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Understanding Relations between Russia and the United States through a Metaphoric Cluster Analysis

On June 12, 1987, U.S. President Ronald Reagan stood on the west side of the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin and gave a speech that many historians argue signaled the end of the Cold War between the United States and Russia. After discussing the nature of the totalitarian state, and after calling for freedom and security in Berlin, Mr. Reagan uttered his famous line, “General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

Following the speech, citizens worldwide looked forward to a thawing of relations between the two superpowers, and an era of good feeling. But over thirty years later, the thaw has begun to refreeze, for a number of reasons. Why? Although the reasons are complex and various, part of the answer lies in charges that Russia meddled in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and is still doing so in October 2020. Regardless of the reasons, too much is at stake for these two superpowers to be pushed against one another. At this fragile moment in human history, we need a way of understanding the nature of the geopolitical interplay between Russia and the United States.

This presentation examines the charges and countercharges emanating from Russia and the United States through the specific lens of metaphoric clusters. An analysis of geopolitical metaphors have much to recommend, because they can be symptomatic of underlying relational causes, as well as suggest what is strategically significant in decision-making arenas. Uses of specific metaphors also allow humans to “understand with greater accuracy, what to guard against” in a search for peace and tranquility between nation-states, to quote Kenneth Burke. For example, politicians’ use of rhetorical “devil” terms can signify muddled, messy relationships between nation-states. My emphasis is on metaphors that President Putin, President Trump and their secretaries of state use to talk about the political relationships between Russia and the United States.