



Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill and President Truman with their staffs around the conference table at the Potsdam Conference, July 17, 1945 (Wikipedia)

## Kennan, Roberts, and the Special Relationship: Lessons for the Strategic Contest with Moscow

By Andrew Monaghan

It was at the beginning of a different “new era” in relations between Moscow and the Euro-Atlantic community. George Kennan had recently arrived in Moscow in the later stages of World War II and met a comrade in arms, Frank Roberts, then the deputy chief of mission in the British Embassy. Together they shared ideas on what US and British policy towards Moscow should look like. This dialogue became a rich exchange of ideas that

led to Kennan’s Long Telegram to Washington and Roberts’ Long Dispatches to London. Together, they underlined the importance of envisaging Moscow’s activity not in regional but in holistic, global terms, and of attempting to interpret Moscow’s view of the future. They also stressed the importance of the US-UK relationship. Times have changed, but their ideas and dialogue still offer a valuable model for today.

## Dispatches from Moscow and the Special Relationship

By the time Kennan became charge d'affaires in Moscow in early 1946, the war-time alliance was fraying and Western relations with the Soviet Union soon began sharply to deteriorate. That March, Winston Churchill gave his "sinews of peace" speech, declaiming how the shadows of war and tyranny were falling over the world, and stating the need for a "special relationship" between Great Britain and the United States to meet the challenge. This meant friendship, of course, and mutual understanding. It also meant the "continuance of the intimate relationship between our military advisors, leading to common study of potential dangers." This included the "continuance of the present facilities for mutual security," especially naval and air force bases "all over the world."<sup>1</sup>

Frank Roberts had arrived in Moscow in January 1945 and was on hand to advise Churchill at the Yalta Conference in February. Unsung, certainly in comparison with Kennan, Roberts would go on to play a major role in shaping British diplomacy in the early Cold War years, particularly in shaping London's policy towards Moscow. He would remain Minister in Moscow until 1947, then served as the private secretary to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin. He would subsequently become London's permanent representative to the North Atlantic Council from 1957-60, before returning to Moscow as ambassador from 1960-62. In these roles, he not only conditioned London's thinking about Soviet activity, but often served as London's direct point of contact with the Soviet leadership in tense negotiations from the Berlin airlift to the U-2 incident and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

At a personal level, Roberts and Kennan had already met and formed a friendship in Lisbon in 1943. Finding themselves together again in the harsh conditions of late-war Moscow, they forged a close relationship as they sought to assess probable Soviet post-war behavior. Their attention was absorbed by developments in – and diplomatic contests over – Poland and the Black Sea region, the advance of the Allied armies into Germany, and then the occupation of Germany.

As the war ended, this focus widened to encompass a broader horizon of Soviet activity from the Aegean, Dardanelles, and Black Sea to the Middle East, Iran, and Manchuria. There was no shortcut to good relations with the Soviets, they agreed, but there was a need to work out how to co-exist. By February 1946, according to Roberts, "we had so peppered our home departments" with "information and warnings of all kinds" that their capitals invited them to submit substantive, considered views. This advice led to Kennan's Long Telegram and, shortly thereafter, Roberts' own Long Dispatches to London.<sup>2</sup>

Despite some differences of emphasis due to writing for distinct audiences in London and Washington, the conclusions the two men reached were very close and their recommendations were very similar. Roberts later explained that they were in "constant consultation" and were "studying and reacting to the same policies."<sup>3</sup> And despite London and Washington having somewhat different political and international priorities, Roberts echoed Churchill in asserting the importance to London of working with the US. Whatever "private disagreements" may arise between the US and the British Commonwealth, he argued, they must remain "firm friends" in Moscow's eyes. If we are

to be strong, he continued, “we must cherish our special relations” with the US, “fostering a natural community of interests.”

In terms of interpreting and responding to Moscow’s challenge, Roberts and Kennan “agreed that what was needed was a long-term approach... not just reacting in the traditional...way to situations as they arose.” They also agreed that, so long as they adopted a realistic view of Soviet policies that were “bound to be adversarial,” there was “no reason why we should come to war.” Firmness and formal correctness in all matters, big and small, was essential: The Allies should show strength and patience, but they should avoid parading that strength in unnecessary saber rattling. As Roberts put it, despite worldwide conflicts of interest, British relations with Russia had been maintained, and not unsuccessfully so, for 300 years on the basis of a distant realism between the governments.

To underpin such an approach, they proposed establishing centralized planning staffs to coordinate thinking and activity, resulting in the Policy Planning Staff in Washington (which Kennan would later go on to lead) and the Russia Committee in London.<sup>4</sup> These staffs were a means of ensuring a continuous and comprehensive consideration of Soviet policy “in all its guises.” The staffs were to produce nuanced, holistic assessments of Soviet activity, concentrating on three points of focus.

First, the staffs would assess Moscow’s global activity as a coherent whole. Second, they would offer substantive answers to central questions about whether Moscow’s activity was tactical or strategic and whether it posed, as British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin asked of Roberts, a “short squall of bad weather or a permanent gale”? Here, Kennan and Roberts were again aligned – it was

rash to assume that Moscow’s moves were only short-term and tactical. Instead, Soviet moves were underpinned by long-term ambitions and persistent strategy. And third, they would attempt to foresee the future development of Soviet activity.

### **Then and Now: Lessons for Shaping Effective Russia Policy Today**

Long-term Russia watchers might be forgiven for thinking that new eras seem to come along frequently these days. For many, Moscow’s renewed assault on Ukraine in February 2022 signaled the emergence of a new era of strategic competition as significant as the early days of the Cold War. For others, Moscow’s 2014 annexation of Crimea coupled with China’s rise had already heralded the birth of a new era of a so-called great power competition.<sup>5</sup> Others still might point to an earlier new era in the late 2000s, with Putin’s Munich speech and the Russo-Georgia war.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, the Euro-Atlantic community’s relationship with Moscow, dissonant since the mid-2000s, transformed from dissonance to competition and then to confrontation during the 2010s. Nevertheless, the escalatory tension between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia in 2022 did present something of a new stage: it became very explicitly adversarial. Some Euro-Atlantic officials now even anticipate the possibility of a war.<sup>7</sup> The values clash between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia is clear and explicit, and the list of fundamental policy disagreements is extensive, going well beyond the war in Ukraine to arms control and freedom of navigation. It is not that Moscow disagrees with NATO enlargement, for instance, so much that it disagrees with the alliance’s continued existence. Such fundamental

disagreements greatly complicate any and all questions of wider European security. These developments strongly evoke the prior conclusion of Kennan and Roberts that the West will find Moscow difficult to deal with for a long time.

Even so, our world is very different to that of Kennan and Roberts. The West has changed. Russia has changed. The international context has changed. It is not, therefore, the Cold War redux. Transposing a straight re-iteration of their proposals does not take us far beyond soundbites about the need for “containment.” In fact, such an approach carries potential problems for shaping effective contemporary policy: the echoes lend authenticity to superficially plausible but backwards-looking thinking, rather than the fresh analysis we need. Defense, deterrence, or even dialogue based on looking in the rear-view mirror will certainly be ineffective.

Nevertheless, it is striking just how much resonance this moment has with the dawn of the Cold War era, including the obvious tensions and disagreements, the geographical scope of the confrontation, and in the language and framing of questions. Bevin’s weather-related question echoes today, for instance, when senior Western officials frame Moscow’s challenge as a short squall of bad weather and ask whether its activity is tactical or strategic.<sup>9</sup> Our era confronts us with a baffling set of problems, but also with a useful strategic inheritance.

Kennan and Roberts offer much to consider today as we engage with the challenges of the day coming from Moscow and as we look to the future. They emphasized the value of intimately knowing both (Russian) history and Moscow’s strategic intent to our capacity to construe the vagaries and contradictions of Russian policies and

actions, which can seem incomprehensible and deeply mistaken, even “ridiculous” and “absurd,” to Western leaders.<sup>9</sup> (Even so, as one perceptive observer noted, “one can understand the historical causes of their nonsensical way of carrying on and yet still stand amazed and flummoxed by its more bizarre manifestations.”)<sup>10</sup> These fundamentals were and remain relevant. But to take the next step and shape effective deterrence and defense, we should draw on three deeper lessons about how they approached the challenge.

The first is the need to adopt a holistic and strategic global horizon when interpreting Moscow’s actions. Today, there is too often a sense in Euro-Atlantic thinking that Russia is a regional European challenge. As in 1946, though, the very real tensions in Europe today are only part of a wider, global picture that stretched from the Aegean through the Middle East and Iran to the Pacific.

As then, Moscow’s activity now is also strategic in intent and global in horizon. The campaign against Ukraine is only one part of this bigger picture. Senior Russian officials work actively in the Persian Gulf, with Iran, China and North Korea, and across large parts of Africa. They draw attention to the growing importance of the Indian Ocean and Pacific in international affairs—and intend to develop the Northern Sea Route to connect the Arctic with these oceans.<sup>11</sup> They also frame their security concerns in a global way, in terms of a global geoeconomic competition lasting throughout the 2020s. For example, they explicitly state their perception of US-led challenges to the Northern Sea Route, as well as in the development of AUKUS (the nuclear submarine agreement between Australia, the UK and the US) and what they term as US provocative actions over the Korean peninsula and Taiwan.<sup>12</sup>

The second lesson is that the scope of Moscow's strategic intent makes the Kennan and Roberts' injunction to focus on the future all the more important to shaping effective policy. Many analysts and policymakers in the Euro-Atlantic community view Russia as a state in structural decline with a bleak outlook (perhaps accelerated after 3 years of its war in Ukraine). The flawed and unimaginative scenario designs that flow from this perception narrow the potential Russian challenge to parts of the European theatre and have a tendency to write Russia out of the Euro-Atlantic community's scenarios for 2030 and beyond. All too often in these forecasts, the "Russia problem" resolves itself and simply fades away. Moreover, public discussion in the Euro-Atlantic community of Moscow's own foresight and scenario thinking, as reflected for instance in its Strategic Forecast to 2035, is vanishingly rare.<sup>13</sup>

Moscow's strategy and its own assumptions about the future yet again underline the very great extent to which the Euro-Atlantic community and Moscow live in different worlds, often incommunicado. To be sure, Moscow finds foresight and strategy as difficult as everyone else, both in making assumptions about and plans for the future; and then implementing those plans. There are flaws, contradictions, and challenges aplenty in Russian strategy. But the Russian leadership is clear and explicit about its strategic agenda and makes great effort to resource and implement that agenda.<sup>14</sup>

The war in Ukraine is not altering but instead accelerating this strategic effort. Importantly, Moscow sees its foresight as being proved broadly correct by events. It is incumbent on us to interpret Moscow's perspective in a holistic and forward-looking way, and doing so is vital for our own efforts to formulate effective deterrence and defense.

Ignoring it or dismissing Moscow's plans as absurd is a recipe for unhappy surprises.

This highlights the importance of the third lesson: the significance, in the wider alliance context, of the relationship between the UK and the US. Often questioned in recent years, this relationship is under scrutiny again in the context of trade tariffs and policy disagreements. Some contend, therefore, that there is a need to "re-evaluate" the relationship and adjust it to the mutual benefit of both.<sup>15</sup> Then as now, there were disagreements between Washington and London. Then as now, the strategic contest with Moscow creates grounds for strategic partnership. The collaboration in weeks leading up to the launch of the full war on Ukraine in 2022 and the years since have shown the value of a joint approach in response to Russia's turn to aggression, as well as the value of shared assessments on and approaches to Russia.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Kennan-Roberts Approach: Renewed and Restored**

The initiation of talks between the US and Russia is an important moment, but the list of policy and value disagreements between them is extensive. Moscow continues to make common cause with Beijing, Pyongyang, and Tehran, among others. It remains very active from West Africa to Southeast Asia. The moment calls for strategic collaboration rather than a series of reactive, tactical responses.

Given such a horizon and such a trajectory, Kennan and Roberts have much to teach. For all the differences between the Cold War and today, their assessment that Moscow's activity is underpinned by long-term ambitions and persistent strategy rings true—as does their prescription that this challenge can best be addressed through common

cause between London and Washington in shaping a common strategic approach in forging future policies towards Moscow.

Washington and London will need actively to contribute to this effort through sustained regular engagement at multiple levels. Washington's evolving debate about security and defense, even as it tries to pivot towards Pacific, particularly China, cannot overlook Russia, either in Europe or the Indo-Pacific. To build on Bevin's historic legacy, the UK's current Foreign Secretary seeks to restore Britain's "reputation as a net contributor to global security" and "renew its alliances."<sup>17</sup> As it does so, London will need to shape its own coherent view of the strategic challenge Moscow poses, recognizing that this matters not only for European security, but more globally.

Following Roberts and Kennan, the first step for such a common, strategic approach is to treat Moscow's activity as holistic and global, and the second is to shape realistic foresight assessment, looking out to 2030 and beyond. These two steps will provide the solid foundations for a sustainable strategic approach to dealing with Russia that can coherently incorporate dialogue, defense and deterrence.

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## Endnotes

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