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What Russian Threat? Americans Shouldn't Be Running Scared Of Moscow

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Listen to folks in Washington talk about the supposed Russian threat and you'd think America was a small, third-rate country—friendless, stuck in Moscow's shadow, possessing a tiny, obsolete military. The paranoia seems strongest from Neoconservatives who otherwise demand that the U.S. dominate the globe, bombing, invading, and occupying other nations at will.

In 2012 Mitt Romney charged Russia with being America's number one “geopolitical foe,” causing some to later hold him up as a prophet. Earlier this year Secretary of Defense James Mattis testified before the Senate that Moscow is the “principal threat” to the U.S., which should be “ready to confront Russia.”

Yet the fear-mongering is nonsense. Russia's presumed attempt to influence America's election was more smoke than fire. Moscow is accused of a private hack which released emails detailing the sleaze afflicting one of the presidential candidates. Although illegal like other cyber-attacks, that's pretty mild, especially compared to Washington's routine interference in other nations' political affairs, including their elections. Although American officials proclaim their commitment to democracy, their activities almost always promote parties, leaders, and movements friendly to the U.S.

More serious are claims that Moscow poses a security threat. Military capabilities are more than formal military budgets, but the spending disparity between the U.S. and Russia is vast: *Washington's outlays are almost ten times as much as Moscow's*. President Donald Trump just proposed an annual jump in outlays, \$54 billion, which is nearly as much as Russia will spend all year.

Russia lacks the global reach to challenge America. As Putin noted in an interview with an Italian journalist: “Publish a world map and mark all the U.S. military bases on it. You will see the difference between Russia and the U.S.” Moscow also lacks the economic foundation to match the U.S. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, “One effect of the country's deteriorating economic situation has been the delay in concluding the next State Armament Program; originally intended to have been started in 2016, this has now been pushed back to 2018.”

Russia possesses the world's second most powerful nuclear arsenal, capable of destroying America many times over. But even Moscow's sharpest critics don't believe Vladimir Putin plans to commit suicide. That nuclear threat acts more as Russia's guarantee against U.S. coercion. Neither side can allow the stakes of any conflict to race out of control.

Beyond inaugurating nuclear Armageddon, how does Moscow threaten America? An invasion seems unlikely, since the two countries don't share a land boundary. An attack across the Bering Strait to retake Alaska is more than a little unlikely. Which means there is no direct threat to the U.S.

How about isolating America by controlling sea and air and interdicting commerce? That's almost as implausible. The vaunted Red Navy is gone. Moscow deploys one decrepit aircraft carrier, no match for Washington's multiple carrier groups. And the U.S. is allied with European nations which also possess capable if smaller fleets. Russia is upgrading its forces, but it lacks the resources to equal America.

Moscow is no more likely to dominate the air above or around the U.S. Russia's air force is capable and has gained valuable combat experience over Syria, but remains no match for America's globe-spanning force. More dangerous may be Russian air defenses, which would ensure that hostile U.S. air operations were not the cakewalk like in Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.

Nor is there any obvious reason why Moscow would inaugurate war with the U.S. Russia's critics notwithstanding, the Cold War is over. There is only one aggressive ideological power, and that is America. Putinism is a simpler, practical authoritarian nationalism.

That's obviously not a congenial home for anyone who believes in America's classical liberal heritage. The vision of a limited government dedicated to protecting individual rights has few takers in the Russian Federation. The real problem posed by Vladimir Putin is not that he's an unpleasant thug, but that he seems to represent a substantial number—a strong majority if polls are to be believed—of Russians. Still, Moscow's policy reflects much more a defensive than aggressive stance.

Its role in the world looks a lot like that of pre-1914 imperial Russia. The Putin government wants its interests to be respected and its borders to be secure. It especially doesn't like seeing its friends, such as Serbia, dismembered without so much as a nod in Moscow's direction. Russia also opposes a potentially hostile alliance pushing ever eastward, absorbing lands such as Ukraine that once were integral to the Russian Empire as well as the Soviet Union.

The U.S. (and Moscow's neighbors) might wish that Russia would accept America's not always so benevolent hegemony. However, Boris Yeltsen's rule proved to be but a brief interregnum until age-old Russian nationalism reasserted itself. That Moscow now stands up for what it considers to be its interests is no cause for alarm in Washington unless the latter has aggressive designs on Russia itself. The belief that such a nation and people would voluntarily, even enthusiastically, submit to American "leadership" always was a fantasy.

Of course, Moscow's policies sometimes run contrary to Washington's desires, but that doesn't mean Russia poses a threat. Moscow generally has been helpful in Afghanistan, Iran, and North

Korea, all significant concerns of the U.S. Russia has moved closer to China, despite major differences between the two, but largely in response to Washington's hostile policies toward both great powers. In this way the Obama administration inadvertently reversed Richard Nixon's geopolitical masterstroke of 45 years ago.

Washington is similarly displeased with Russia's intervention in Syria, but Damascus long has been a Russian ally. America has no monopoly on the "right" to wage war in the Mideast. And the U.S. nevertheless remains the region's dominant outside power, allying with Israel and the Gulf States, maintaining multiple bases in multiple countries throughout the region, and fighting endless wars for years.

If there is a "Russian threat" to America it must come in Europe, generously defined to include Georgia and Ukraine. Yet the Cold War truly is over. There is no Red Army poised to plunge into the Fulda Gap and race to the Atlantic Ocean.

The very idea of Russian domination of Eurasia is fantastic. Europe has recovered economically from World War II and consolidated politically into the European Union. The continent enjoys about three and a half times Russia's population and almost 15 times its GDP. Indeed, Germany alone almost has three times Russia's economic strength. The economies of the United Kingdom, France, and even Italy are larger than Russia's economy.

Despite their shameless defense lassitude, Europeans still collectively spend nearly four times as much as Moscow on the military. The UK alone comes close to Russia's levels. For all of the sound and fury at recent NATO meetings, no one seriously contemplates a Russian attack on "Old Europe," or even most of "New Europe." What would Moscow gain by triggering a potential nuclear war while trying to overrun large populations of non-Russians who would resist Moscow's rule?

Theoretical capability does not equal intent. Last year the faculty of the Naval War College assessed the Russian "threat." The NWC subsequently issued a "Sense of the Faculty" report which revealed that a majority believed "Russia's fear of potentially 'hostile' forces on its doorstep and within its historical sphere of influence" was "the most fundamental cause of the Ukraine Crisis." Moreover, 71 percent considered the likelihood of an attack on the Baltics to be low or very low.

The latter are seen as most vulnerable to Russian pressure. Yet Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are irrelevant to America's security. Washington is treaty-bound to defend them, an unfortunate result of the foolish go-go years of NATO expansion. However, Russian aggression is very unlikely.

Moscow might see itself as being guardian of resident ethnic Russians, but there seems to be little separatist sentiment in any of the three Baltic countries. Overrunning these states would destroy their economic value while ensuring a new cold war even if the other NATO nations unexpectedly failed to act on their Article 5 responsibilities. No wonder Russia's military deployments suggest no plans for Baltic conquests.

Which leaves Georgia and Ukraine. Their plight is unfortunate but, truth be told, also unimportant for America. Of course, to point out the obvious horrifies advocates of the two. But

Washington never worried about either region when they were part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. Tbilisi and Kiev matter even less geopolitically to America after the U.S.S.R.'s break-up.

Moscow has treated them badly, but it did not act irrationally. The U.S. and Europe heedlessly expanded NATO up to Russia's borders, dismantled Serbia, a historic ally of Moscow, proposed bringing Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, the U.S.-led anti-Russia alliance, pushed to overthrow Russo-friendly governments in both nations, and sought to reorient Ukraine's economy westward. Of course in principle Washington and Brussels had every right to act as they did, and Tbilisi and Kiev had every right to respond as they wished. But to assume that Russia's nationalistic and ruthless government which felt ever more aggrieved would accept such treatment was foolhardy, even reckless. And both Georgia and Ukraine paid the price.

That's unfortunate, but it's a humanitarian, not a security, issue for America. And the countries with the greatest interest the fate of Georgia and Ukraine are in Europe. The best option is to negotiate on the basis that neither Tbilisi nor Kiev will join NATO. Leave them free to trade with whomever they wish, but promise Moscow that neither will be a military outpost for the West. That might not be a perfect outcome, especially for Georgia and Ukraine. But the U.S. government must make policy for the benefit of Americans first. And it would be madness for Washington to contemplate war with a nuclear power over border issues that Russia considers to be vital when America has no serious interest at stake.

Indeed, there's been some debate over Russian nuclear doctrine, and whether Moscow has lowered its threshold for using nukes. If true, noted Olga Oliker in a study last year for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the decision "is driven by Russian concern that its conventional capacity is not sufficient." That is, conventional weakness vis-à-vis the West makes Moscow more likely to use nuclear weapons first.

If Europe nevertheless is willing to risk war over Georgia and Ukraine, the Europeans should put their money and troops where their collective mouth is. European states should garrison both nations and perhaps even join Ukraine's fight in the Donbass against ethnic Russian separatists. But no one in the continent appears ready to fight for Georgia and Ukraine. America certainly shouldn't do so.

There are plenty of good reasons to view Russia as something other than Washington's best buddy. And a bromance between President Trump and Vladimir Putin should leave a sour taste in the mouth of anyone who cares about human liberty. Nevertheless, the concerted campaign by Republican hawks like Lindsey Graham and Democratic partisans of all stripes to turn Moscow into an enemy is not just counterproductive. It is dangerous.

Cooperation with Russia would ease Washington's efforts around the globe. Moreover, Moscow is the one power theoretically capable of destroying the U.S. The two nations got through the Cold War without jumping into the abyss. American politicians should stop tempting fate by demonizing Russia and acting in ways that seem to confirm that the U.S. poses a threat to Russia.

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