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The U.S. shouldn't be running scared of Russia

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WASHINGTON – Earlier this year Secretary of Defense James Mattis testified before the Senate that Moscow is the “principal threat” to the United States, which should be “ready to confront Russia.” Yet the endless fear-mongering is nonsense.

Russia's presumed attempt to influence America's election was pretty mild, especially compared to Washington's routine interference in other nations' political affairs, including their elections. More serious are claims that Moscow poses a security threat.

However, the spending disparity between the U.S. and Russia is vast: Washington's outlays are almost 10 times as much as Moscow's. U.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. Moreover, economic troubles have forced Russia to slow down its military build-up.

Moscow possesses the world's second most powerful nuclear arsenal, but Russian President Vladimir Putin doesn't appear ready to commit suicide.

How else could 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 ain't happening. Which means there is no direct threat to the U.S.

How about isolating America by controlling sea and air? That's almost as implausible. Moscow deploys one decrepit aircraft carrier, no match for Washington's multiple carrier groups.

Moscow is no more likely to dominate the air above or around the U.S. More dangerous may be Russian air defenses, which would ensure that hostile U.S. air operations were not a cakewalk.

And why Moscow would inaugurate war with the U.S.? 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. 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.

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.

Russia has moved closer to China, but largely in response to Washington's hostile policies toward both great powers. Washington is similarly displeased with Russia's intervention in Syria, but Damascus long has been a Russian ally.

If there is a "Russian threat" to America it must come in Europe, generously defined to include Georgia and Ukraine. Yet the very idea of Russian domination of Eurasia is fantastic.

Europe 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.

Despite their shameless defense lassitude, Europeans still collectively spend nearly four times as much as Moscow on the military. And 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?

The Baltic States are seen as most vulnerable to Russian pressure. Yet they are irrelevant to America's security. Thankfully, Russian aggression is very unlikely, since the costs would greatly exceed the benefits.

Which leaves Georgia and Ukraine. Their plight is unfortunate but also unimportant for America.

Washington never worried about either region when they were part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. 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, pushed to overthrow Russo-friendly governments in both nations, and sought to reorient Ukraine's economy westward.

Moscow acted wrongly, but to assume that Russia's nationalistic government which felt ever more aggrieved would accept such treatment was foolhardy, even reckless. That's unfortunate, but it's a humanitarian, not a security, issue for America. The best option is to negotiate on the basis that neither Tbilisi nor Kiev will join NATO.

Indeed, there's evidence that Moscow has lowered its threshold for using nukes. If so, it's because Russia lags behind conventionally.

If Europe nevertheless is willing to risk war over Georgia and Ukraine, the Europeans should garrison both nations. America certainly shouldn't do so.

Russia is not Washington's best buddy. Nevertheless, the campaign to turn Moscow into an enemy is dangerous. American politicians shouldn't tempt fate by demonizing Russia and acting in ways that seem to confirm that the U.S. threatens Russia.

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