support of the various presidents, and this strategy even now is far from exhausted. It remains the core strategy of the liberal economists who remain in control of Russia’s macroeconomic policy.

Nevertheless, in the sphere of security policy there was deepening estrangement between Russia and the Atlantic community. This was already visible at the time of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, when both Germany and France shred Russian concerns. However, by the time of Putin’s notorious speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 Russia found itself increasingly isolated. The European powers were increasingly bandwagoning with the US, thus reducing the scope for policy pluralism within the Atlantic community. Increasingly, Russia became not an out-and-out revisionist state, but at most a neo-revisionist power; claiming not to repudiate and threaten the rules of the international system but presenting itself as their most staunch upholder. When forced to ‘break the rules’, this is justified by their alleged prior breaching

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by the Atlantic powers.\(^{19}\) In fact, as far as Russia is concerned, it is the West that has become revisionist, not Russia. Equally, it is not the principles of international law and governance that that Russia condemns but the practices that accompany their implementation.

This is one of the essential features of the quarter century of the cold peace. None of the fundamental issues of European security and the management of global affairs was resolved. As far as the ‘victors’ were concerned, there was not a problem. The despotic system of European communism had dissolved and its associated geopolitical power system had disintegrated, allowing the former captive states to exercise their sovereign choice to align with the Atlantic community, while extending the sphere of freedom and democracy. If Russia did not like this, then that was its problem, and reflected Russia’s failure to complete its democratic transformation and its ill-founded and intemperate claims to be a ‘great power’, a status warranted neither by its economic nor social power.

At least three points can be made in response to this argument. The first concerns the nature of ‘choice’ in the post-Cold War geopolitical environment, an issue which in some ways mimics the broader debate about the quality of post-modern freedom. It also reprises the debate over the choices available to countries after the disintegration of the original Yalta system. As argued above, Helsinki first confirmed Yalta and then transcended it; but as Malta demonstrated, the transcendence was at most partial, and certainly did not give way to creative forms of engagement. The hedging strategy is one based on an irresponsible dynamic of ‘options’.

The idea that contemporary freedom entails the absence of constraint and instead opens up limitless ‘options’ is absurd, but one that has gained considerable currency today. As the reviewer of a recent study on the question puts it, ‘We decide what to do on the basis of our values, beliefs, temperament, conditioning, predilections and the like – which is to say that it is we who decide, not some blank space. To be entirely free of such constraints would mean that you had no basis at all on which to choose’. This means that ‘Freedom is not a question of being released from the forces that shape us, but a matter of what we make of them’.\(^{20}\) What applies to individuals is also true of nations. Like so many other countries, Ukraine does not exist in a vacuum where the ‘options’ are limitless, but finds itself in a region which is now on the fault line between the Atlantic community and Eurasia, and itself has traditionally been divided between these orientations. In that context, the intelligent exercise of freedom would be to engage with both, while ensuring the maximum scope for the development of self. This had long been tried through Kuchma-style ‘multivectorism’, but too often this degenerated into playing one side against the other, rather than acting as the genuine intermediary for both. This ‘torn’ aspect to Ukraine’s political identity, to use Samuel Huntington’s term, was exacerbated by the failure to create a transcending strategy at the regional and global level.


The second point concerns the ‘death of the West’ as a broad concept of modernity. The ‘West’ has traditionally represented a civilisational complex, and thus comfortably embraces many countries that are geographically far from the West, notably Japan. In the mind-1990s Christopher Coker warned of the ‘twilight of the west’, having in mind not western civilisation as such, whose decline had long ago been anticipated by Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, but the Atlantic community as the political and cultural foundation of NATO. Coker meticulously describes how the idea of an ‘Atlantic community’ had to be constructed in the post-war years, and did not enjoy the automatic allegiance of its members, in particular in Europe. It was ultimately the Soviet threat that kept the alliance together, although it was challenged by alternative projects, above all the Gaullist vision of an independent Europe responsible for its own security that at its most expansive included the Soviet Union and at its most exclusive would be able to manage its affairs without the United States. By the end of the Cold War, moreover, the countries making up the alliance were undergoing major demographic changes that turned them into multicultural societies, with diverse orientations that weakened the traditional focus on Atlantic security. On this basis, Coker was pessimistic about the future of the community.21

Instead, the Atlantic community not only survived but prospered, and today is assuming increasingly ramified features in the form of what I call the new Atlanticism. The revived Atlanticism is the intellectual framework for the new confrontation with Russia, and includes attempts to impose ‘bloc discipline’ of the Cold War type, especially when it comes to imposing sanctions as well as the accompanying propaganda efforts that at their worst reach McCarthyite proportions. Above all, the new Atlanticism effectively incorporates the European Union as one of the pillars of the new community, a development that was confirmed by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Although there are many countervailing trends, including the failure of most NATO countries to meet the two per cent defence spending threshold and German concerns over intrusive American spying on its leadership, European politics today is conducted within the framework of the new Atlanticism’s attempt to consolidate its hegemonic position. Thus when Ukraine talked of its ‘European choice’, this was less about Europe or even a cultural orientation towards the ‘West’, but expressed the aspiration to join the Atlantic community.

This brings us to the third point, the merger between security and ‘democracy’. Exponents of the democratic peace theory have long argued that consolidated democracies do not go to war with each other, and this lies at the basis of the post-Cold War ‘transdemocratic’ elision between security and systemic issues.22 The idea of ‘transdemocracy’ suggests that security can be advanced by promoting liberal democracy and integration into European institutions.23 However, when this was perceived to take the form of aspirations

21 Christopher Coker, Twilight of the West (Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1997).
22 The related concept of ‘inter-democracy’ is explored by Glenn Diesen, EU and NATO Relations with Russia: After the Collapse of the Soviet Union (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2015).
23 See, for example, Sandra Lavenex, ‘EU External Governance in “Wider Europe”’, Journal of European Public Policy, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2004, pp. 680–700; Sandra Lavenex and Frank
for ‘regime change’, the policy provoked conflict and resistance. At the heart of the idea of transdemocracy in the European context is the coupling of democracy and human rights with the expansion of the Atlantic community. The human rights agenda of Helsinki is married to that of Yalta/Malta. The ideology of transdemocracy assumes that if democracy is the best possible form of government and the one that is liable to make allies of the states concerned, then all practicable measures should be employed to achieve the desired end.

The main instrument for this ‘systemic’ approach to the conduct of international politics came to be ‘colour’ revolutions, mass popular mobilisations against attempts to ‘steal’ elections. The current series began with the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2005 in what came to be known as the ‘bulldozer revolution’, and then progressed through the tulip revolution in December 2003 in Georgia, the orange revolution in Ukraine in autumn 2004, and the lilac revolution in Kyrgyzstan in spring 2005, and on to the Arab spring from 2011. The normative impetus behind these revolutions was inspired by genuine ideals of inclusive democratic citizenship. In the Arab awakening this took the form of calls for secular reform, while in Ukraine from November 2013 this was expressed in the struggle for ‘dignity’ and the end of political and economic corruption. However, everywhere this quickly entailed the substantive denigration of the political subjectivity, if not sovereignty, of the states at the receiving end of transdemocratic practices. Struggles for democratic emancipation were subsumed into broader struggles for geopolitical advantage. In the end, as so vividly seen in Syria and ultimately Russia, if a state did not comply with the normative demands of the Atlantic system and sought to retain its autonomy in the international system, then it would come under scrutiny as a target for regime change. Countries were tested on two features: systemic conformity with the values of the Atlantic system; and structural compatibility with the hard format of the Euro-Atlantic security community. On both counts, Russia was found wanting.

Thus, in the era of the cold peace two principles came increasingly into conflict – transdemocracy and ‘sovereign democracy’ – and this ultimately is the context in which the Ukraine crisis unfolded. The argument between the two concepts ultimately cannot be resolved, since it is fundamentally not a debate over facts but about two contending narratives – myths if you will – based on incompatible ontologies of historical experience and understandings of how political change should be achieved. For the partisans of transdemocracy, societies were considered malleable, and in an almost Trotskyist manner became engaged in a permanent revolution to change societies to render them compatible with the exigencies of the Atlantic system. This revisionist stance provoked Russia’s neo-revisionism, based on the sovereign democracy assertion in defence of the autonomy of historical experience and the need to tailor reform

to the actual structures of an existing society, rather than imposing teleological patterns of change on to that society.

The current crisis was provoked not by the existence of these different narratives and world views, but by their politicisation and the failure to find a mode of reconciliation to overcome their baleful consequences. The Yalta approach of systemic and geopolitical pluralism was one such mode of reconciliation, although clearly with major drawbacks, notably the denigration of the rights of small powers. Malta offered another mode of reconciliation by incorporating the Helsinki agenda but also retaining the idea of systemic and geopolitical pluralism. However, as we have seen, Gorbachev’s transformative vision of Malta quickly lost traction, and instead only confirmed the power shift to the triumphant US-led Atlantic community. A third potential mode of reconciliation was offered by the European Union. There was a time when idealists thought that the EU offered just such a prospect of transcending the logic of conflict, but unfortunately in recent years it has become more of an instrument for their perpetuation rather than transcendence.24 From being a way of overcoming traditional geopolitics in Europe, something that it achieved with spectacular success when it comes to relations between France and Germany, in relations with the East it has now become a geopolitical actor (whether its actorness is effective or not in this sphere is another matter) rather than contributing to the overcoming of the logic of conflict.

The fourth potential mode of reconciliation was the system of global governance, with the UN at its apex. However, despite much anticipation that with the end of the Cold War the UN system would finally come into its own, in practice the asymmetrical end of the Yalta system once again constrained its work. Although Russia inherited a permanent seat on the Security Council from the Soviet Union, the formidable Atlantic troika the US, UK and France once again reproduced the stalemate of the Cold War years. The unipolar moment unbalanced the structures of global governance created in the wake of the Second World War. It is for this reason that Primakov and later Putin called for a multipolar world order, which began to develop with the creation of the G20 in 1999 as a policy forum, which after the Washington summit in November 2008 took a more active in global governance, formalised in a decision of 25 September 2009 that henceforth the body would supersede the G8 as the economic forum for the developed nations.

**Is a new wall inevitable?**

The last straw was the perceived attempt to wrest Ukraine away from Moscow’s economic and security sphere. Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014, including the repatriation of Crimea and support for the insurgency in the Donbass, is perceived by the West to represent a violent challenge to the system of international law. However, from the Kremlin’s perspective—and, it must be said, from the point of view of the great majority of Russian citizens—the struggle

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24 This is evident from any number of speeches by elites in Poland and the Baltic republics, notably the former Polish foreign minister, Radek Sikorski.
over Ukraine is considered to be a desperate last stand to defend not only Russia’s interests but also that different vision of Europe’s destiny enunciated by Gorbachev in the Cold War’s dying days. Putin’s Russia is a deeply conservative country at home, and in international affairs it claims to be defending a status quo threatened by what has come to be seen as the West’s revisionism, manifested by the restless urge to remodel regimes in its own likeness while pushing its security system to Russia’s borders.

Although the NATO alliance has made every effort to manage its enlargement with Russia, the structural exclusion of Russia from the Atlantic security system has inevitably provoked conflict. In this way, at the end of the Cold War, the cold peace was born. Long before Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, NATO was perceived by Moscow to be a security threat. Russia was excluded from the Atlantic security system, and all of Moscow’s attempts to create a Eurasian alternative were blocked. The Ukraine conflict is the child of the cold peace. Although there are profound internal contradictions in the Ukrainian model of state development, these would not have assumed such disastrous forms if the geopolitics of post–Cold War Europe had been sorted out earlier. Equally, although a fragile cease-fire is taking hold in Ukraine within the framework of the Minsk II agreement, no sustainable peace is possible unless the Minsk peace is embedded within a broader European and global settlement.

This brings us back to where we started. If the West had truly opened itself up to Gorbachev’s visionary concept of European transformation, we would not be facing the catastrophic breakdown of the European security system provoked by the conflict in Ukraine. Gorbachev came to Malta with radical ideas about transcending the Cold War logic of ideological conflict between East and West. Instead, this logic was reaffirmed, but with the opposite polarity. The Atlantic alliance system emerged as the supreme power on the European continent, while ideas of geopolitical and systemic pluralism were negated. Soviet concerns and interests were increasingly marginalized, as were those of the newly formed Russian Federation. Although the former communist countries joined NATO by invitation, one they mostly enthusiastically sought, all this did was to perpetuate the logic of confrontation and division. The 2008 Russo-Georgian war had already demonstrated that Russia would not tolerate being encircled by NATO countries.

Malta turned out to be not just a lost opportunity but also a political disaster. Instead of establishing a new pattern of international politics, it reconfirmed the predominance of great power politics, but now in a system that lacked alternatives, and to which was added a normative dynamic that effectively delegitimated the security concerns of others. Although the European Union formally enshrines the equality of all its member states, it has become one of the pillars of the larger Atlantic community. Although NATO is an alliance of equals, it is clear that America is by far the pre-eminent power. And it is NATO that has been steadily enlarging, to the point that it threatens to encircle Russia from the south and west. From a geopolitical perspective, it is irrelevant whether NATO is a benign or malign force if one of Europe’s great powers considers it a threat.
Gorbachev understood where all this was heading, and since his forced retirement in December 1991 he has repeatedly lamented this outcome. It is for this reason that he broadly endorsed Putin’s policies regarding Ukraine in 2014. We lived for forty-five years in a world shaped by Yalta, and then another twenty-five years in a world shaped by Malta. As the Ukraine crisis makes painfully clear, fundamental questions of European security remain unresolved. The cold peace was always pregnant with conflict, and it has now given birth. The West lives in a world where time has stopped: the myth of its victory in the Cold War is considered the foundation of the contemporary international order. If we want to chart a path toward stability in Europe, we must challenge the myths of the last quarter century. We must also avoid the mistakes of the past 25 years of the cold peace, and the previous 45 years of the Cold War. The foundations of European and global security need to be rethought. The stakes could not be higher.