

# Is Putin starting another Cold War?

## GATHERING PLACE

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**H**ALF a century ago, President Kennedy said, "The real problem is the Soviet desire to expand their power and influence. If Mr. Khrushchev would concern himself with the real interests of the people of the Soviet Union, there's no real reason why the United States and Soviet Union — separated by so many thousands of miles of land and water, both rich countries, both with energetic people — should not be able to live in peace."

Substitute Vladimir Putin's name for Khrushchev and the same is true today. In 2008 we stand at a peculiar juncture in U.S.-Russian relations. In the past few months, Russia has withdrawn from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, resumed active alert flights of its nuclear bombers, violated the airspace of nations around the world from Britain to Norway to Japan and, most recently, buzzed the USS Nimitz in the Pacific.

If this weren't enough, President Putin has threatened to target Ukraine with its ICBM missiles should it join NATO, along with the Czech Republic and Poland should they host a U.S. missile defense platform. This belligerence comes on the heels of an internal crackdown that has eroded personal freedom and the democratic gains of the 1990s, effectively turning the clock back by more than a decade.

THE RUSSIAN media are no longer free and again are subject to heavy censorship and government control; political parties are back under the control of the state, and civil society organizations are closely monitored, scrutinized and randomly shut down. Political dissent has been squelched through various intimidation practices that include assassi-

nation of Kremlin opponents and critics. Elections have been rigged and votes undercounted. Compliance squads are the Kremlin's new vanguard composed of street gangs of nationalist thugs who stand ready to stamp down any pro-democracy demonstrations. Regional governors, once elected by the people, now serve at the mercy of the Kremlin under an added layer of supervision and control by seven "super-regional" governors, appointed by Putin and comprised of KGB veterans and close allies. Sound like the old Soviet Union?

Yet in the past 17 years, the people of Russia and the United States have experienced a greater understanding of one another during the absence of totalitarian control.

Our exchange students are developing a love for both nations; our astronauts and cosmonauts work together on the International Space Station, while economic globalization has brought a stronger degree of interdependence between our businesses and banks.

Yet with all we have in common, and Russia prospering with sky-rocketing oil prices, the world is again faced with the specter of nuclear exchange.

It is rather clear that the United States has no intentions to go to war with Russia. During the past seven years, the Bush administration has placed an emphasis on "transformational" doctrine, premised on Russian transitioning away from the old autocratic model to more democratic governance. The United States has shunned offensive Cold War-style



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weapons in favor of defensive systems and platforms suited for regional conflicts that require more nimble rapid reaction and quick insertion and "military operations other than war." Air and artillery systems built to counter a Soviet attack have been canceled, stealth missiles retired and other weapon systems scaled back.

Russia complains that the United States is building a so-called "missile shield" and uses their fear of the system as justification for their belligerence and renewed arms race. Yet Russia is deploying the Topol-M ICBM, a multiple-warhead nuclear missile superior to anything in the world's arsenal. Russia also is planning to construct 12 new Borei-class "boomer" submarines to replace its current fleet of Typhoon-class submarines, the quietest and most modern first-strike submarines to ever be deployed by any military —

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while the U.S. currently has no plans to upgrade or replace its aging fleet of Ohio-class submarines. All of these weapons are offensive, first-strike systems designed to start wars, not prevent them.

Putin's belligerence toward his neighbors, as Defense Secretary Condoleezza Rice said, is "reprehensible"; his suppression of human rights and political rights at home abhorrent. He would be wise to realize there is much to gain from continued peace and an expansion

of freedom, but little to profit from a renewed chilling of relations and political repression. The Soviet Union couldn't win the last Cold War and Russia won't win this one, if it starts again. Bottom line: Putin's last few months in office (his term expires in March) could be most remembered for his pushing Russia backward into the future and the possible revival of Khrushchev's Cold War with America.

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