

Realist diplomacy in the Cold War era

Alexandra Porumbescu^{a*}

^a *University of Craiova, Craiova, Romania*

Abstract

This paper addresses the theme of the Cold War, especially the role of the diplomatic approaches to the use of nuclear weapons and the role they had in international relations during this period. Throughout history, we have had to deal with the struggle between ideologies and the political involvement of this struggle. The conflict of the Cold War is no different in this respect, being a struggle between communism and democracy at the ideological level. Moreover, the conflict is complex and can be approached from several points of view, from ideological conflict, to military conflict, or to a conflict between civilizations and cultures. The Cold War has left visible consequences for the world in which we live today, remodelling Europe's composition and its role in international politics.

Keywords: *Realism; Cold War; security; defense; power.*

1. The realist approach of the Cold War

Realism is one of the main theoretical frameworks in the study of international politics. David Anderson notes that realism is not beyond critics, but ever since the great Greek historians, it had the ability to provide a behavior paradigm of rational cost-benefit calculations regarding national interest in a mainly anarchic international environment (Anderson, 2001: p.2).

The realists subscribe to a number of central statements regarding the nature of international politics: the international system is centered on states, the international system is characterized by anarchy and it is a system based on self-help (Waltz, 2006: pp. 91-92). While international politics is a source of constant conflict among states in order to acquire more power, this concept is explained by realists such as Hans Morgenthau as the struggle of great nations to obtain relative power in the detriment of their rivals: "When regarding the power of a nation by saying that one is very strong while another one is weak, we always presume a comparison...Neglecting this relative character of power and treating it as absolute is one of the most elementary and frequent mistakes in international politics" (Morgenthau, 1948: p. 174).

In the realist theory of international relations, the security dilemma is caused by the competition for security among the great powers. Although they agree to the main assumptions of realism, offensive and defensive realists disagree on several significant issues, one of the most important ones being whether seeking to acquire hegemony is a wise strategy (Layne, 2011: p. 74). According to David Anderson's description of the Cold War, the anarchy was caused by the vacuum of power left behind by the Second World

* Alexandra Porumbescu. *E-mail address:* alexandraporumbescu@yahoo.com.

War that called to be filled, but, at the same time, states were concerned with their own economic and security issues, thus balancing the costs of another conflict in a precarious economic situation with the danger of the expanding power of some states. In an anarchic international system, the great powers are facing the need to obtain a leverage on their rivals (Morgenthau, 1948: p. 175), situation that started the arming race of the Cold War, but at the same time created a competition for security, where prudence in conducting diplomatic relations was felt throughout the entire Cold War era. "The balance of power was established after the Second World War and during the Cold War between two poles, two very powerful countries in militarily, economically and ideologically, U.S.A. and U.S.S.R" (Serban, 2013: p. 57).

Realists claim that by the human nature, people are motivated to try to dominate others, the same principle being applied to states, thus transforming the policy of nations into a tacit power struggle, and realpolitik into a network required for survival. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow surmise the "essence of classic realism that begins with the two basic postulates of the RAM: namely that unitary states are key players in international affairs, and that states act rationally, calculating the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action and choosing action that maximizes their usefulness. The international environment is a jungle, as Thomas Hobbes explained, in which the aggressive behavior of an animal against the other is a normal fact in the absence of any other supreme authority, and the predominant goals pursued by states in political life are security and power" (Allison, Zelikow, 2010: p. 39). Diplomat George Kennan believes that the realities included dependence on a balance of state power in Europe in order to prevent any power from dominating the Eurasian territorial mass, which is why the US entered the Second World War and after the end of the war it helped begin the reconstruction of Europe through the Marshall Plan. Therefore, the US' decision to completely end its isolationist policy and the ending of traditions with European countries was a step in favor of US security. It did not want hegemony on the European territory, but rather to create a balance of power that could be unbalanced by the military rise of the USSR.

Later, Kennan clarified the paradigm of interstate action, writing that "the interests are essentially connected to military security, the integrity of political life and the good state of the people". The government needs to reasonably identify these needs and then put "the commitments and mistakes assumed by someone in a reasonable relationship with the real possibilities they have to act in the international environment" (McKeown, 2001: p. 1172).

The bipolarity of power distribution has contributed to maintaining the conflict at the level of ideologies, given that a more or less equal distribution of power is preferable in exchange for the gathering of power in the hands of a single state. Looking back, the arming race and the implicit issue of nuclear weapons has led to increased states' security, balancing the "defensive-offensive balance" of the military capabilities of the great powers (Taliaferro, 2000: p. 136). Defensive realists assert that the advantage is usually on the defensive side, which means that the great powers should be confident that others will not attack them (Layne, 2011: p. 74)

That is why we can explain the duality of the Cold War relations which, on the one hand, represented the desire of states to eliminate or at least control nuclear weapons, and on the other hand, there are the weapons-related operations they carry out. The fact that both great powers, both the US and the USSR, have become actors of the nuclear era has

been a benefit, from a realistic point of view, to preserving international security. The existence of nuclear weapons could not be denied, not so much the danger of their use by the states holding it. Therefore, the only realistic solution of a competing power remains the enrolment in the arms race.

The strategies of the great powers can be divided into two realistic categories: on the one hand, we have the actions of the United States of America that can be analysed in terms of defensive realism, and on the other hand the Soviet Union finds its actions to be analysed from the perspective of offensive realism.

2. Defensive Realism

Although the United States has adopted an isolation perspective for a certain amount of time, having the advantage of both geographic and technological factors, the Cold War period brings changes to the US government's strategy. To prevent the existence of a single power in a Europe threatened by Soviet expansion, the US had to expand its "umbrella" on European states. The US believes that security is in the international space but it is not achieved through expansionist actions, and the defensive realists argue that the great powers adopting great strategies to maximize power end up enjoying less, not more security.

The goal of the American foreign policy was to conclude international relations with European states by offering them a guarantee of security. Through these actions, the danger of the USSR's enlargement was diminished and diplomatic relations deepened.

Defensive realists consider that the main cause of insecurity in expansionist strategies is, first of all, the increase in costs, even in the case of successful expansions, weakening the internal economic base of the state (Kennedy, 2011), fact that is also demonstrated by the political evolution of the USSR during the Cold War, due to its attempts to reform the system for economic recovery.

Furthermore, one of the main rules in international politics is that "instead of allying with a potential hegemon, other great powers unite their forces to defeat it by strengthening their own military capabilities and / or forming counterhegemonic alliances" (Layne, 2011: p. 75). The goal of the Americans was to increase economic interdependence between states through economic aid programs and the perpetuation of democracy. Thus, we are able to identify another component of the duality that the Cold War was built upon, namely the one between the security concepts of the great powers to dictate the world order: on the one hand, the US regarded security as existing within the interstate relations, while the USSR considered security could only be provided by expansion and maximization of power.

3. Offensive Realism

The USSR during the Cold War era can be describe as having a foreign policy dominated by offensive realism, which, unlike the defensive, implies that a state can only achieve a certain level of security by pursuing an offensive strategy by which the aim is to maximize its power and influence its rivals (Layne, 2011: p. 75).

Unlike the defensive realists, who claim that the great expansionist strategies are causing the emergence of security dilemmas, the offensive realists consider such strategies to be a logical consequence of the state of insecurity (Posen, 1986: pp. 16-19).

One of the most significant statements in offensive realism is John Mearsheimer's work, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, in which he argues that expanding and maximizing power are the only strategies that allow great powers to gain security. As Mearsheimer

states, "States quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to become the most powerful state in the system" (Mearsheimer, 2001: p.33). Mearsheimer thus sees the justification of the action of a power to seek the status of a hegemon in the search for security "the search for power ceases only when hegemon status is obtained ... the best means of guaranteeing its security is to become the hegemon at present, so any possibility of a challenge by another great power is removed" (Mearsheimer, 2001: pp. 34-35).

Through the lenses of offensive realism, we can analyse the actions taken by the USSR in Europe, considering them even necessary in order to ensure the interests of the state. Tellis states that "no state can be sure that competing states will not use their military capabilities to threaten their existence and autonomy, each is compelled to try to eliminate or subdue its competitors before they have a similar fate" (Tellis, 1984: p. 381).

The purpose of analysing the actions of the great powers through theories of international relations is not to find the state in fault or the right one; the aim is to look at their actions from a perspective that offers certain patterns and to try to understand what led to the unfolding of the Cold War in the way it evolved.

4. Diplomatic relations and strategies during the Cold War

The emergence of nuclear weapons has led to a drastic reconsideration of the role that war has ever had in international politics and implicitly has led to the change of strategies. As Bernard Brodie wrote, "the ultimate goal of our military strategy was to win the war, from now on it would be to avoid war" (Brodie, 1959)

The Cold War period is characterized by multiple interstate relations that have kept countries in a continuous correlation and prevented a possible nuclear attack in an era marked by constant threats from states with atomic weapons.

The Cold War diplomacy has had major themes in the arms race, the conclusion of strategic alliances and the discrepancy between the ideologies and policies of the two superpowers. Stalin reinstated a policy of confrontation with the West because he understood that the communist party he was able to crown could not be sustained in an international or domestic context dedicated to peaceful coexistence (Kissinger, 2007: p. 388). Therefore, he needed to set up an orbit of satellites to strengthen its power in order to prepare for an inevitable diplomatic display of forces.

H. Kissinger reports a short conversation with Truman in which he captures the entire American thread, namely America's call to serve as a reservoir of freedom and progress for all mankind: "We have completely defeated our enemies and made them surrender. After that, we helped them recover, become democrats and re-enter the community of nations. Only America could do this" (Kissinger, 2007: p. 376).

After several unsuccessful encounters between Stalin and the American Secretary of State, Marshall, the Marshall Plan, the Atlantic Alliance, and the Warsaw Pact were discussed, in response to Stalin's actions, which lead to distrust from the Americans. According to Kissinger, America opted for Western unity in the East-West negotiations. Indeed, little choice was left, because no one dared to take the risk of following Stalin's suggestions, just to find out that he was using negotiations to undermine the new international order that America was trying to build. Thus, fencing has become the guiding principle of Western politics, and so has remained for the next forty years.

The Marshall Plan was the financial aid America offered in an attempt to rebuild the European economy rejected by the USSR and its satellites. It assumed that the United States could safely focus on European economic reconstruction, while postponing any

Russian offensive with forces, as it intimidated them at the same time as the atomic bomb (Gaddis, 2009: p. 51).

The North-Atlantic Treaty was initiated at the initiative of America, and as a result of the desire of states to maintain peace and defend their independence. The Treaty provided them with the necessary military force to respond to any aggression against them or its Member States.

The Warsaw Pact was the USSR's response to the NATO initiative of America and represented a military force of the Eastern European countries. The declared goal of the pact was the desire of countries to defend them against NATO, but in reality the alliance had no substance. According to Kissinger, "The USSR cemented its domination over Eastern Europe", and yet "this alliance was devoid of substance co-ordinated by the coercion, while the Kremlin did its utmost to interrupt the process of Western unification" (Kissinger, 2007: p. 394).

At the beginning of the Cold War, the superiority granted by the fact that it was the only country with the secret of the atomic bomb, gave Americans the chance to dictate world politics. Therefore, they did not take a clear initiative in reforming their foreign policy, the American tradition demanding that each foreign initiative be justified by national security reasons. With the loss of the atomic monopoly, this policy demanded reform, and the United States could not continue its isolationist policy. It was clear that the new atomic power, the USSR, would use this advantage over the European states to facilitate the spread of the communist regime.

The United States has sought to discourage a strategic nuclear attack on Western Europe by deploying its strategic nuclear umbrella to cover its NATO allies (Layne, 2011: p. 221) by elaborating the doctrine of massive retaliation, according to which the US would respond to any attack on its own territory or its allies with a nuclear attack. It was a bold move from the Americans, which started both from the need to defend its own territory and from the need to sustain the image America had succeeded in creating, the world power that served as an example to other countries. However, there are many opinions that see this "widespread discouragement" as not being comprehensible given that "one of the permanent problems of deterrence for the benefit of a third party is that the price that a state is willing to pay is usually much lower unless its territory is threatened, and it is very difficult to claim that things are different " (Layne, 2011: p. 221-222). In other words, the interest shown by the Americans, as the declarant protector of Western states, was not considered to be quite as intense as declared. In a nuclear era, this strategic deterrence is even more difficult to believe, as the hired defender risks its own territory in defending his allies. Still, all nuclear weapons amplify the imperative of self-help that is at the heart of international politics, and although it may be considered a political recklessness to the widespread discouragement and commitment of the Americans, it can only work if both potential strategic and defense allies are convinced that their commitment is credible.

The Theory of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) marked a deliberate departure from rationality in the strategic theory, defining the threat of suicide. In practice, it provided a great advantage, certainly a psychological one, to the party capable of launching challenges that the opponent could only respond to in other ways than using a general nuclear war (Kissinger, 2007: p. 680).

The stake of the Americans was on the European unit, namely the Western Europe, for counterbalancing the Soviet power and keeping them in chess. Kissinger believes that "many years of insecurity cannot be our goal, at any stage, all allies must continue to share

the same feeling that NATO's security is indivisible. Otherwise, the Alliance's two pillars may start to ruin. It was a new and long-term, demoralizing idea that the cost of maintaining the alliance should condemn the civilian population of each ally to total vulnerability" (Kissinger, 2007). The presence of the Americans on the European continent was advantageous to them because it allowed them to "contain" the communists from a strategic position, and ensure the security of their own continent at the same time. Washington has relied on a multilateralism policy for peacekeeping, while the USSR has created a line of East European Communist states by creating the Mutual Economic Aid Council.

In the 1960s, the US gave up the doctrine of massive retaliation following President Kennedy's election, and made efforts to intensify diplomatic relations in order to solve the nuclear problems. Thus, international developments have taken a new form, from discouraging, the constant threat of nuclear weapons, to the seeking to solve international problems. In this way, the first non-proliferation treaty SALT I meant to limit strategic weapons emerged in 1968, a treaty that illustrated the new diplomatic relations between the two nuclear powers.

the Soviets never accepted the complicated Western terror of nuclear deterrence, although they were consistent with their basis. In the early 1970s, under Brezhnev-Kosāghin-Podgornāi, the Soviet strategic doctrine was now inspired by the principle of "prudent flexibility". Its fundamental statements resembled the American ones in the sense that a nuclear war had to be firmly avoided, and the ability of the state to strategically defy, both in a defensive and offensive manner, is the best guarantee for this goal. At the same time, the Soviet doctrine provided for the preparation to win an unwanted nuclear war.

To sum up, although a nuclear war was not desirable, both states were increasing their arsenal in order to discourage their opponent, but also to be prepared to respond. During this period, America pursued a pacifist policy, meaning that it provided security guarantees to European states that felt threatened by the USSR's nuclear ascent in order to prevent the start of an arms race. Although the promises of the Americans were doubtful in the eyes of the Soviets, they never tried the veracity of these statements, so we can say that the American strategy was fruitful.

Following what has been said before, we can conclude that it was difficult for the Americans to demonstrate the truthfulness of their commitment, as they still needed to secure the Westerners and discourage the Soviets at the same time. The diplomatic relations between America and the NATO member states have been somewhat controversial, and even the solidarity of international organization has been disputed. The views were divided but a response was never completed because the American commitment was never put to trial by the USSR. Even Secretary of State Christian Herter confessed, "I cannot imagine the President of the United States involving us in a total nuclear war unless the facts clearly show that we ourselves are threatened with destruction or that effective measures have been taken to destroy us" (Layne, 2011: p. 123).

Although the USSR did not test the commitment of the Americans until they felt threatened, they continued pursuing their own ideals. Stalin's goal was to perpetuate the communist regime by trying to establish communist governments in its satellite states where, although it was not a Communist government, the Communist parties were dictating the policy of the respective countries. The 1970s also brought about a change in the USSR doctrine, a change brought by Mihail Gorbachev, who reoriented the foreign policy of the Soviet Union by concluding Brezhnev's doctrines and replacing it with the

Sinatra doctrine which allowed the Warsaw Pact member states to choose their own way in domestic politics.

The end of the Cold War was marked by the attempt to control the development of nuclear weapons. New American President Ronald Reagan changed America's way of conducting international affairs. Reagan implied a defining duality, represented by his dream of creating a world free of nuclear weapons, but which was extremely serious about the development of weapons to protect his territory and allies. Soviet leaders were not impressed by the morality that Reagan had shown, but were forced to take into account America's technological potential. The SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative) policy has helped open the way for arms control, resulting in the Soviets getting engaged in the arms control talks they had interrupted (Kissinger, 2007: p. 680).

The most prominent moment that demonstrated the leaders' willingness to take an attitude in this regard was the 1986 peak meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev in Reykjavik, where Kissinger reported that the two leaders agreed to reduce all strategic forces by 50% within five years, and to destroy all ballistic missiles on the parcel of ten years. At one point, Reagan came to accept the Soviet bid to dismantle all nuclear weapons. In this way, Reykjavik brought very close cooperation between the US and the USSR, which so many Allies and Neutrals had feared alike. If the other nuclear powers refused to accept the Soviet-American agreement, they would suffer public abuse, pressure from the two superpowers or isolation. Still, the deal failed on the one hand because the new nuclear powers were not prepared to give up their own nuclear intimidation force, and on the other hand because of Gorbachev's pressures to get more, ending up resisting Reagan.

By the end of the Cold War, the USSR had lost the ability to create problems, and the main point on Reagan's agenda was the arms' control negotiations. The Cold War did not continue, mainly due to the pressure the Reagan administration had exerted on the Soviet system. "What has stopped the outbreak of the war [...] was the irrationalisation of pure terror on both sides. That was what Churchill predicted when he saw the hope in the "equality of annihilation". This was what Eisenhower had understood when he was ruling out the possibility of carrying out limited nuclear wars: his strategy leaves no choice but to ensure complete destruction, based on the presumption that it, instead of imposing the confidence to orchestrate the levels of destruction in the midst of a war, it would prevent its outbreak from the beginning " (Gaddis, 2009: p. 158).

References

- Allison, G., Zelikow, P. (2010) *Esența Deciziei O explicație a crizei rachetelor din Cuba*, Iași: Polirom.
- Anderson, D. (2001) "Paradigm Lost", *Diplomatic History*, vol 25., no. 4.
- Brodie, B. (1959) *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, [online] Available: file:///D:/Downloads/RAND_CB137-1.pdf.
- Gaddis, J. L. (2009) *Razboiul Rece*, Bucuresti: Rao.
- Kennedy, P. (2011). *Ascensiunea si decaderea marilor puteri*, Iasi: Polirom.
- Kissinger, H. (2007). *Diplomatia*, Bucuresti: ALL.
- Layne, C. (2011). *Pacea iluziilor*, Iasi: Polirom, 2011.
- McKeown, T. (2001). "The Journal of Politics", *Plans and Routines, Bureautic Bargaining and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, vol.63, 2001, pp.1171- 1175.

Mearsheimer, J. (2001). *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, U.S.: W.W. Norton & Company.

Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics Among Nations*, New York: A. A. Knopf.

Nye, J. S. (2005). *Desifrarea Conflictelor Internationale: teorie si conflict*, Prahova: ANTET XX PRESS.

Posen, B. (1986). *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*, Cornell University Press.

Serban, I. (2013). "Theories and Concepts in International Relations – from Idealism to Realism", *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, No. 40, 52-58.

Taliaferro, J. W. (2000) "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited", *Quarterly Journal: International Security*, vol. 25. no. 3.

Tellis, A. J. (1984). *The drive to Domination: Towards a Pure Realist Theory of Politics*", PhD thesis, Political Science Department, University of Chicago.

Waltz, K. (2006) *Teoria politicii internationale*, Iasi: Polirom.