

Does Russia have Reason to Fear?

By James W. Carden

In April 1970, at what was roughly the halfway point in the 40-year Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, Richard Nixon's Nation Security Adviser Henry Kissinger thought he smelled a rat. Kissinger told an incredulous Nixon that the Soviets were stirring up trouble in the Middle East, attempting to provoke a war between the Israelis, Syrians and Jordanians in order to distract the United States from what it was really up to: building a naval base at Cienfuegos Bay in Cuba.

Nixon's Chief of Staff, H.R. "Bob" Haldeman, recounts in his diaries that: "On September 18 we had received word that the Soviets were building a submarine base in Cienfuegos Bay, Cuba." By Sept. 24 word had leaked to the press and that same day Nixon and Kissinger, according to Haldeman, "gave [Soviet Ambassador Anatoly] Dobrynin an ultimatum and over the next few weeks...the Soviets backed down and abandoned the base."

Well, not quite. As NYU historian and *Nation* contributor Greg Grandin expertly lays out in his groundbreaking account of Kissinger's legacy, *Kissinger's Shadow*, the Cienfuegos affair was little more than a figment of Kissinger's fevered imagination. According to Grandin, "The Soviets didn't back down because there was nothing to back down from." Indeed, "Reconnaissance flights photographed every inch of Cienfuegos and couldn't find one piece of heavy equipment that could be put to building such a port."

If various accounts of the Nixon era – by among others, Haldeman, Grandin, Robert Dallek and Richard Reeves – are anything to go by, Kissinger was more than a touch unsound. But the basic premise behind his imaginary Cienfuegos threat was not altogether baseless (even if there never was to be a Soviet base): the U.S. *did* have definable security interests in preventing the Soviets from developing a military base 90 miles from U.S. shores.

Today, as NATO places troops and missile defense installations in Eastern Europe, we might ask ourselves if the Russian Federation has similar definable security interests in its own backyard. Since the end of the Cold War, the American foreign policy establishment seems to have done a complete 180-degree turn and now, of late, has decided that countries, above all Russia (and as regards the South China Sea, China), do not.

American officials now commonly express their belief that “spheres of influence” are passé, and that the rest of the world best get with the (revised) program. We see this all too clearly in the row that has been unfolding these past weeks over the new NATO missile defense installation in Romania.

Does the U.S. have a clear and definable national security interest in placing a missile-defense shield in Romania? This would be news to most Americans who – unless their grasp of geography has miraculously improved since a [2014 poll revealed that only 16 percent](#) of them could find Ukraine on a map – would be hard pressed to place Romania on the [right continent](#), much less its exact location.

The Generals and Pentagon policy wonks, of course, realize this and so they cling to the old chestnut that the missile-defense installations are meant to prevent an attack by Iran, with whom the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (plus Germany) just signed a far-reaching agreement on nuclear proliferation. According to Deputy Defense [Secretary Robert Work](#), “As long as Iran continues to develop and deploy ballistic missiles, the United States will work with its allies to defend NATO.”

What would Iran’s interest in firing ballistic missiles into Europe be? What exactly is America’s interest in setting these installations up? On these points the wonks are silent.

Oh, but never mind. Having abandoned any pretense that other great powers have definable (and eminently defensible) security interests of their own, American-led NATO is blithely plunging the Western world into fighting Cold War 2.0.

Yet, given the wide support candidates Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump have been receiving this election cycle, it is

just possible that the heretofore somnolent American public may be waking up to the long post-Cold War con perpetuated by the country's governing elites over the need for global American hegemony.

But I wouldn't count on it.

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