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# The Cold War is Over . . . Again

Allen Lynch, Assistant Director of the Harriman Institute and Lecturer in Political Science at Columbia University, spoke to the Institute on the topic of "The Cold War is Over . . . Again" on March 12, 1991. With the collapse of communism in East-Central Europe, the reunification of Germany, and the overall improvement in East-West relations, many have concluded that the Cold War is finally over. Lynch, however, argued that the Cold War, stripped of the rhetoric and reduced to its geopolitical essence, was over quite some time ago; indeed, authors such as William Pfaff, Marshal Shulman, and Andre Fontaine were already writing about the end of the Cold War by the early sixties. Unfortunately, the ideological atmospherics of the Cold War continued to influence the collective consciousness of academia, the media, and the policy-making community, which accounts for the confusion surrounding postwar East-West relations.

## Geopolitics and Atmospherics

Discussion of the Cold War is marked by many controversies: the nature of the struggle itself, who initiated it, and how long it lasted. Lynch addressed each of these issues in turn. First, what was the Cold War about? For the US: containing communism, or containing Russian/Soviet expansionism? As Lynch pointed out, the answers to these questions significantly determined our choice of policies. If the issue was containing communism, then American policy would have to be global and unlimited; if it was containing Russian/Soviet expansionism, then American interests could be less than global. From the Soviet perspective: was the Cold War about destroying capitalism, or about establishing a stable balance of power in Europe?

For Lynch the main issue of the Cold War was the political collapse of Europe, and the consequences of this collapse. The disintegration of an autonomous European balance of power, and of German power in the heart of Europe, left a void which could only be filled by the US and the Soviet Union — the only powers able to reconstitute an equilibrium in Europe, but also the only ones capable of upsetting it. As Lynch noted, however, such a geopolitical situation was rife with ideological tension and discord. Thus, because of the climate of the times, "what began as a rather predictable political contest to secure or frustrate the age-old pretension to European hegemony eventually became worldwide ideological confrontation."

Nevertheless, ideological confrontation was not the intent of early postwar policy makers. Following George Kennan, Lynch noted that "many of the policies that were to characterize US cold war policy, such as the militarization of relationships, the globalization of commitments, and the pervasive ideological hysteria, were absent from American foreign policy in 1947-48, the formative period of containment policy."

That the Cold War was patently not about ideology is proven by US support for national communists such as Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia after 1948, or Gomulka in Poland after 1956. The US decision not to intervene in the Chinese Civil War is a similar case, which suggests that the containment of communism *per se* is a gross oversimplification of a more complex US policy. In both camps the rhetoric of Cold War tended to overshadow the reality. "The cold war was portrayed as nothing less than an irreconcilable clash of civilizational destinies: that is, capitalism versus socialism for one, freedom versus slavery for the other," Lynch said.

Running through the postwar superpower relationship was the tendency of both sides to ascribe the blame for the Cold War to their opponents. Both sides often claimed that the other had an actual *policy* of Cold War, which as Lynch pointed out, "denied the fact that it was an interactive process deeply rooted in historical and geopolitical circumstances . . . that there could be a tragic incompatibility of interests." Ironically, despite substan-

tial disagreement over many things, both the US and the Soviet Union agree that the Cold War was started by one side, or rather, that it was started by the other side.

Lynch stressed that the basis for an eventual postwar settlement in Europe was already in place by 1949: a divided Europe, a divided Germany, and a divided Berlin. While not the preferred outcome of either side, "compared to the risks that both the US and the Soviet Union ascribed to any politically realistic alternative, this division was over time to prove eminently acceptable to both superpowers and both alliances . . . the fact is that after the establishment of the two German states, neither East nor West were ever prepared to challenge the division of Europe by offensive means."

That the postwar European arrangements in place by 1949 were acceptable to the Western allies became clear in the following years. Typical of the West's acceptance of these arrangements was what Lynch called "the remarkable indifference on the part of the allies to consider Stalin's 1952 offer to demilitarize Germany and remove all foreign forces from German territory. In many other instances, such as the East German riots of 1953 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Western inaction confirmed an underlying tolerance for the division of Europe if challenging it meant a possible military confrontation with the Soviet Union."

Lynch described the years 1956-57 as a conceptual turning point in the Cold War. The events in Hungary, and in particular the Western decision to support the Polish "national" communist Gomulka after 1956 signified the recognition on the part of the US that "it was possible to have a stable advancement of American interests by working with national communists, instead of pushing directly for the rollback of communism." At the same time, many elements that later would be considered parts of a new world order were already in place: polycentrism, the recognition of the limited utility of nuclear weapons, and the basic respect of each alliance of the other's vital national or alliance interests. These had all been explicitly or implicitly recognized by 1956-57. For these reasons, Lynch argues that by 1956-57 there was a perceptible a change in the way both sides were thinking about the long-term stability of East-West relations.

From this perspective, Lynch argued that the Berlin crises of 1958-61 were the last test of the stability of the system. This also puts the Cuban Missile Crisis in a new light; for Lynch, the superpower confrontation in 1962, "only confirms the latent stability of the East-West structure as it had come into being at this time. Only by such a dramatic and risky end-run could Khrushchev had hoped to revise what had become for him a maddeningly stable post-war order in Europe. And it is significant that upon the frustration of his Cuban adventure both East and West began the long-term process, which by promoting stability over system change would yield detente," and what Lynch argues was by the 1970s the post-cold war era.

## History as a Guide

Thus, in Lynch's view, the Cold War lasted roughly from the post-1948/49 period to the mid-to-late sixties. Given the transformation of the superpower relationship, are the history and dynamics of the postwar relationship between the superpowers of any use to us now? Lynch argued strongly in the affirmative, noting that "our understanding of what we have been through will decisively affect our idea of what the most important problems and choices of the present and the future are."

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