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The Cold War at Ditchley: A Digest in 1,000 Words

By Thomas Cryer

Since its founding in 1958, Ditchley's discussions have continually grappled with the consequences and legacies of the Cold War, a torturously drawn-out epoch of global superpower confrontation that catalysed several complex geopolitical undercurrents, from decolonisation to economic globalisation. This digest summarises a piece written by Thomas Cryer (Archives Intern, 2021) surveying Ditchley discussions of the Cold War more extensively, which can be found at: [From the Archives | Ditchley Foundation](#)

In emphasising the Cold War's ideological consequences, the paper asks vital questions of Ditchley in 2021, particularly how an institution whose discussions were for many years dictated by such perspectives can adapt to a new multipolar era. How best can Ditchley welcome new geopolitical perspectives, discuss former Communist states and, most importantly, evaluate its Cold War conferences and possible institutional biases to prevent a comparable ideological confrontation from ever occurring again?

Both Ditchley's Anglo-American roots and the difficulties of securing participation from the Eastern bloc meant that it predominantly promoted pro-capitalist voices from the major liberal democratic trans-Atlantic powers. Ditchley has had no Annual Lecturer from a former Communist state and only one, Ghana's Kofi Annan, from the Non-Aligned World. As late as June 1985, the largest hitherto gathered Ditchley Conference discussed 'East-West Relations with the New Men in Moscow' without a single Eastern bloc participant. As Nathaniel Ocquaye (Archives Intern, 2021) has shown, even by 1993 Ditchley discussed 'Western Relations with the PRC' without any Chinese participants, the first only coming to Ditchley in 1998.

Yet Ditchley's extended deliberations continually challenged those encouraging an action-reaction logic in response to every perceived Soviet aggression. As Ditchley's first Director H.V. Hodson warned in a September 1963 Director's Note, uncertainty was 'not a valid excuse for inaction: the need was to use a period of uncertainty to mould the environment of the problems in such a way as to advance progress towards ideal long-term solutions.' By bringing together discussants from across the Western bloc, Ditchley equally revealed subtle differences in opinion between its component nations, particularly a consistent European questioning of the starkest American catastrophism.

In this sense, encouraging mutual understanding naturally furthered Sir David Wills' aim in establishing Ditchley: to prevent another armed conflict comparable to WWII. The main themes of Ditchley's early Cold War discussions were consequently great

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power and great responsibility. As the American General Lauris Norstad announced in Ditchley's second Annual Lecture, 'threats, crises, disarray—these mark this time of our responsibility.'

With regards to Russia, Ditchley participants continually emphasised that lasting reforms had to be domestically-driven. Admittedly, this often reinforced a stereotyped view of an omnipotent Politburo solely motivated by status preservation and 'traditional' Russian beliefs. Whilst rarely underestimating the USSR's many domestic issues, participants often sounded the alarm over Soviet militaristic boasting, unhelpfully translating such grandstanding into 'reality.' Ditchley conferences of the 1980s reveal just how unforeseeable the USSR's final collapse proved to be within this mindset. Participants only fully recognised Gorbachev's reforming intents and abilities in 1988, even then conceding that the 'power on the streets' was largely beyond their control and analytical purview.

Since 1990, most discussions concerning Russia have been astutely pragmatic, recognising that internal democratisation cannot come overnight. This was why five 1990s conferences focused exclusively on Russia, a unique level of interest. Equally, participants have rightfully respected Russia's belief that it remains a 'great power' with a vital global influence. This mindset's continual references to Cold War legacies make rapprochement a high-stakes game. Whilst mutual misunderstanding wholly exacerbated the long-forewarned crisis in Ukraine, the overriding Ditchley consensus that this was **not** a new Cold War remains critical. Russia remains in immense domestic difficulty: it may merely be that the playing-out of such challenges will require patience or may, once again, erupt unpredictably.

Meanwhile, China's ascent represents a critical counter-current that has recently become one of Ditchley's major concerns. Certainly, Ditchley has rarely bracketed China as an inevitable enemy, instead aiming to subtly steer its rise by welcoming it into post-war liberal institutions. That Ditchley's first conference discussing China came in 1964 was impressively prescient. Yet after twenty-two China-related conferences, further effort is still needed to increase participation from China and the Indo-Pacific. It is still unclear how an originally transatlantic organisation can adapt itself to the 'Pacific Century.' Perhaps Ditchley's own 'pivot to Asia' is heralded by October 2021's conference 'The Indo-Pacific', consciously scheduled to encourage participation from those time zones.

What of the 'Western' powers? Ditchley recognised the Cold War's importance to the West's sense of self and the trans-Atlantic partnership when many underlying factors, including decolonisation and economic decline, threatened to raise tensions between the two continents. Indeed, as Lord Carrington's 1990 Ditchley Annual Lecture recognised, 'fear is a powerful cement.' Ditchley's conferences since President Trump's election have continuously uncovered such tensions. Whether discussing human rights or climate change, 'the West' has arguably yet to find a more effective cement than fear.

Finally, emphasising the Cold War's remaining legacies stresses the difficulties of establishing a new post-Cold War course, if such a singular notion can still exist. Whilst Ditchley participants always pragmatically recognised foreign policy's intricacy, even during the Cold War's height, few have doubted that current policymaking has become considerably more complex. Nevertheless, Ditchley discussions clearly remain at the forefront of efforts to find common resolve balancing these divided aims and political

priorities. This effort faithfully reflects Ditchley's founding mission of fostering a dialogue to avoid repeating the horrors of another recently concluded global conflict.

Following sixty years of decaying 'unpleasant certainties', Ditchley's best possible post-Cold War contribution remains to make today's pleasant uncertainties more certain. Doing so requires dutifully analysing and deliberating upon the diversity and complexity of the world created in the Cold War's wake and, in turn, creating an equally diverse and multi-faceted Ditchley. Following COVID-19 and recent catastrophic events in Kabul, Sir David Wills' mission consequently remains terrifyingly appropriate. As Sir Michael Howard 1993's Annual Lecture warned, 'the failure of rival creeds does not mean that our own is bound to succeed, only that it has been given another chance.'