During World War II, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain joined forces to fight a mortal enemy. In partnering with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to fight Hitler’s Germany, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt were guided by the understanding that it was impossible to defeat Nazi Germany alone, as well as by geopolitical realities. Having made that decision, they set aside ideological considerations.

It had taken many years for Soviet and Western leaders to recognize that Nazi Germany was their common enemy, and that the very survival of their countries depended on them joining forces against German aggression. But after Germany invaded the Soviet Union, London and Moscow became close allies, later joined by Washington after the United States was attacked by Japan at Pearl Harbor.

Once they did band together, Moscow, Washington, and London remained loyal allies, despite their conflicting interests and convictions. The three allies refrained from concluding separate peace deals at various times during the war, and the USSR fulfilled its promise to declare war on Japan three months after the end of fighting in the European theater.

Once the allies won the war and their common threat was eliminated, however, old differences came to the forefront. These differences escalated further when the allies set out to organize a postwar world. In just three years, the wartime alliance degenerated into a postwar confrontation between the United States and Great Britain on one side and the Soviet Union on the other. The fact that it was a “cold” confrontation was not a result of a gentleman’s agreement, but rather the result of the development of nuclear weapons, which threatened to end human civilization in the event of a new war.

Continued close cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union became impossible due to insurmountable ideological and political differences. Although a Cold War in the form in which it took place was not inevitable, nor was it the result of happenstance, ill will, or an unfortunate confluence of events.

The experience of the wartime military alliance is not applicable to modern-day relations between Russia and the West. New threats that various observers have tried to compare to the threat of Nazism are far smaller in scale and far more uneven in their impact on the two sides. Furthermore, Moscow does not play a role in dealing with these new threats commensurate with the way it stood up to Nazi Germany in World War II, when the Soviet Union bore the brunt of the Wehrmacht’s onslaught and defeated the bulk of the German armed forces.
Finally, Washington now views Russia as a declining power. Moscow, of course, does not agree with that assessment, but any attempt on its part to revive the image of the anti-Hitler coalition to combine Russian and Western efforts to fight international terrorism, the pandemic, climate change, or anything else is futile and only baffles Russia’s would-be allies.

Even if a real partnership, rooted in common interests, were possible between Russia and the West at some future point, it would be very difficult to achieve conditions that Russia would find acceptable, and the success—or, even more so, failure—of such a partnership would only return the situation to the status quo of contradictions in interests and significant differences in ideologies.

**INCONCEIVABLE UNION**

Although both the West and the Soviet Union could see the threat of German aggression in the 1930s, an anti-Hitler coalition was not formed until Germany attacked the Soviet Union.

In 1938, rather than joining forces against Germany under existing military and political agreements between Paris, Prague, and Moscow, Britain and France chose to reach a settlement at Munich allowing Hitler to annex parts of Czechoslovakia. Western leaders and elites were not only afraid of a new war, but also feared a possible increase of Soviet and communist influence in Eastern Europe. The deal with Hitler gave them what turned out to be false hope for peace with Germany.

Even as the situation in Eastern Europe deteriorated, Paris, London, and Moscow were unable to agree on joint actions. Britain and France could not decide whether it was more important for them to secure Soviet assistance in the event of German aggression, or to buy time in the hope that such aggression would be directed eastward.

Meanwhile, from 1939, Stalin no longer differentiated between Germany on the one hand and Britain and France on the other. He viewed both camps as capitalist countries that were hostile to the Soviet Union and fought among themselves for markets and control of them. From a Marxist-Leninist perspective, wars are intrinsic to imperialism, and Stalin saw the impending World War II as a logical consequence of World War I.

According to the diary of Communist International (Comintern) leader Georgi Dimitrov, in September 1939, Stalin remarked with regard to the war that had just started, “we see nothing wrong in their having a good hard fight and weakening each other […] the division of capitalist states into fascist and democratic no longer makes sense.”

Stalin made his decision based on his assessment of Soviet interests. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of nonaggression between the USSR and Germany, from the point of view of the Soviet leader, granted Moscow more time and gave it strategically important territory, while rerouting the war westward, undermining capitalism. In the meantime, Stalin set to prepare for inevitable war with Germany by strengthening strategic flanks—attacking Finland; annexing Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; and seizing Bessarabia.
By that time, Stalin had stopped considering a coalition with London and Paris: the war between the Soviet Union and Finland effectively turned the USSR into an adversary of both Britain and France. The Western countries began to increasingly associate the Soviet Union with Hitler's Germany. Stalin believed that the British and French were going to attack the USSR from the south, and in 1940, he strengthened the defense of Baku.2

Stalin expected to be forced into war with Germany no earlier than the summer of 1942, after Britain's likely surrender.3 The Soviet leader was convinced that Hitler would remember the lessons of World War I and avoid fighting on two fronts. However, the surprisingly swift and complete defeat of France, as well as Hitler's readiness to take risks, defied Stalin's expectations.

INEVITABLE UNION

The alliance between the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States became inevitable after Germany attacked the USSR, fundamentally changing the situation in Europe and the global power landscape. On the evening of June 22, 1941, Churchill announced in a radio broadcast: “Any man or state who fights on against Nazidom will have our aid. Any man or state who marches with Hitler is our foe... It follows, therefore, that we shall give whatever help we can to Russia and the Russian people.”4

Churchill had not relented in his complete opposition to communism, and he had doubts about the USSR's ability to withstand Germany's attack, but he saw the German invasion of the Soviet Union as a chance of salvation for Britain, which had been fending off Germany on its own for a year after France's defeat.

In the United States, isolationist moods were still strong in the summer of 1941. Democratic senator Harry Truman said then, "If we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia, and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible."5 However, President Roosevelt held a different position. He viewed Germany, along with its ally Japan, as a threat to the United States. Four days after Japan's December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, Germany declared war on the United States.

Thus, an alliance that had been inconceivable before the war became inevitable in wartime. A potential threat had failed to unite London, Washington, and Moscow, but once all three were under attack, they joined forces despite their political and ideological differences.

There were challenges in the partnership. Two issues that remained a constant source of tension were the opening of a second front in northern France—a move that Stalin insisted on year after year, and that Churchill just as consistently opposed—and Moscow's desire to get its allies to recognize the Soviet borders of June 1941 as quickly as possible.6 Nevertheless, throughout the war, the Allies remained loyal to each other. In the difficult early months of the war, Stalin did not sign a separate peace with Hitler as London had feared that he would. In turn, Britain and the United States rejected the idea of a separate peace with Germany in the final stage of the war. In 1945, the Red Army and the Western allied forces not only avoided clashes with each other inside Germany, but took up the precise territorial positions agreed upon by the three allied powers in 1944.
While the war was under way, the USSR and the Western allies made mutual compromises. They agreed on the borders of postwar Poland, which also meant the recognition of western Ukraine and western Belarus as part of the Soviet Union, and the transfer of South Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands to the Soviet Union. Despite the idealism ascribed to Roosevelt, he recognized the importance of Soviet assistance in the war with Japan and was no stranger to the logic of geopolitical trade-offs. In turn, Stalin was willing to disband the Comintern in 1943. There were many smaller compromises and concessions as well.

In addition to fighting the Axis powers, the three allies also declared plans to build a new world order after the end of the war. The principles of this new order were initially outlined in the Atlantic Charter, which Roosevelt and Churchill signed in August 1941, and the Soviet Union joined in 1942.

From 1944, the USSR was also actively involved in efforts to establish the United Nations. Following painstaking negotiations, the Allies reached agreements on the principles of the structure and operations of the UN. The UN Charter confirmed the leading positions of five states that became permanent, veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council: the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China, which was also fighting Japanese aggression.

Some of the most lasting and consequential results of the wartime alliance among Washington, Moscow, and London were the approval of the United Nations Charter and the establishment of a ramified system of international organizations, from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to UNESCO and the World Health Organization, as well as the granting of a central role in matters of international peace to the UN Security Council. While the direct impact of the UN on international relations is limited, the very existence of the organization brings some order to world politics and offers a unique global platform for contacts and negotiations. This is the most important diplomatic heritage of the anti-Hitler coalition.

However, joint victory in the war also meant the beginning of the end of the “Big Three.” As Stalin had noted at the closing banquet of the Yalta Conference in February 1945, “It is not so difficult to keep unity in times of war since there is a joint aim to defeat the common enemy, which is clear to everyone. The difficult task will come after the war when diverse interests will tend to divide the Allies.”

**IMPOSSIBLE UNION**

Victory in World War II sharply reduced the mutual dependence of the allies and just as sharply amplified their differences, particularly in their visions of a postwar world. One of the main disputes was over the approach to forming governments in Poland and other Eastern European countries.

During a visit to Moscow in October 1944, Churchill proposed dividing up political influence in a number of Balkan and Eastern European nations based on the percentage of pro-Soviet and pro-Western politicians in their governments. In contrast, Roosevelt based his views on more romantic
Wilsonian principles and would hardly have understood the logic of the division by percentage points. But he, too, accepted in advance (even before the Tehran Conference in 1943) that Poland would de facto have to be given to Stalin after the war. Roosevelt had also assured Stalin that Washington would not prevent Moscow from pursuing its policies in Romania, Bulgaria, Finland, and even Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, although Washington refused to formally recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltics.

The division of territory into spheres of influence was starkest in Germany and Austria. Back in the fall of 1944, the Allies had agreed that these two countries would be divided into occupation zones; that Berlin would be split into sectors; and that joint control would only be set up for central Vienna. Division into occupation zones did not immediately mean the partition of Germany as a country. Stalin, who feared that forced division would only fuel German nationalism, advocated for a neutral Germany under quadrilateral control by the Allied Council and its executive commission. Similar councils and commissions were set up in other German satellite countries, from the Balkans to Finland.

However, joint administration proved difficult—and ultimately impossible—due to differences in the interests and strategies of the USSR and Western states. As early as the summer of 1945, the farsighted U.S. diplomat George Kennan had found the division of Europe and dismemberment of Germany to be the only realistic strategy for the United States. Washington, London, and Paris concluded that it was better for them to fully control half of Germany than to half-control a united Germany.

The partition of Germany was a prologue to the partition of Europe. The Truman Doctrine of protecting the "free world" from the communist threat and from Soviet expansion into the Eastern Mediterranean was soon supplemented with the Marshall Plan to provide economic assistance to Western Europe and reduce the influence of communist parties. Moscow saw the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan as efforts to create a Western bloc against the Soviet Union. Stalin responded by pursuing a policy of communization of Eastern Europe.

Germany and Europe were divided in 1948. The currency reform in the western zones of Germany prompted the Berlin Blockade, the first overt military-political confrontation between the collective West and the USSR in the Cold War. In Czechoslovakia, the Communist party took power through street demonstrations. Soon after, NATO was established and the Korean War began.

The transition from a shared victory to a confrontation between East and West took just three years. The victory had established the foundation for a new world order (the UN Charter, international institutions, a global platform for international relations), but the confrontation shaped the geopolitical, ideological, and military-political structure of this new world order: a bipolar world divided between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The clear threat of mutual destruction in the event of the use of nuclear weapons by either side served as a deterrent in U.S.-Russian bilateral relations. Wars ignited along the flanks of the confrontation line, but they were local in nature and executed primarily by the junior allies or client states of the two superpowers.
**GRAND BARGAIN ATTEMPTS**

The post–World War II world was divided into spheres of influence dominated either by the Soviet Union or the United States. This division was not without problems, and global equilibrium within its framework was only achieved following dangerous crises, such as in Berlin and over Cuba. This relatively stable state of international relations became known as “peaceful coexistence,” the phrase used by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. Both sides recognized that—in the nuclear age—even inveterate adversaries had to coexist. In essence, this was a “grand bargain.”

The standoff between the two superpowers continued, but their desire for self-preservation necessitated pragmatic cooperation to reduce the risk of collision. Arms control was started and a certain level of détente was achieved, thanks in part to the individual personalities of the leaders. Both Khrushchev and his successor Leonid Brezhnev had fought in World War II and wanted to avoid World War III; they also recognized the importance of high-level contacts with their U.S. counterparts.

The Soviet and U.S. leaders did not confine themselves to formal diplomatic channels and also used trusted envoys. The best known and most effective communication channel was that between U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin: their cooperation was integral to the development of the policy of détente.

Attempts by the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, to build new Soviet-American relations—a sort of amicable global condominium—failed due to the Soviet Union’s progressing weakness, which ultimately resulted in the country’s collapse. Under Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, the objective was effectively no longer a “grand bargain” between Moscow and Washington, but rather Russia’s accession to a collective West headed by the United States. The unpreparedness and ultimate unwillingness of the Russian elites and society to recognize the unconditional leadership of the United States in the new relationship was the main reason for the failure of attempts to integrate Russia into the West.

Efforts to negotiate this integration continued until the early 2000s. In a March 2000 BBC interview, then acting president Vladimir Putin had allowed for the possibility that Russia might join NATO. And in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Putin’s statement of support for the United States and his move to provide real assistance in the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan sparked hopes in Moscow of new cooperation with Washington.

In November 2001, Sergei Rogov, then director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, wrote: “For the first time since 1945, the United States and Russia have a common enemy: international terrorism... The fight against a common adversary creates such powerful common interests that all other objectives become secondary to them. The union can be stable if the sides have other long-term interests. Nonproliferation of nuclear weapons could become one such interest.”
However, the United States envisaged this new relationship as Russia joining an international system led by the United States, whereas for Putin, it was critical for Washington to view Moscow as an equal partner with the right and ability to make important decisions jointly. For Washington, such an expectation was excessive and unacceptable, as it challenged the singular leadership of the United States and could undermine from within the international system that Washington had built. Putin ultimately understood this himself. In his famous Munich speech in February 2007, he sharply criticized the unipolar world and the behavior of its hegemon, the United States.17

Thus, the fight against international terrorism was not a sufficiently strong foundation for a new union of two powers that were growing less equal and more distant in values and geopolitics. Attempts to “reset” Russian-American relations during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency in 2008–2012 did not last long, and were upended by domestic developments in both countries and disagreements between them in the international arena.

The election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in 2016 revived the specter of a “grand bargain” in Moscow, perhaps one last time. There were hopes that an agreement could be achieved—not because Russia would accept Western values, but because of Trump's indifference to the value framework, as well as pure pragmatism and personal “chemistry” between Trump and Putin. However, domestic dynamics in the United States resulted in the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations.

Finally, at the beginning of the new coronavirus pandemic, an illusion briefly arose in Moscow that joint efforts against the pandemic could at least allay the confrontation between Washington and Moscow. In reality, the pandemic only exacerbated tensions, fueled U.S. distrust of Russia, and spurred competition between the two countries on the vaccine market, which escalated into an information war.18

CONCLUSION

Following Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 election, the new U.S. administration emphatically downgraded the priority of relations with Russia in U.S. foreign policy, pointedly declining to make a traditional promise to work on improving relations with Moscow, and ruling out any reset. President Biden and his team also ramped up the ideological dimension of foreign policy and cast off certain diplomatic niceties in public rhetoric, including with respect to President Putin personally.

In these conditions, an appeal to the idea of a “grand bargain” between Russia and the United States (or, more broadly, the transatlantic West) appears to be pure utopia. While there may be some practical opportunities for cooperation—those commonly listed include preventing a military confrontation, guaranteeing strategic stability, pursuing nuclear nonproliferation, and the rote list of cooperation on climate change, efforts against the pandemic, and the fight against terrorism—actual contradictions in interests and values are too acute to expect any stable partnership between Russia and the United States in the foreseeable future.

The experience of the Soviet-American-British wartime coalition was unique and inimitable. Now that Russia is no longer a superpower, a “grand bargain” between Russia and the United States is implausible. Pulling the U.S.-Russian relationship back from the brink of confrontation to less antagonistic rivalry will only be possible in the event of major changes in the domestic politics of one or both countries. For the time being, there is no indication of any such change.
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NOTES

2 Kimmo Rentola, *Stalin i sudba Finlyandii* [*Stalin and the Fate of Finland*] (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2020), 50–51.
3 Lev Bezymensky, *Hitler i Stalin pered skhvatkoi* [*Hitler and Stalin before the battle*] (Moscow: Veche, 2000), 277.
8 Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, 44.
10 Yury Melnikov, *Ot Potsdama k Guamu: Ocherki amerikanskoi diplomatii* [*From Potsdam to Guam: Essays on American diplomacy*] (Moscow: Politizdat, 1974), 49.