

The Real Cold War: A High-Stakes Chess Match of Global Proportions

No missiles were launched and no guns were fired between the two superpowers, but The Cold War was a war nonetheless: a battle of indirect aggression, of politics, of economics and propaganda. The term "Cold War" was originally coined by presidential adviser Bernard Baruch during a 1947 congressional debate. That term would come to signify decades of tension and hostility between the United States and the United Soviet Socialist Republic.

The conflict would take many forms, from the chess game of ever-shifting global alliances to an escalating arms race that would spark worldwide fears of a nuclear holocaust. Often thought to refer solely to the strained relations between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., the Cold War, in fact, involved the whole world. If the United States and the Soviet Union were the main players, then lesser countries were their pawns.

Fall of Hitler, rise of Russia

At the end of World War II in 1945, the clear-cut relationships between the Allies began to unravel. Their common enemy, Hitler, was done away with; ideologies and agendas set aside during the war were taken up again. The victors of WWII, surveying the altered landscape of global power relations, also began to eye one another warily.

By 1948, the Soviets had already established leftist governments in the liberated Eastern-bloc countries as a bulwark against any renewed German threat; America and Great Britain feared that Soviet influence, if not curbed, would spread to Western Europe. In 1947-48, the U.S. was building its own bulwark, sending aid to Western Europe under the Marshall Plan. With the Soviets having installed openly communist regimes in the East, the Cold War had begun.

The next five years would mark the height of the Cold War, with the Soviets and the U.S. dividing Europe with their military forces and ideologies. The subsequent years unfolded in an unnerving match of maneuver and counter-maneuver: After the Soviets unsuccessfully blockaded Western-held sectors of West Berlin in 1948-49, the U.S. and its European allies formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military presence that served to keep Soviet influence in check. But the Soviets were advancing in other quarters nonetheless, exploding their first atomic warhead in 1949, ending the U.S.'s primacy in weapons technology. Also, in 1949, the Soviet-backed North Korean government penetrated the border into South Korea, which was supported by the U.S. The ensuing Korean War would last until 1953.

Hot points

That same year, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin died, easing the standoff somewhat. But two years later, relations were strained anew as the two superpowers' military organizations -- the West's NATO and the Soviet Union's newly formed Warsaw Pact -- scrambled in a sort of larger-than-life membership drive.

The race was for technology as well as allies: the U.S. and U.S.S.R. began developing intercontinental ballistic missiles in 1958, touching off another intense period. When the Soviets were discovered to be secretly installing missiles in Cuba -- well within range of U.S. cities -- the superpowers were poised at the brink of war. Fortunately, this episode, known as the Cuban Missile Crisis, was defused when an agreement was reached to withdraw the weapons.

The outcome was strangely hopeful: it showed that even top defense leaders of both superpowers feared the awesome destructive power of these new weapons. With the signing of the Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty in 1963, both sides agreed not to engage in above-ground nuclear weapons tests.

But hostilities still ran high. The Soviets considered the outcome of the Cuban Missile crisis nothing less than a humiliation to them; they vowed to never again be shamed by their rival in the west. The Soviet Union thus began a buildup of conventional and strategic forces over the next 25 years -- and the U.S. would be forced to keep pace. This escalating arms race would be one of the definitive aspects of the Cold War, inspiring civilian peace movements and deep fears of The Bomb.

The Cold War had its hot points, battles carried out in allied and enemy countries. The Soviet Union fortified member countries such as East Germany, Hungary and Afghanistan. The U.S., meanwhile, tried to stanch communist influence closer to home, overthrowing a leftist regime in Guatemala, invading the Dominican Republic and Grenada, and backing a failed invasion of Cuba in 1961. Most infamously, it fought from 1964-1975 to stop North Vietnam from bringing South Vietnam under communist rule.

The thaw

But cracks were forming in the Communist bloc. Countries that were once of middling consequence showed signs of autonomy and political strength, and the globe wasn't so easily defined in terms of U.S. or Soviet influence. China had largely distanced itself from the Soviet Union, creating a rift in what was formerly considered a unified Communist front. Meanwhile, Western Europe and Japan were developing at an explosive rate.

Tensions were eased further with the SALT I and II agreements, which limited the development of antiballistic and strategic missiles. Still, tensions spiked in the 1980s with a flurry of mutual arms buildup. However, the administration of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the Cold War wound down, as he attempted to democratize the U.S.S.R.'s political machine. With the fall of the Soviet bloc of Eastern Europe in 1989-90, the rise of democratic governments in its place and, most notably, the unification of

East and West Germany under NATO oversight, the tensions of Cold War were finally disappearing.

In late 1991, the final stubborn bastion of Communism, the Soviet Union, collapsed, creating 15 newly independent nations. Russia itself saw a democratically elected leader come to power, and the world sighed with relief: it was the surest sign that the Cold War had thawed at last.