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# Content of Soviet/Russian war-threat in the speech of U.S. political elites

*Damon Ajiri*[1]

**Abstract.** Amid the Russia-Ukraine war, political and academic debates have intensified on whether the security situation is returning to the Cold War era. To contribute to this discourse, this research aims to explore whether U.S. officials are securitizing the Russian threat and how their rhetoric compares to the Cold War times. Theoretical framework of this research is based on the Copenhagen School of securitization developed by Wæver and Buzan. The content analysis method is applied to examine the perception of the Soviet/Russian threat in 26 speeches by U.S. senior officials on four cases: Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Russia-Georgia war in 2008, annexation of Crimea in 2014, and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Three main categories of threats are analysed: military, political, and economic. The findings reveal that the events of 2008, 2014, and 2022 did not bring a direct reproduction of Cold War rhetoric. Russia is not communicated by U.S. officials as a direct military threat to their country, but the U.S. could be forced into confrontation through a possible attack on a European NATO member. Economic threats are no longer linked to systemic ideological dogmas, but autocratic and conservative-nationalist governments are perceived as security challenges for democracies.

*Keywords:* Russia-Ukraine war, Russia-Georgia war, Soviet-Afghan War, Cold War, USA, securitization

## Introduction

In 1989, the world was on the brink of major transformation. Policies of détente between the superpowers and an end to the Cold War were on the horizon. It was a time that promised enduring peace and, to a large extent, delivered it for more than two decades. But the years since 2014 have shown a dynamic that has significantly altered the previously prevailing state of politics, economics, and society. Russia's annexation of Crimea and occupation of the eastern regions of Ukraine demonstrates that Moscow resumes its imperial ambitions. This put an end to aspirations for peaceful international coexistence [1]. The year 2022 brought an unprecedented escalation, as Russia waged a full-scale war on Ukraine, challenging peace in Europe and stability in the world.

[1] Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia. damon.ajiri@fses.uniba.sk, https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0344-2544

The USA and the EU have taken a clear stance against Russia's actions, supporting Ukraine with financial, civilian and military resources. While the USA is geographically distant from direct impacts of the war, but their NATO allies are on the boundary. From this perspective, the question of the U.S. perception of Russia's aggression and the official communication of threats posed by Russia has arisen. This research aims to explore whether American political leaders are communicating the Russian threat through securitization and how this is in line with Cold War rhetoric.

## Methodological approach

In terms of methodology, content analysis is used in this research to determine the perception of Russia threat in the speech acts of U.S. senior officials. The content analysis is applied to examine whether the security factor is identified, the threat is defined, and the securitization is established in accordance with securitization theory developed by O. Wæver and B. Buzan in the 1990s.

In order to analyse the content of threat rhetoric and the comparability of terminologies that can be associated with Cold War rhetoric, the relevant categories were defined based on the Cold War narratives promoted by political elites and adopted by public: communist world revolution — anti-communism [25; 14; 17]; global takeover — totalitarian world state under communist leadership [12]; totalitarianism/dictatorship and challenge to U.S. values and interests [17]; communist aggression [14].

26 speeches by representatives of American political elites between 1980 and 2024 were selected as textual sources for analysis. Three main categories were analysed in terms of sources of threat accumulating in the following fields: military threat, political threat, and economic threat.

## Results

In the period from 1980 to 1983, the **Soviet/Russian war of aggression in Afghanistan** had progressed from the invasion in December 1979 to control of the most important cities and infrastructure. However, the Soviet forces were denied control of the wider hinterland. Mujahedeen scattered across the country put up fierce resistance and control of cities other than Kabul shifted back and forth [17]. The resistance groups in the country were supported by the U.S. government with weapons and other material and trainers were sent [14].

Speeches by President J. Carter, Secretary of Defense H. Brown, and President R. Reagan were selected for the chosen time period. Military, political, and economic threats were identified in the speeches. Among other things, military threats include an increased likelihood of conflict between nuclear powers [7]. Political threats include challenge to U.S. values and interests, as well as challenge to global order and competition for supremacy, presenting Soviet aggression in Afghanistan as a test of American values [9; 22]. Economic threat was presented by stressing the negative impacts of Soviet invasion for international economic relations [9]. The political emphasis on themes of threat aligns with the USA's strategic alliance policy with Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. Reagan intensified this policy both politically and militarily,

drawing clear distinctions from the USSR and emphasizing the threat posed by Soviet policies. Cooper [11] states that under Reagan's administration, the USA sought to dominate the conflict through extensive military armament and propaganda focused on competition for supremacy, peace, economic development, and freedom. On the one hand, immediately after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the principle of opportunities for negotiation and diplomacy was still emphasized in the speeches by U.S. officials. In the following years the impossibility of a quick diplomatic solution, the bipolar views against the USSR and the threat scenarios grew vehemently. This increase in threat communication in military, political and social terms reached its absolute peak with President Reagan's speech in 1983.

After the collapse of the USSR, a period of extended co-operation between the USA and Russia emerged. But with the attempt by Russia to intervene in former satellite states, the USA increasingly doubted Russia's stance regarding compliance with international agreements. **Russia-Georgia war** lasted only a few days, but it was a confirmation of new expansionist endeavours of Russian foreign policy [18]. Although Georgia was independent after the collapse of the USSR, it was a divided country and had to deal with the secessionist endeavours of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia took advantage of these efforts of the republics and deployed its troops as peacekeepers there. Several Russian soldiers were killed in an attack by the Georgian army in summer 2008, which was taken by Moscow as an opportunity to invade Georgia.

Speeches related to this war by Vice President D. Cheney, Secretary of State C. Rice, President B. Obama, and Vice-President J. Biden were selected for the analysis, in which military [23], political and economic threats [5; 20] were identified. The threat to the USA itself from Russia was identified in the analysed sources, but the USA is positioning itself more strongly as a defender of free nations that are suffering attacks from Russia. No Cold War narratives like in the 1980s are communicated, rather it is assumed that a repetition of the Cold War is not possible as Russia is no longer a superpower. Nevertheless, there is a recognizable accent that autocratically led nations, including Russia, are turning out to be states with an aggressive foreign policy.

With the **annexation of Crimea** and further seizures in Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, Russia has challenged existing structures of international cooperation. The previous conflict in Georgia had an important influence on this development [26], and with its invasion of Ukraine Russia challenged the global order supported by the USA and Europe that may lead to further conflictual development, bipolarization or multipolarisation of the global order [24].

For this period, speeches by President B. Obama, Vice-President J. Biden, and Secretary of Defense A. Carter, were analysed, in which military and political threats were identified [9; 19]. With regard to the potential resurgence of a Cold War-like scenario, U.S. senior politicians are taking a cautious stance. They stress that NATO's military deterrence capabilities should be strengthened, but diplomacy remains the preferred option. It is also stressed that Russian support can enable Iran to develop its own nuclear weapons, posing a direct threat to the U.S. national security. Additional threats are also identified beyond military concerns, including possible disruption of supply chains, chal-

lenges to free trade and economic risks. Emerging risk-based problem areas, along with existing and impending crises, demand a coordinated response from both the USA and NATO.

Russia has been engaged in an offensive **full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine** since 2022, violating international agreements. A threat of war expansion further in Europe is considered possible and as some NATO members could be attacked, the war could extend across the globe [10]. In response to Russia's aggressive military actions, the USA provided the largest amount of security assistance to Ukraine, and U.S. government made more statements and speeches than during the previous analysed cases, which is reflected in twelve analysed sources. The Cold War, as it existed until 1989, does not play a role in the analysed statements, but the confrontation is increasingly focused on autocratic governments versus democracies, and this new format of bipolarization is communicated as a threat. In this constellation, the USA continues to present itself as the nation that is in a position to defend the free and democratic world, but it needs strong and reliable partners in NATO, which is also being communicated.

The analysis of the speeches by President J. Biden, Vice President K. Harris, Secretary of State A. Blinken, Secretary of Defence L. J. Austin following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine highlights a notable increase in communicated military threats [15; 6]. Additionally, considerable attention is given to political threat challenging to U.S. values and interests and emphasizing the growing divide between democracies and autocratic governments [5]. Economic threats are also mentioned but appear only sporadically in the discourse [4].

**Shifts in the communication of threats** can be seen in Figure 1. The percentage shares of all information in the main categories were graphically recorded according to the analysed time periods. The proportions show that communication of the economic threats decreased since 1983. There was an increase in communication of military threats between 1983 and 2015, which exceeded the political threat after the annexation of Crimea. Russia's ambitions in Europe are seen as security threats to the USA due to the potential threat to European NATO members. In connection with the findings related to the use of Cold War narratives and communicated threats, there is a noticeable tendency toward a revival of narratives from the Cold War era. These narratives, however, particularly in relation to bipolar tendencies, increasingly incorporate a new systemic area of conflict that is becoming more politically pronounced.

In the period after the end of Cold War, with Russia's military intervention in Georgia, concerns emerged over Russia's attempts to re-establish the borders of the former USSR. This would also bring current NATO member states into the circle of nations that are considered as expansion targets. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 gave rise to new threat scenarios due to the Russian expansionist policy through use of military forth. In the communication of U.S. senior politicians, the focus is particularly on Europe, as these NATO members do not appear to be able to withstand themselves possible Russian attack.

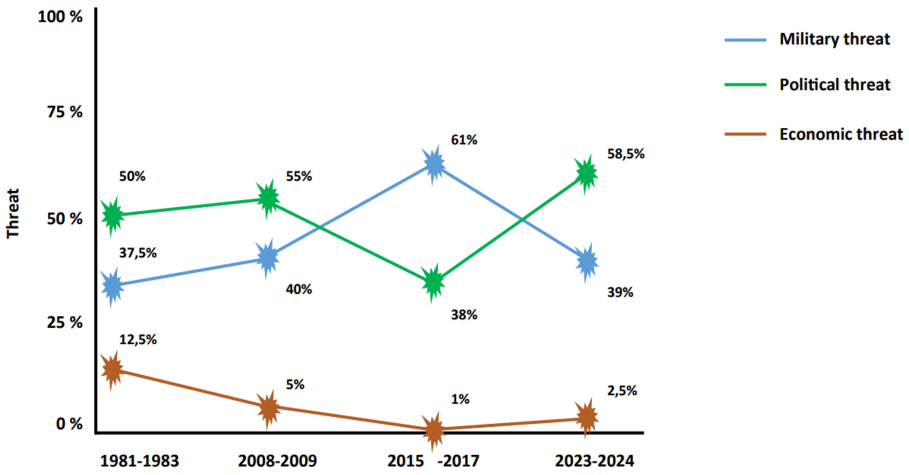


Fig. 1. Shifts in the communication of threats in the analysed speeches by U.S. senior officials, in %. *Source: Author's analysis of texts.*

## Discussion

Our analysis indicates that direct military threat for the U.S. in relation to Russia-Ukraine war is not communicated in the speeches of American senior officials, however, the potential threat to NATO is mentioned. And this raise concerns that the United States might be drawn into a military conflict with Russia through NATO. Analysis of speeches related to the Georgia conflict does not yet reflect this concern with the same intensity [3] as after the Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 [8], and even more significantly since the full-scale war start in 2022. These findings are in line with concerns about the possible NATO-related escalation, mentioned by Sperling and Webber (2016) in their research.

American leaders emphasize necessity for strengthening European defence capabilities, which demands increasing of military spendings [6; 5]. At the same time, their statements reveal that the United States cannot shoulder this responsibility alone, as they also must face other potential threats, among which China is the most important competitor for global influence [19]. It is noticeable in the analysed speeches that in recent years China's role in U.S. security debate became increasingly important. Ahmad [2] points out that the USA has adopted a securitization policy to counter China's expansionist ambitions, particularly regarding international influence gained through economic investments in poorer nations with significant strategic resources. This perceived threat is also evident in analysed speeches and supports the argument for securitization.

Analysis of speeches from the 1980s also highlights how American rhetoric, particularly during the Reagan administration, framed the ideological struggle in binary, propagandistic terms of "good versus evil," portraying the USSR as a massive threat to the United States. Reagan consistently asserted America's leadership in defending the "free world" against communism. This extreme position reflects the polarized nature of the Cold War during its intense phase in the 1980s [14; 16].

A short Russia-Georgia war was not perceived by the U.S. senior officials as a "new Cold War," with Rice (2008) emphasizing that Russia alone did not pose a significant threat to the United States or NATO. And despite following the Russia's annexation of Crimea, Turner [27] argued that the Cold War never truly ended, but our analysis of the speeches by the U.S. senior officials indicates that they did not perceive the situation as the "new Cold War". This is explicitly emphasized in speeches by Obama [20] and Carter [9].

Rudolf (2018) identifies three key aspects shaping American policy towards Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of certain areas of the eastern Ukraine: nuclear deterrence; economic pressure through sanctions, and perception of Russia as a threat. In analysed speeches, these three points appear with varying emphasis. The nuclear threat is occasionally highlighted to reaffirm that any Russian aggression will provoke a firm response [15]. Sanctions are frequently discussed as an economic tool to weaken Russia's ability to sustain its war efforts and achieve military success.

The analysis since 2022 indicates that U.S. discourse primarily frames the Russian threat as concentrated on the European continent. However, American leaders emphasize that an attack on NATO ally would directly implicate the USA under NATO's collective defence obligations [5]. This possibility remains a recurring theme, underscoring the need for strengthening European deterrence capabilities.

A return to Cold War narratives can be seen, although it must be assumed that these narratives have been modified. This results in changes in the bipolar perceptions of the system, which tend towards a new orientation of opposites. The frequently communicated juxtaposition of democracies and authoritarian governments can be seen in the speeches of the U.S. political leaders [23; 4]. This communicated new polarization increases in the periods from the Georgian war to the full-scale attack against Ukraine. The same applies in direct connection with the domino theory through imitation effects or the continuation of military expansion [20; 4].

## Conclusion

The findings of our research indicate that after the Russia's acts of aggression in 2008, 2014 and 2022, U.S. senior officials communicated the Russian threat through securitization, but this did not lead to a simple repetition of Cold War rhetoric in their speeches. Unlike Cold War times, Russia is not presented as a direct military threat to the U.S., but it is emphasized that Moscow's aggressive expansion could still draw the United States into a military confrontation through a possible Russian attack on a European NATO member state.

The military weakness and vulnerability of some European NATO members makes American political leaders pay attention to the disproportionate role that the U.S. might have to play in case of a Russian attack on a NATO member. To reduce the risks of Russia's further expansion and the probability of its aggression against NATO, U.S. officials emphasize the need to increase military spending by the European allies. Compared to the Cold War times, the rhetoric of U.S. senior officials has also shifted towards China as the main

competitor, both economically and militarily, and in order to be able to focus on the new rival, the U.S. expects its NATO allies to be prepared to pay more attention to European security issues.

Our research also revealed that despite often use of the term "new Cold War" in media reports and by some scholars and experts, this trend is not reflected in the speeches of the U.S. senior officials. Instead, the analysis highlights a new constellation characterized by multipolar threat patterns, with no clear signs that this situation will change significantly in the near future. Economic threats are not bound anymore to systemic ideological dogmas representing two opposing economic systems as it was during the Cold War. Politically, there is also no dogmatic competition, instead, the autocratic and conservative-nationalist governments are perceived as security challenges for democracies.

At the same time, as during the Cold War, securitization in the rhetoric of American senior officials plays an important role in mobilizing public opinion. Gallup public opinion surveys indicate that unfavourable opinions of Russia among the U.S. population increased from 41% in 2007 to 53% in 2009 following Russia's invasion of Georgia. It dropped to 42% in 2011 after Obama's attempt to reset relations with Moscow, but rose sharply to 70% in 2015, after Russia's military intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and to 89% in 2023 after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine [13].

Despite the change in accents and narratives compared to the Cold War times, securitization continues to play an important role in the public speeches of U.S. senior officials to convey the threat to both their own society and allies, to shape public opinion to support increased military spending and to provide assistance to victims of aggression. Although the ideological characteristics of the confrontation have changed since the Cold War, democratic countries should be prepared to respond to the challenges and threats posed by conservative-nationalist and autocratic states.

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