

# THE RUSSIAN-AMERICAN TUG-OF-WAR:

THE QUEST FOR HEGEMONY IN THE TURBULENT (GREATER) MIDDLE EAST

by

Rachael Shaffer

A thesis is submitted to the faculty of the Department of Political Science  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts  
Roger Williams University

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	2
Introduction.....	3
Cold War.....	3
Soviet Union .....	3
Global Strategic Interests and Origins .....	3
Foreign Policy in the Greater Middle East .....	4
United States .....	5
Global Strategic Interests and Origins .....	5
Foreign Policy in the Greater Middle East .....	6
Post-Cold War.....	6
Russia.....	6
Global Strategic Interests .....	7
Foreign Policy in the Greater Middle East .....	7
United States .....	7
Global Strategic Interests .....	8
Foreign Policy in the Greater Middle East .....	8
Case Studies .....	8

## ABSTRACT

*Since the end of World War II, the international system has been functioning under a bipolar system of balance of superpowers: Russia, or the former Soviet Union, and the United States. These two states have been competing for strategic and economic influence since the beginning of the post-war period in multiple regions throughout the world. Although the two powers both have their own economic and political interests in the greater Middle East, there is minimal, if any, overlap of interests. Despite divergent interests, the greater Middle East continues to be the rope in a game of hegemonic tug-of-war between the United States and Russia. The purpose of this paper is to examine why the United States and Russia continue to compete for influence in this region specifically; what geopolitical interests do these states have in the region? Where do these interests derive from? Do the geopolitical interests in the greater Middle East fulfill the global strategic interests of each state? Are geopolitical interests translated to the state's foreign policy towards individual states in the region? This paper will analytically follow each state's respective foreign policies within a global strategic sphere, the regional sphere of the greater Middle East, and local spheres by examining their respective policies in regards to Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria since the beginning of the post-war era. Is the current game of hegemonic tug-of-war between the United States and Russia an extension of the Cold War?*

## INTRODUCTION

Following the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union and the United States emerged as the two world powers in a recovering system. As each country began to make advances in the world technologically, militarily, and economically, the United States and the Soviet Union saw their counterpart as a direct threat to their state's national security. The global strategic interests of each state were designed to prevent the other from spreading its sphere of influence. The United States saw the Soviet Union's attempt at expansion as a threat to her national security and actively engaged in foreign policies to thwart the expansion of communism and Soviet influence; and the Soviet Union saw the same in the United States. During the Cold War, the three regions that were of utmost importance to the Americans and the Soviets were East Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. It was vital to the national security of each state to protect these areas from either preventing the spread of the other state's evil ideals or to promote their own respective sacred ideology. The following literature will examine both Soviet and American global strategic interests and how the geopolitics of the greater Middle East region promote their corresponding interests.

## COLD WAR

### SOVIET UNION

#### GLOBAL STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND ORIGINS

The foreign policy of the Soviet Union following the end of the Second World War boiled down to one national interest that has always been a forefront of Soviet foreign policy: securing the borders of the far-reaching Soviet Empire. The different political structures of Russia, whether it be tsarist, Soviet, or democratic, have long engaged in the practice of securing its borders by means of expansionism. The first tsar of Russia, Ivan III (Ivan the Great), rose to power as the leader of Russia in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by expanding the borders of the principality he ruled; thus beginning the era of expansionist Russia.<sup>1</sup> Russian expansionism was not driven solely by the desire to protect Russian borders but also by a need to obtain resources that do not exist in Russia; where half of the country is in the permafrost zone, making sufficient agricultural means and, more importantly, ice-free ports scarce assets.<sup>2</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian expansionism continued its search for ice-free ports and access to major waterways, leading it to the Crimean War with Turkey, Britain, and France which not only forced the Russians to surrender much of its recent territorial gain but also exposed the greatest weaknesses of the now visibly backwards Russian army.<sup>3</sup> Being exposed by Britain and France began to encourage the

<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Nogee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

anti-Western sentiments engrained deep in the policies of Russia today and throughout the Cold War. After the humiliating defeat at the Crimean War, Russia began to set her sights east to the geostrategic advantages of Central Asia: close proximity to British-India and the presence of natural resources unavailable in the largely frozen Russia.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw great changes for Russia. In 1917 the Russian Revolution transformed Russia from an imperial expansionist to a Soviet power expansionist. Lenin, who rose to power in 1922 following the Bolshevik revolution, believed that communism would save the Russian state from the trials of an autocratic government. The top of Soviet foreign policy still remained from the days of imperial Russia but with different rationale for the need: “the inevitability of war between the Soviet Union and its capitalist adversaries.”<sup>4</sup> Soviet leaders following the path set before them by Marxist-Leninist ideology supported the socialist and communist parties of neighboring and nearby countries in the midst of political and social upheavals.

Following the end of World War II, “the Soviets deemed it vital for Soviet security that the countries which bordered on the Soviet Union should not have anti-Soviet governments which would either support or be unable to prevent another invasion of the Soviet Union.”<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that the Soviet Union had no interest in setting up puppet governments in the liberated states in Eastern Europe resulting from the end of the war. “Each country had a coalition of Communists and non-Communists ... the Soviet Union was prepared to accept such coalition governments.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, at the time the Truman administration in the United States did not believe that the Soviet Union would remain detached from the internal issues of its neighbors, which caused the Soviets to remove the non-Communist tenets of East European governments and implementing Communist satellite governments in neighboring countries.<sup>7</sup> Satellite governments propped up by the Soviet Union were the only way the Soviets could ensure security from the imposing threat of Western capitalism embodied by the United States. Protection of Soviet security from Western capitalism by means of expanding Soviet sphere of communist influence would remain the fundamental goal of the Soviet Union’s global strategic policy.

---

#### FOREIGN POLICY IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

Soviet foreign policy in the greater Middle East really came into existence in during the Cold War. The tsarist Russian Empire had interests in some of its neighbors such as present day Turkey, Afghanistan, and Iran but beyond immediate borders was not of much interest to the Russians. It came into focus during the Cold War primarily because of the significance the region held for the United States. The Soviet Union knew that, in addition to the security of the newly formed Jewish state of Israel in the heart of the region, the United States’ principal interest in the greater Middle East was the prevalence and crucial trade routes of oil.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>5</sup> Peter G. Boyle, *American-Soviet Relations: From the Russian Revolution to the fall of Communism*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 62.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Consistent with the global foreign policy goals Union during the Cold War, the Soviet Union saw the greater Middle East as a region with an abundance of states that would benefit from socialist policies. The Soviet Union believed that if these states were socialist, not necessarily Soviet socialist but still socialist in practice, it had won and was therefore just another step closer to defeating capitalism and the West.

## UNITED STATES

### GLOBAL STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND ORIGINS

The foreign policy of the United States following the culmination of the debilitating Second World War was unlike the Soviet Union's as it did not have roots deep from within the historical contexts of the state. In fact, the foreign policy goals during the Cold War actually required the United States to reevaluate her pre-war isolationist foreign policy objectives. The ultimate interest abroad following the Second World War was the prevention of a Third World War. A main cause of Hitler's rise to power and the emergence of Nazi Germany was due to the enormous reparations Germany was required to pay back to the victors of World War I, as laid out in the Treaty of Versailles. In order to pay back this incredulous amount Germany chose to print more money, causing drastic inflation within the country in addition to the worldwide effects of the Great Depression. Preventing a powerful state from entering a period of devastating economic turmoil such as Germany did prior to World War II became a systematic foreign policy initiative to avoid any possibility of a Third World War.

The interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s was riddled with economic instability felt throughout Europe and the world. To prevent the outbreak of World War III, the United States believed that it needed to stabilize the economies within and of Europe. Many American policy makers saw the expansion of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology threatening.<sup>89</sup> Arguably, the aggression many Americans witnessed during Nazi Germany's expansion was mirrored during the Soviet Union's expansion into nearby Eastern European countries and the emergence of communist regimes in Southeast Asia. So, if Nazi Germany expanded to its neighbors and increased its sphere of influence and the Soviet Union is also expanding its sphere of influence to its neighbors, the Soviet Union must be stopped before the outbreak of World War III. It was this reasoning that prompted U.S. President Truman in 1947 to ask Congress for \$400 million in military and economic aid for Greece and Turkey as their economies were faltering and faltering economies are vulnerable to communist influences.<sup>10</sup> The framework of the request, however, was not just a specific request for aid for Greece and Turkey but rather as "the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation

<sup>8</sup> X, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July 1947): 566-582, accessed March 18, 2014, <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/helin.uri.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=14885486&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Aftergood, "NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, April 14, 1950," *Federation of American Scientists*, accessed March 18, 2014, <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”<sup>11</sup> This statement will go on to be known as the Truman Doctrine and will remain a staple of American foreign policy during and after the Cold War.

In a continued effort to rebuild the economies within Europe, the aid requested by President Truman for Greece and Turkey was just one part of a larger plan known as the Marshall Plan, or the European Recovery Program. The Marshall Plan provided almost \$13 billion in aid to sixteen different European nations.<sup>12</sup> The Marshall Plan restored the economies of these sixteen European nations in addition to setting the foundation for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>13</sup> The creation of NATO directly targeted and threatened the Soviet Union and their expansionist goals. Communism in Western Europe was the ultimate goal of the Soviet Union; however, the establishment of NATO barred any communist Soviet influence. The Truman Doctrine and the extension to the Marshall Plan were the beginning parts to the overall policy of containing communism and the Soviet Union in order to prevent a Third World War in the post-World War II era.

---

## FOREIGN POLICY IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

During the Cold War, the states within the greater Middle East became of vital importance to the success of American global foreign policy goals. Given the region’s proximity to the Soviet Union, a comprehensive containment policy was pursued to ensure that Soviet influence did not enter into the region. However, American interests ran much deeper than preventing the invasion of Soviet influence. The greater Middle East was home to the world’s largest oil reserves and to the newly established Jewish state of Israel. The United States is the world’s largest oil dependent and if the states in the region geographically pertinent to the production and trade of oil were to align with the Soviets, the price and accessibility to oil would become dismal. The United States was a key player in the formation of the Israeli state and protecting its sovereignty became a focal point of American policy in the region from its creation. Israel was considered an important ally in the greater Middle East as the United States previously had no direct influence there. Should the Soviet sphere of influence expand, it was only a matter of time before it came in direct contact with Israel, posing a direct threat to American ideals.

## POST-COLD WAR

### RUSSIA

---

<sup>11</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Harry S. Truman, 1947*, (Washington, US Government Printing Office, 1963), 178-9.

<sup>12</sup> “The Marshall Plan,” last modified 2009, <http://www.marshallfoundation.org/TheMarshallPlan.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

---

## GLOBAL STRATEGIC INTERESTS

The collapse of the Communist Soviet Union came on the final day of 1991 calendar year, marking the end of 45 years of conflicting ideologies between the East and the West.<sup>14</sup> The announcement came less than a week prior when President Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on national television. The ultimate demise of the Soviet Union can be found in Gorbachev's attempt to modernize the Communist party with *perestroika*, which sought to introduce more market economies in a system that has fought the idea of capitalism for so long.<sup>15</sup> Gorbachev noted that even in a country with an abundance of natural resources, the people of Russia were drastically suffering.<sup>16</sup> In 1947 when the Marshall Plan was established, the Soviets were invited to participate even though the United States knew that the conditions of the Marshall Plan would be unacceptable to the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> Had the Soviet Union agreed to the terms of the Marshall Plan, the Soviet Union could still be a strong Communist state today.

Due to the vast geography of the Soviet Union, the abundance of natural resources, especially oil, allowed for the Soviet Union to continue to function for over four decades under a central planning economic system that was failing the USSR.<sup>18</sup> When the prices of oil were increased under Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in the 1970s, Russia benefitted immensely from this. "This surge in oil revenues helped keep the enfeebled Soviet economy going for another decade, enabling the country to finance its superpower military status and meet other urgent needs."<sup>19</sup> With an economy that was barely surviving, the interests of the Russians were to rebuild their economic system; all the while still remaining as the balancer of power to the United States.

---

## FOREIGN POLICY IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

As the United States began to intervene in the affairs of states within the greater Middle East, the Russians could not idly sit back and watch the Americans slowly approach its (former) borders. The Russian economy could not prop up states in the region like the United States was able to do so the Russians had to find another way to continue and to expand their sphere of influence. Russia was able to remain an opponent to the United States in the region by giving states an alternative to capitalism. Soviet policy during the Cold War remained intact for directly following its dissolution.

## UNITED STATES

---

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 22.

<sup>15</sup> Stephan White, Richard Sakwa, and Henry E. Hale, *Development in Russian Politics 7*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Yergin, *The Quest*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Boyle, *American-Soviet Relations*, 65.

<sup>18</sup> Yergin, *The Quest*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



---

## GLOBAL STRATEGIC INTERESTS

The foreign policy of the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century was always driven by something that threatened her national security; whether that was an isolationist approach or an interventionist approach. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, “there was no single focus of ‘threat,’” allowing for the future of American foreign policy to be dictated by the policy makers themselves.<sup>20</sup> A major tenant of American foreign policy directly following the Cold War was global democratization. The democratic peace suggests that democracies do not go to war with other states operating under democracies. The global foreign policy goal of the United States during the Cold War was the prevention of World War III. Therefore, if democracies do not go to war with one another then the best way to prevent World War III would be to democratize the world. This ideology became a driving force strongly influenced the foreign policy of the Clinton administration and was then the continued and expanded by the second Bush administration in the early twenty-first century.

Global democratization was a feature of the overall foreign policy goal of the United States succeeding the end of the Cold War: as the remaining superpower, sustaining and becoming the leader of global engagement.<sup>21</sup> The discourse of the Cold War provided validation for American internationalism through containing the communist evils of the Soviet Union. When the communist evils of the Soviet Union no longer existed, it required the United States to adjust its foreign policy to continue to provide validation for its internationalist actions abroad.

---

## FOREIGN POLICY IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

As a region that had been of tremendous importance to the success of American foreign policy during the Cold War, the greater Middle East became of even larger importance to the United States following the collapse of the Soviet Union for two reasons. Firstly, the greater Middle East was an ideal region to execute the American policy of democratization. It was a region that was no stranger to conflict and democracy is the answer to preventing conflict; so, logically states in the greater Middle East would benefit from the implementation of democracy. Secondly, terrorism had rapidly grown as a defense strategy for many non-state groups, especially in the greater Middle East. As the United States proceeded with its policies in the region, the target on its back grew. It was important to the United States that its policy in the greater Middle East addresses the rising issue of terrorism; whilst maintaining the security of its interests in oil and Israel.

## CASE STUDIES

The case studies of Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran and Syria will determine if, in fact, the current quest for hegemony in the region is an extension of the Cold War. These case studies will examine the role each state played to the United States and to Russia during the Cold War and after. Thorough examination will require an introspective look at the pertinence of each country

---

<sup>20</sup> John Dumbrell, “American in the 1990s: search for purpose,” *US Foreign Policy*, Michael Cox and Doug Stokes, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

in relation to the United States and Russia and how the relationships of each state have supported, or not, the global foreign policy interests respectively. Through this determination, the conclusion will be reached as to whether or not the greater Middle East has never been released from the constraints of the Cold War.