

The Present Rooted in the Past

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Thirty years ago, in 1994, the Western Group of Forces—the main Soviet, and then Russian, military contingent in Europe—completed its pullout from Eastern Europe. The agreement on its withdrawal had been reached four years earlier during the talks on German reunification, and was fulfilled to the letter. The Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany was considered exemplary, as it peacefully resolved the most complex of conflicts, and it settled the “German question” that had endangered European security for more than a century. Article 2 of the

document states that the two German governments reaffirm that “only peace will emanate from German soil,” and that “acts tending to and undertaken with the intent to disturb the peaceful relations between nations, especially to prepare for aggressive war, are unconstitutional and a punishable offense,” pledging that “Germany will never employ any of its weapons except in accordance with its constitution and the Charter of the United Nations.”

At the time, it would have been difficult to imagine that, in just a few decades, Moscow would consider

denouncing the treaty because Germany could violate its obligation to pursue a peaceful policy, headlines would report on a leaked discussion between senior German officers about using Taurus cruise missiles against Russian targets, and the three Western (apart from Germany) countries that signed the agreement in 1990—the United States, the UK, and France—would affirm the unacceptability of Russian military victory and the necessity of inflicting a strategic defeat upon Russia. It would have been equally surprising that Moscow, which played an extremely constructive role in the rapid reunification of Germany, would later enter into a systemic military-political confrontation with all of its partners in those negotiations.

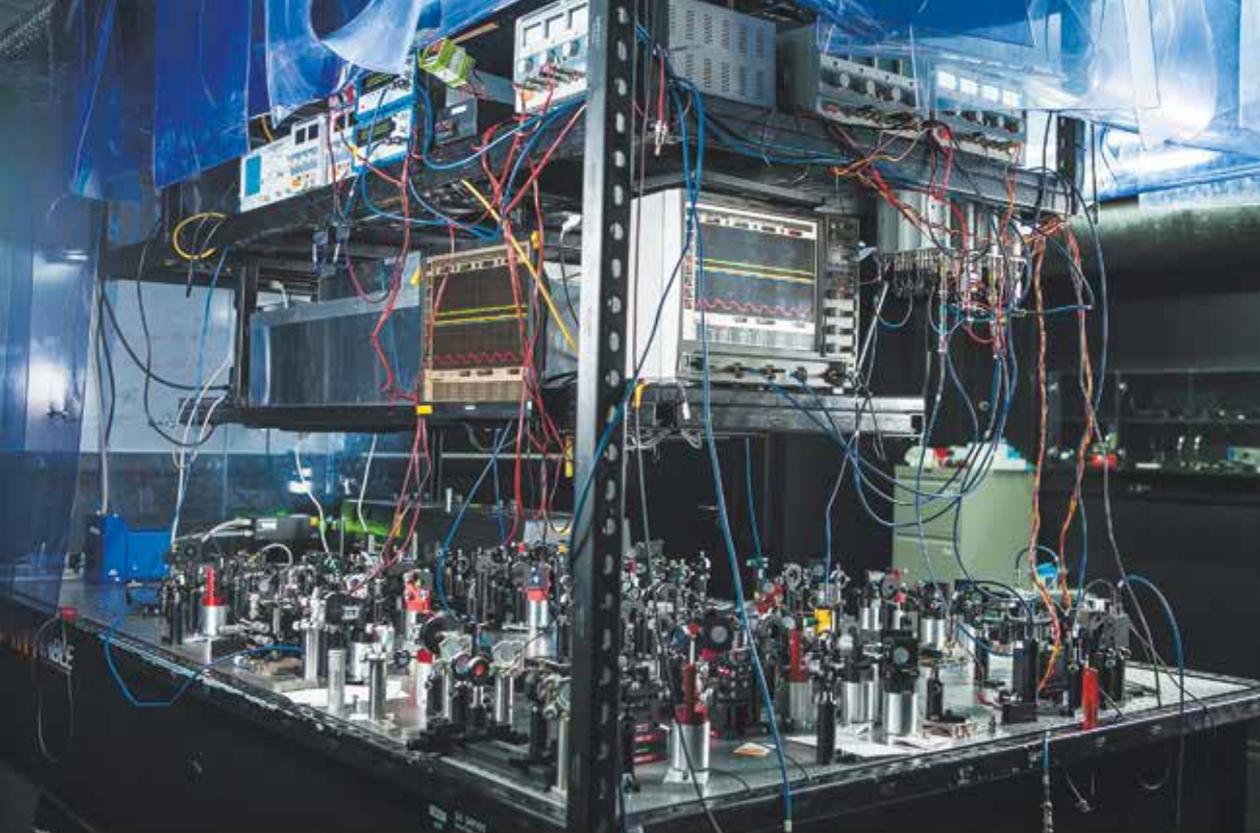
However, there is reason to believe that the current crisis has its roots in that process. Article 6 of the treaty confirms that “the right of the united Germany to belong to alliances, with all the rights and responsibilities arising therefrom, shall not be affected by the present treaty.” In other words, there were no objections.

One of the key issues was a united Germany’s participation in NATO. The USSR was not happy with this, but did not obstruct it, either. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev believed that the reunification of Germany would be an important step towards building a pan-European home, an idea that inspired the Kremlin’s foreign policy then.

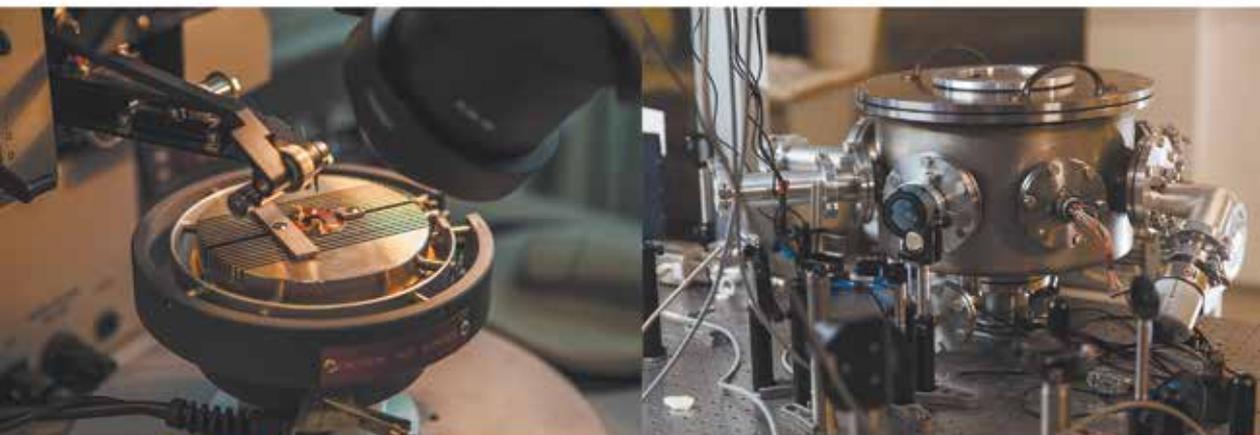
Territorial changes did not actually seem so large—NATO incorporated

some “eastern lands” (the former GDR) but was restricted in deploying military infrastructure there. In reality, however, Moscow’s consent became the first step towards the large-scale expansion of the world’s most powerful military bloc, consistently pursued from the mid-1990s (when the final decision was made) through the present day, when Russia is trying to stop it by force.

Mikhail Gorbachev died in the late summer of 2022, having lived to see the final collapse of his hopes for a common European home. For him, this must have been much more bitter and painful than even the disappearance of the country he had once headed—the Soviet Union. After his resignation, Gorbachev repeatedly admitted that he had lost completely as a politician, but he blamed his opponents, primarily Boris Yeltsin, for what had happened. And yet, after exiting politics, the father of *perestroika* and “new political thinking” was still sure of his own historical role. He had not the slightest doubt that ending the Cold War and freeing humanity from the fear of nuclear destruction were his main achievements. This kept his optimism aglow. But 2022 revealed that the respite had been temporary and the result reversible—probably, with even the worst outcome. The international situation has not even returned to that of the relatively stable late Cold War, but instead has been submerged by a psychosis of complete and total distrust.



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It turns out that the period of deep détente, at the turn of the millennium, has even reduced our ability to manage crises. The skills of prudent confrontation, developed during the Cold War, have been lost. A sense of absolute moral and historical rectitude reigns on one side of the former Iron Curtain. Victory in the Cold War—achieved, moreover, without a direct collision—convinced the West that things could not have been otherwise, as it is on the “right side of history.” Meanwhile, a sense of the outcome’s unfairness was accumulating on the other side. The growing resentment was exacerbated by the failure of (initially quite sincere) attempts to join the winning camp. In the West’s view, Russia had received more than enough for a politically and ideologically defeated country. In Russia’s view, the West had taken advantage of Russia’s situation to immensely harden its international dominance and show Russia its subordinate place.

The differences did not initially obstruct cooperation, but, in the 1990s, they began to gradually deepen. Nothing was done to reduce the tensions or investigate their causes. The West believed that no correction was necessary because everything was as it should be, while Russia pressed for corrections, but to no avail. As a result, the rosy idea of a pan-European home has degraded into pan-European confrontation, which appears to be even more dangerous than the standoff in the second half of the 20th century.

So we must again tread the path to stabilization and peaceful coexistence. But we will first need to set foot on that path. And so far, all of the parties to the conflict—Russia, Ukraine, and the West—are uncompromising, considering any concession to be defeat, and defeat to be existential. Meanwhile, the Doomsday Clock in Chicago shows 90 seconds to midnight.