



Despite the Strange New Respect for Mitt Romney, He Still Was Wrong About Russia

Doug Bandow
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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made Sen. Mitt Romney winner of the latest "strange new respect" award. When running for president in 2012 Romney insisted that Russia was "without question our number one geopolitical foe." He's being held up as a geopolitical prophet even though he was ostentatiously wrong then and remains wrong today.

At the time the Republican Party was desperate to retake foreign policy as its issue. It had owned national security during the Cold War – the Soviets offered classic enemies against which the GOP routinely ran. Then the blundering George W. Bush tossed away the issue with his endless war in Afghanistan, catastrophic bungle in Iraq, and ineffective responses to both North Korean and Iranian proliferation. To succeed him the GOP nominated Sen. John McCain, who had supported every war, real, proposed, and imagined, for years. Voters rightly ran screaming from their polling places.

So candidate Romney tried a bit of scare-mongering, to make Moscow an issue again. President Barack Obama, running for reelection, recognized Romney's gambit and countered accordingly: "the 1980s, they're now calling to ask for their foreign policy back because, you know, the Cold War's been over for 20 years." Most Americans appeared to agree, giving Obama a solid victory.

A decade ago relations with Russia were strained but still civil. In 2007 Putin gave his famous speech at the Munich Security Conference. He explained his unhappiness with the US playing unipower at great cost to others, speaking in the aftermath of America's disastrous intervention in Iraq and ongoing fight in Afghanistan. His brutal critique was embarrassingly accurate: "Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts."

Moreover, Putin cited the issue of NATO expansion. Unlike the allies, he had not forgotten the many assurances given Russian leaders that the transatlantic alliance would not move up to his nation's borders: "I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today?"

His officials made similar points, with their concerns captured in State Department cables. Yet Washington was surprised by the August 2008 crisis involving Georgia. US promises of future NATO membership and American friendship led the unstable Mikheil Saakashvili to expect American support after conflict with separatists in South Ossetia triggered Russian intervention. The result was a short and sharp war which cost Georgia additional territory. The Bush administration considered intervening militarily, a mad proposal thankfully rejected.

Although Russia acted badly, the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had long resisted Georgian control. Moreover, Moscow was following US precedent: the Clinton administration had ignored international law by attacking Serbia and hiving off Kosovo, which later declared independence with US support, Washington could only engage in special pleading, insisting that it was unique, entitled to attack other nations without UN warrant, and nothing it did could be considered a precedent by others. Putin rejected that preposterous argument and acted accordingly.

In these circumstances occurred the US presidential election, bringing Obama to power. Yet until the Georgian crisis, Russia had done little to concern Washington. Putin took his country in an authoritarian direction, earning a "not free" designation from Freedom House. However the US created, worked with, and/or subsidized several governments with equal or worse records: Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, South Sudan, United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan. Washington's campaign for human rights was highly selective.

Despite Moscow's unhappiness with US policy, only in Georgia had Moscow responded violently toward a military threat. And that appeared to be a one-off event. The Putin government did little to obstruct Washington's imperious, incompetent interventions despite Putin's 2007 criticism. And the two countries were nowhere at existential odds. Indeed, cooperation even seemed possible on regional issues, such as addressing the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs.

Nor had the Russian army performed particularly well in Georgia, exhibiting "structural and technological weaknesses," according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies. IISS also noted that "the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff remain on the whole reluctant to reform and modernize." The Putin government sought to reform its armed forces, but the process was nowhere near complete by 2012. Prior to the US election IISS noted that despite claims modernization objectives had been largely achieved, "the reforms have not always run smoothly." In part, "personnel issues continue to bedevil the modernization process." Finally, "modernizing the equipment used by military personnel is another challenge." Although the Russian armed forces were improving, they did not threaten the US in any significant way, nor should they overmatch European capabilities, at least if America's allies contributed meaningfully to their own defense.

There was nothing that justified calling Russia a geopolitical foe, let alone America's "number one geopolitical foe." And there probably wouldn't have been reason to make that argument today absent events of 2014. The Obama administration sought a reset in relations, which seemed possible until the Maidan Revolution. Ukraine was badly divided west and east between generally anti- and pro-Russian sentiments. President Viktor Yanukovich, from the east,

negotiated an Association Agreement with the European Union, which would have redirected Ukrainian commerce toward Europe. Under pressure from Moscow, he decided not to sign, leading to a lengthy occupation of the capital, located in the west, by opposition demonstrators. Violence eventually erupted and Yanukovich – grossly corrupt but freely elected – was ousted, to the dismay of his supporters in the east and Russia.

Western support for what amounted to a street putsch along with the prospect of a government antagonistic to Moscow evicting Russia from Crimea and entering NATO triggered Russian intervention. Moscow annexed Crimea, historically part of Russia and transferred to Ukraine only in 1954 as part of internal Soviet politics. The majority of the population supported the move, though opponents were treated brutally. Russia also backed separatists in the Donbass, many of whom opposed the events in Kyiv.

Efforts to resolve the conflict failed. The two sides negotiated the Minsk agreements. However, Ukrainian nationalists blocked enforcement of constitutional changes; Russia failed to follow through on other provisions. Putin's conviction that the terms would never be implemented, and that the US and Europeans had abetted Kyiv's failure to comply, led him to his latest, much more violent strategy.

Yet even his terrible war on Ukraine doesn't directly threaten America. At least so long as both Washington and Moscow avoid a clash that could escalate. Putin may grow more reckless having presumably miscalculated in expecting an easy victory. The Biden administration might grow more aggressive in supporting Kyiv to maximize Russia's distress. Putin's nuclear alert is a reminder of the global stakes, especially if he feels he has painted himself in a corner.

Thankfully, unlike during the Cold War, Moscow and Washington are not playing a winner-take-all ideological game. The US remains vastly stronger militarily and America and Russia still have no essential territorial disputes. Although their objectives sometimes conflict in areas such as the Middle East, that has been exacerbated by the steady deterioration of their relations over the last eight years, which has encouraged Moscow to challenge the US globally. Another unfortunate consequence: The Putin government also has turned to Beijing, but additional American pressure only pushes them closer.

Moreover, Moscow lacks the power to dominate Europe, let alone Eurasia. Europe still should be defended, but it is long past time for the Europeans to take over that responsibility. Indeed, Russia's attack on Ukraine should be the famed fire bell in the night for Europeans. Already Moscow has unified both NATO and the European Union against his country. He even has provided a demonic figure, not quite as dramatic as Adolf Hitler, but still sufficient to enrage his opponents.

The US can be most effective not by rushing more forces to Europe, but rather by calling its allies to account. Washington should make clear that Putin's criminal aggression has not changed the fact that for America China remains a far more significant challenge. Their security is ultimately their responsibility.

Already some European leaders have begun to engage in soul-searching. Alfons Mais, Chief of the German Army, wrote: "The Bundeswehr, the army that I am privileged to lead, is more or less bare. The options that we can offer the politicians to support the alliance are extremely limited. We all saw it coming and were not able to get through with our arguments, to draw the conclusions from the Crimean annexation and implement them." Yesterday Germany announced a major increase in military outlays. Chancellor Olaf Scholz called the invasion of Ukraine "a turning point" and said "it is clear that we need to invest significantly more in the security of our country in order to protect our freedom and our democracy." This should be just the start across the continent.

Russia's lawless attack is an atrocity but does not change basic geopolitical reality: Moscow is principally a problem for Europe, not America. Since the end of the Cold War Russia stopped being a significant geopolitical foe of the US and has not turned into one since. Dealing with the ongoing war still won't be easy. However, while punishing Russia for its criminal conduct Washington must ensure that neither it nor its alliance partners get drawn in. That could turn a limited conflict into a nuclear confrontation and a world in which no one would be debating geopolitical threats anymore.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.