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March 8, 2022

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The United States and its allies have had a remarkably peaceful 75 years since the end of World War II but now are in for “a rough patch of an extended duration,” a retired ambassador to Moldova and expert on Russia predicted in Naples Monday.

William H. Hill, global fellow at the Wilson Center at the Kennan Institute, spoke to members of the Naples Council on World Affairs (NCWA) on “Understanding Vladimir Putin: His Battle Strategy and Psychologial Interpretation of Rebuilding the Soviet Empire” in one of NCWA’s lectures in its series on foreign policy. He was joined by another Russian expert, Mariya Omelicheva, professor of national security strategy at the National War College.

Hill and Omelicheva outlined a view, historically kindled by Russia itself, of a “Great Power,” an empire inclusive of Ukraine, and elements that will lead to the development of “New Order” different from the Cold War in which Europe and the United States and other nations in the world will align themselves into competing hostile camps. “We are going to have to make up our response as we go along,” Hill said.

They predicted the rekindling of a global nuclear arms race, with North Korea and Iran attempting to expand their stockpiles. “All of this is unprecedented and not reversible in our lifetime,” Omelicheva said.

However, despite their troubling view of the future, an important foil lies within Russia itself – the Russian people, they agreed.

To respond to this trend, Hill advocated increasing American military strength and strategic use of our economic power to prevent a more dangerous future in coming years, as Russia continues to try to destabilize the global order.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine will create long-term repercussions in international relations, Omelicheva said. At the heart of Moscow’s thinking is Putin’s theory of Russia’s greatness, although there is a shifting – and unclear – definition of what that means, she said. Ukraine is central to Russia’s foundational narrative, just as the flight of the Calvinists from England to America is central to our own creation story.

“Their thinking distorts history,” she said. Putin’s projection of his theory of Russia’s greatness has generated the support of the Russian people for many years. Eventually, in 2016, when Russia entered a recession, Putin’s fear of losing control led him to say that for Russia to be great, it had to reconnect to land that Russia had lost when the Soviet Union broke up.

“In the past two years, with the pandemic, the balance between strategy and ideology has been lost, and ideology has become strategy,” she said.

Facing the threat by Putin to use nuclear weapons – at least tactical weapons – is deeply frustrating, Hill said. “We can’t let ourselves be paralyzed by these tactics,” he said. “If it works, it will lead to further bites at the apple. This will be a test of will and nerves. We have to say we won’t fight in Ukraine, but we won’t let you get away with this, and we will defend if you get out of your territory.” Both experts said they couldn’t predict whether Russia will use nuclear weapons.

Hill predicted that Putin’s Achilles heel is the Russian people. Their ability to travel and to integrate with the West has been curtailed by sanctions, a threat to the staying power of Putin’s regime, Hill said. Russians do not want to kill Ukrainians. Their people are intermixed. Russian troops were not told where they were going. Hill said the U.S. and its allies need to find ways to provide information to the Russian people. They will not be happy with Putin about the war in Ukraine, and this could have a real effect, he said.

But while there are real problems before us, if we use our strengths carefully and thoughtfully, we can get to a new era of stability and security, Hill said. “We did it before; we can do it again.”

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