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## **Improve Relations With Russia — It Poses Little Military Threat To The US And Europe, Despite Election Meddling**

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Perhaps the most important policy initiative suggested by candidate Donald Trump was improving relations with the Russian Federation. His proposal horrified the Blob, the collection of Washington elites who typically dominate U.S. foreign policy irrespective of administration. But the idea made eminent sense: no vital interests between the two countries conflict and in many areas, such as confronting Islamic terrorism, the governments have similar objectives.

However, the controversy over apparent Russian interference in the 2016 election has overshadowed virtually everything involving Moscow. The two presidents recently met for the first time on the sidelines of the G-20 summit.

Protecting the integrity of American elections is a vital national interest, but the U.S. is ill-positioned to complain too loudly about Russia's misbehavior. After all, Washington has interfered in the electoral processes of at least 81 other nations, including Russia a couple of decades ago. And as American officials obviously recognize, manipulating someone else's election is an attractive tactic because it potentially offers big bang for the buck—or in this case, the ruble. Before sanctioning Moscow the U.S. Congress might apologize for the many times Americans played a similar game.

Moreover, Russia's apparent efforts were not responsible for Hillary Clinton's loss. She alone bears blame for her manifold scandals, poor record, and bad campaign. She lost because of her own failings. Still, the 2016 race offers a warning to U.S. governments from state to national to do more to secure the election process.

Washington must deal with Russia despite the latter's misbehavior. Moscow's powerful nuclear arsenal remains an existential if theoretical threat to the U.S. The Russian conventional military presents a formidable barrier to American geopolitical domination. Moscow's uncertain international ambitions, highlighted by its armed intervention against Georgia and Ukraine, continue to unsettle Europe.

Russia's economy is sizeable and its energy production significant. Moscow possesses a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, with a veto. The Russian Federation runs from Europe to the Pacific, giving the Kremlin wide-ranging if not quite global interests. Moscow

fears Islamic terrorism (in Syria and elsewhere), opposes nuclear proliferation (by Iran and North Korea, in particular), and backs U.S. forces engaged in work seen as supportive of Russian ends (such as providing logistical aid for Americans in Afghanistan). Moscow could become the ultimate balancer, leaning toward Washington instead of Beijing if the American embrace was warmer.

Washington obviously would benefit from a better relationship with Russia. While the U.S. should have no illusions about Putin's character or ignore fundamental disagreements, the president should improve relations if possible.

However, in the minds of many Americans Russia has become the nation's "No. 1 geopolitical foe," as GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney declared in 2012. A cavalcade of U.S. and European officials has warned of Moscow's ill intentions. For instance, former U.S. ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns charged that "Russia is our most dangerous adversary in the world today." Gen. James Mattis said at his Senate Confirmation hearing "Russia is the principal threat to U.S. security." NATO's former deputy command Richard Shirreff even wrote a book: *2017: War with Russia*. To some Vladimir Putin is the new Hitler, poised to conquer Europe, impose his will on the Middle East, create an anti-American axis with China, undermine Western democracy and values, and threaten even the American homeland. History, it seems, is about to end in very unexpected fashion.

This lurid vision is entertaining but ludicrous.

Vladimir Putin is not a nice person. Some people who cross him end up dead. A free press is not in his lexicon. Political opponents find the playing field to be anything but level. The avarice of his ruling circle is said to be remarkable. He is fully prepared to thwart Washington anywhere and anytime he believes it to be in his government's or nation's interest.

Yet in light of such sentiments it is striking how little Russia actually threatens the U.S. today. During the Cold War hawks commonly spoke of missile gaps and windows of vulnerability. Today Moscow spends roughly one-ninth what America does on the military. Even accounting for the flaws in such estimates, the difference is vast.

Moreover, nowhere are the two countries at fundamental geopolitical odds. Moscow has made no territorial claims against America, deployed no forces threatening the U.S. or its possessions, put no American transit routes on water or in air at risk, and challenged no important let alone vital interest. In much of the globe Russia is essentially absent: South America and Africa, and large parts of Asia. Once the Grand Puppeteer, Moscow is much diminished on the world stage.

Nor is any of this likely to significantly change. During the Cold War the Soviet Union posed a global and ideological challenge. Russia looks much more like a pre-1914 imperial power, primarily concerned about respect and border security. That makes Moscow very touchy about what happens in Georgia and Ukraine, but significantly less concerned about events further away. Where Russia acts it does so mostly defensively, at least in its view: secure historically Russian Crimea with the military base in Sebastopol, salvage at least a remnant of its Syrian ally, weaken Georgia and undercut its effort to join NATO, bolster its traditional Serbian friend.

Mutual irritation with if not antagonism toward Washington has encouraged cooperation with China, but this is no World War II “Axis.” Differences between Moscow and Beijing limit their cooperation, which so far has come to little. The two governments haven’t even made noticeable progress toward such mundane objectives as undermining the dollar’s role as the globe’s reserve currency. And the U.S. bears the primary blame for pushing these two nations together, reversing the dramatic Nixon-Kissinger strategy to separate the two then-communist giants.

If not America then surely Europe is threatened, argue those who see Russia as the new “necessary enemy.” How else to justify Washington’s continuing dominant international role and outsize military despite the end of the Cold War?

Yet Europe doesn’t appear to perceive much of a danger. Set aside the three Baltic States and perhaps Poland. What other countries actually fear a Russian attack? Even Putin’s wrong and aggressive behavior against Georgia and Russia was measured: he showed no desire to rule territory dominated by non-Russians. Despite predictions that Moscow would occupy Tbilisi, swallow all of Ukraine, overrun the Baltics, and even reconquer Finland, the Russian government has done little. Since becoming acting president in late 1999 Putin has amassed scant territorial booty: Crimea, and influence over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Donbass. Adolf Hitler he ain’t.

Whatever the Europeans say about their supposed fear of Russian aggression, their behavior suggests otherwise. Since Moscow’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, European NATO outlays rose 1.8 percent in 2015 and 3.3 percent last year. If all goes to plan, spending will increase 4.8 percent this year. That’s a modest rate appropriate for bourgeois republics in peacetime, not a serious build-up by prosperous and civilized states to hold off avaricious, barbaric hordes. Overall NATO Europe devotes an underwhelming 1.46 percent of GDP to the military. Germany, with the continent’s greatest military potential, spends 1.22 percent, the same percentage as Albania.

NATO officially sets an objective of two percent of GDP for defense. Last year Great Britain and Poland edged over the line through statistical legerdemain. At least Estonia and Greece actually spent two percent of GDP on the military, though the latter was more focused on fellow alliance member Turkey than Russia as a potential enemy. This year Romania appears likely to slip into the select group with 2.02 percent.

But where are Latvia and Lithuania, whose plaintive whimpering about Moscow’s ill intentions has been heard all the way across the Atlantic? At 1.7 and 1.77 percent, respectively. This year, they promise, they will hit two percent.

And they claim to fear for their independence?

Putin has no evident moral compunction against military aggression. But there’s nothing to suggest that he plans a westward push. Even if he did, there is nothing to prevent Europe from doing far more to constrain Moscow. The European Union nations have about three times the population and 15 times the GDP of Russia. Germany, Great Britain, France, and even Italy alone have larger economies than does Russia. European military outlays already are about four

times those of Moscow, though a group of 27 states naturally spends less efficiently than just one country. Still, the Europeans don't do more because they see no need to do so, especially as long as the U.S. insists on defending them.

The West's main challenge with Russia is to reach a modus vivendi on Georgia and Ukraine. Neither are treaty allies of Washington or Brussels. Neither much affects Western security: until a quarter century ago, they had spent centuries, with only brief breaks, as parts of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. No doubt the Europeans would feel more comfortable with a stable and peaceful Ukraine, in particular. But their present unease does not a military threat make.

Georgia and Ukraine have been treated badly by Moscow, but the U.S. and Europe contributed much toward the present stalemate. Hubris and indifference encouraged them to expand NATO within spitting distance of St. Petersburg. Dismantle Serbia, a traditional Russian ally, and attempt to exclude Moscow from any say in the post-war settlement. Aid color revolutions in border nations Georgia and Ukraine. Promise NATO membership to Tbilisi and Kiev. Embrace Georgia's anti-Russian president Mikhail Saakashvili. Push an exclusive European association agreement on Ukraine. Back a street putsch against the elected, pro-Russian Ukrainian government.

This litany doesn't justify Moscow's response, but it well-illustrates the truth of the dictum that even paranoids have enemies. Backing the nominal independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which long had a separate identity from Georgia, was payback for allied behavior in Kosovo and Serbia, in which the West lawlessly dismantled a sovereign state. Russia's military action also punished the irresponsible Saakashvili, who actually started the shooting in the brief August 2008 war, and dissuaded NATO from adding Tbilisi.

The collapse of the government in Kiev offered Putin an opportunity to reclaim Crimea, a majority-Russian territory long part of Russia until arbitrarily transferred by Communist Party boss Nikita Khrushchev to Ukraine, likely as a result of internal party politics. Annexation secured the Black Sea naval port of Sebastopol. Backing separatists in the Donbas may have been intended as a modest step to disable the weak Ukrainian state and prevent its participation in NATO or a more ambitious attempt to detach a chunk of Ukraine. In any case, Ukraine remains an issue more of humanitarian than security concern for America and Europe.

The only other active Russian challenge of note is Syria, which should be of even less concern to Washington and Brussels. America's attempts to micromanage affairs in the Mideast and territories nearby have been a consistent disaster. Decades backing Israel's military occupation over millions of Palestinians, which alienated Arabs and Muslims elsewhere and encouraged terrorism. Routine support for dictatorships in Egypt and the Persian Gulf even to this day, undermining Washington's purported commitment to democracy. Backing an anti-democratic coup in Iran which ultimately led to an anti-American Islamic revolution in Iran. Supporting Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's aggressive war against Iran, which misled him into expecting U.S. acquiescence when he attacked Kuwait.

Nearly 16 years of dismal nation-building in Afghanistan. A botched “cakewalk” in Iraq that loosed terrorist furies, spurred sectarian war, destroyed the indigenous Christian community, and strengthened Iran, Destroying Libya after reaching a nuclear disarmament deal with its government, thereby spreading chaos and discouraging any future dictator anywhere from negotiating a similar nuclear disarmament pact. Encouraging the Syrian opposition to rise against dictator Bashar al-Assad without providing meaningful aid and heedless of the consequences of defenestrating yet another secular dictator. Pursuing a set of conflicting, even impossible, objectives in Syria, putting Washington simultaneously at odds with the Assad government, the Islamic State, other Islamist insurgents, the Turkish government, Kurdish militias, and Russian government. Backing Saudi Arabia’s brutal, aggressive war against Yemen and hypocritical, divisive diplomatic and economic assault on Qatar.

Washington’s best policy would be to back away from the region, and especially Syria, a humanitarian disaster but security irrelevancy. The country never threatened America. Damascus stopped being a serious danger to Israel after the 1973 war. Syria has been an ally of Moscow for decades and for years has made common cause with Tehran as well; Russia’s and Iran’s current involvement is defensive, intended to preserve a least a remnant of the regime. Even “victory” likely will result in a government with only indifferent control over much of the country. Washington should wave from the sidelines if Russia tries to patch up Humpty Dumpty.

The meeting between Presidents Trump and Putin was overdue. The former should make clear that interference with American elections is a red line for bilateral relations, while pledging that Washington will eschew any attempts at political intervention or regime change involving Russia. Negotiations over a cyber-accord, in line with that reached with China, should be a priority. The two leaders also should develop a compact on Syria, promoting political options to reach a long-term settlement, with Washington backing away militarily after the defeat of the Islamic State.

Finally, Washington, Brussels, and Moscow should seek a reasonable resolution for Ukraine and lifting of sanctions. Possibilities include practical acceptance though continued official non-recognition of the annexation of Crimea, implementation of extensive autonomy for eastern Ukraine, the end of Russian military support for Ukrainian separatists, Kiev’s agreement to military neutralization, NATO’s pledge not to induct Ukraine, and open Ukrainian economic relations East and West. Obviously only Kiev can agree on its role, but the West should state clearly that it will not hold its relations with Moscow hostage to Ukraine’s unrealistic if understandable preference for Western military aid and alliance membership.

On foreign policy, candidate Trump and President Trump often have been in conflict. The former usually held the better views. The president must take hold of U.S. policy toward Moscow. Yet again, the usual suspects in Washington have driven America into a foreign cul-de-sac with no exit strategy. The president should turn the country around, and quickly.

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