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Russia And NATO Meet: Time For Allies To Call Off Mini-Cold War With Moscow

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The NATO-Russia Council met in Brussels for the first time in nearly two years. “We are not afraid of dialogue,” announced alliance Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. Alas, the talks didn’t get very far. Afterward he explained: “it was reconfirmed that we disagree on the facts, on the narrative and the responsibilities in and around Ukraine.” Indeed, he added, “there were profound disagreements.”

Of course, this should surprise no one. After all, Russia is in a mini-Cold War with the U.S. and Europe over Ukraine. A meeting, even one that ran longer than expected, wasn’t going to change anyone’s opinion. Still, Stoltenberg emphasized the importance of “open channels, for political dialogue, for predictability, for transparency” at a time of increased tensions. Also on the agenda was discussing how to reduce risks from military activities, like when a Russian plane buzzed a U.S. destroyer last week.

However, the issue of Moscow’s relations with the West really doesn’t belong with NATO. Only political decisions in the respective capitals can significantly improve ties. And that won’t happen without a reassessment of everyone’s respective national interests. Should the West maintain permanent confrontation with Russia over Ukraine?

None of the allies has made a security commitment to Kiev. Indeed, Ukraine is not a member of NATO for a reason: few if any of the 28 members are willing to go to war with Russia over its neighbor. It turns out the Dutch aren’t even willing to approve a treaty initiating closer economic and political relations, and they probably aren’t alone in Europe.

Nor does the infamous Budapest Memorandum, which formalized Kiev’s disposal of Soviet nuclear-tipped missiles left in Ukraine when the Evil Empire dissolved, create any meaningful allied obligations. The signatory powers, most notably Washington, agreed to *go to the United Nations* if another country threatened to use nuclear weapons against Kiev. And Ukraine still signed.

Should the U.S. and Europe treat Kiev as if it was a member of NATO, creating a de facto Article 5 commitment to go to war? There's a reason the alliance has a membership process: to decide which states warrant inclusion. One criterion is not to induct countries with a *casus belli* or two trailing behind. After all, no one wants membership to result in instant conflict.

More fundamentally, inclusion only makes sense if it makes the existing allies more secure. No one seemed to consider this issue during the madcap alliance expansion after the Cold War because no one really still thought of NATO as a military pact. Instead, the organization was treated as an international gentleman's club, to which everybody who was somebody wanted to belong. However, the Ukraine conflict reminded everyone that war could happen, leading most members to clear their throats uncomfortably when the Baltic States were mentioned. Although the latter are full alliance members, no one else ever imagined actually fighting for them. Only now have some advocates of NATO expansion remembered that the reason to go to war on another nation's behalf is because the latter's independence is vital to one's own, not to satisfy one's charitable impulses.

Which is why NATO members would be mad to include Ukraine. Moscow has behaved badly and Ukrainians are suffering as a result, but such humanitarian considerations, though real, are a poor basis for issuing military commitments. Kiev simply doesn't matter geopolitically to Europe or America. Ukraine spent most of its recent existence under Imperial Russia and then the Soviet Union. Since gaining independence in 1991 Kiev has suffered corrupt, incompetent, and authoritarian governance. The allies barely noticed. While Ukraine ultimately could become a significant trading partner with Europe, that day is far in the future and isn't worth war. Kiev's travails may be regionally disruptive, but they don't make America or the rest of Europe less secure.

Indeed, despite all of the tub-thumping about the supposed new Russian threat, Vladimir Putin is a poor excuse for Joseph Stalin or Adolf Hitler. His aggregate "conquests" so far are pitiful: Crimea and some influence over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Donbas. There's no evidence that he covets any other territory, certainly none without an ethnic-Russian majority. Moscow would have a hard enough time conquering and occupying Ukraine, let alone Europe. Putin might be evil, but he isn't stupid.

And despite Moscow's modest military revival, Europe alone vastly outranges Russia in economic strength and military spending. America's global reach is unparalleled. Despite the refusal by most European states to invest in their militaries, Moscow still is in no position to stage a continental Blitzkrieg. Former Russian Finance Minister Alexey Kudrin recently observed that without its reserve funds Moscow would have had to cut military outlays in half after the drop in oil prices. Putin can demand national respect and intervene in small foreign conflicts, but his country is no longer a true *Weltmacht*.

Which Europe obviously recognizes by its steadfast refusal to do more militarily. Stoltenberg was almost exultant because last year the European NATO states only slightly *reduced* their collective spending. Because for years they had rapidly cut outlays. The nations supposedly most at risk, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, devote between one and two percent of their GDPs on the military. They claim to worry about being eaten by the Russian bear but the most they ask of their citizens is two cents on the dollar? If they can't be bothered to do more, they certainly shouldn't be calling on America for a permanent garrison.

There's still reason for the West to oppose Russia's actions in Ukraine, though the allies' hands are hardly clean. The U.S. and Europe took their Cold War victory and ignored Moscow's interests: expanding NATO to Russia's doorstep; dismembering Serbia, a long-time Russian friend; offering alliance membership to Georgia and Russia; seeking to pull Kiev into Europe's economic orbit; supporting a street revolution against Ukraine's corrupt but elected leader, who leaned toward Moscow.

None of these warranted military hostilities toward Kiev, and the Russian people have paid a high price for dubious gains (some Ukrainians aren't sure they want the Donbas back). However, the U.S. would not have supinely accepted the Russian-backed overthrow of a friendly government in Mexico. Provoking a wounded bear is stupid in international relations as well as in the natural world.

The Brussels meeting was never going to change anyone's mind. But then, nothing else is likely to do so either. Sanctions remain in place to no obvious effect. They punish but have not transformed Moscow's behavior. And they discourage Russian cooperation on issues including North Korea, terrorism, Iran, Syria and Afghanistan. Even worse, the West's economic war has pushed Moscow toward Beijing despite important differences between the two countries. Another great game is afoot, but Washington is focused on children splashing in the kiddie pool.

The U.S. and Europe must decide whether they are willing to wage a permanent mini-Cold War over Ukraine. Russia took back Crimea lawlessly, but no more so than the allies broke up Serbia and created an independent Kosovo. A majority of Crimeans probably supported the move, though only a free and fair referendum, unlike that conducted by Moscow, would tell for sure. In any case, Crimea is no more likely to go back to Ukraine than Kosovo is likely to go back to Serbia. The issue is effectively closed.

No doubt Moscow has supported separatists in the Donbas, but also no doubt there are separatists. It's a mix of civil war and aggression, which isn't unusual. This certainly is not the first and won't be the last insurgency to have outside support: just ask Washington about the Mujahideen, Contras, and other U.S.-backed groups. While everyone seems to agree on the political settlement represented by the Minsk agreement—it was the one reported area of accord at the Council meeting—both Kiev and Moscow appear lax in implementation. Even the end of shooting won't mean harmony is restored. Look at the Balkans, where the allies put their limited skills at international social engineering to work with less than stellar results. Even in the best case, Ukraine is likely to remain a mess.

Which suggests the allies should seek to forge a deal with Moscow that gets both sides out of the present geopolitical cul-de-sac. Agree to disagree over Crimea, neutralize Ukraine by withdrawing Russian support from insurgents and NATO's promise of eventual membership for Kiev, liberalize trade opportunities for Ukraine in both directions, and swap Moscow's acquiescence in the results of Ukraine's political system for grants of significant autonomy to areas filled with ethnic Russians. As an independent state Kiev could refuse to go along, but then it would be on its own.

Call it "appeasement" if you like, but Ukraine has no automatic claim to Western support, especially when continuing confrontation is unlikely to yield any practical result. Indeed, respecting the interests of adversaries once was a time-honored diplomatic technique. The

relevant question for every policy proposal always is “Is there a better alternative?” A bit more appeasement could have prevented World War I, out of which World War II emerged. Appeasement failed in the latter because Adolf Hitler would never be satisfied. Putin’s geopolitical aims are far more modest. Addressing them makes more sense than maintaining a mini-Cold War. Only a deal seems likely to deliver peace for Ukraine, security for Russia, stability for Europe, and satisfaction for America. (The U.S. really has nothing meaningful at stake geopolitically, only moral sentiment.)

It’s good that NATO and Russia met. But the former is not the real decision-maker. Dialogue should continue, with the EU and U.S. prepared to negotiate a deal normalizing relations. Moscow could say no, of course. However, the allies won’t know without trying. And everyone would benefit from ending the current impasse. Especially the Ukrainian people.

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