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Time to Make a Deal With Vladimir Putin

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President Joe Biden will be meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin in a couple weeks. It is time for a new approach to Russia.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher played a key role in ending the Cold War. Her most important moment might have been when she observed, “I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together.”

She helped convince Ronald Reagan that Mikhail Gorbachev, soon to become the Soviet Union’s Communist Party General Secretary, was different from his predecessors. And he was. It took a few years, but after he took control and kept the Red Army in its barracks across Eastern Europe, the communist Humpty Dumpty tumbled off the wall, never to be put back together.

Biden and Putin need to similarly “do business together.”

The latter is no democrat. Too many of us who were exhilarated by the collapse of communism underestimated the difficulty of a country never free of imperial oppression — spending centuries under Tsarist autocracy and decades under Soviet totalitarianism — moving to liberal democracy. Boris Yeltsin was well-intentioned but boozily incompetent. Only blatant and unashamed American election interference in 1996 helped him defeat a nominally reform and scarily resurgent communist party candidate. When he resigned on New Year’s Eve in 1999, many people felt relieved.

Alas, his successor, Putin, elevated from prime minister to acting president, proved to be more authoritarian and competent. But he never was particularly anti-American. KGB officers tended to be cynical and worldly, not fanatical ideologues. Indeed, they were needed to enforce tyranny precisely because the USSR was so contra human nature and experience.

Putin was supportive after 9/11, and Russia long offered logistical assistance for U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Even today there is no conflict between America and Russia over essential interests. There are no contested territorial claims, no global-spanning rivalries, no hostile ideological clashes. The Russian Federation is the Russian Empire reincarnated, sans non-Russian satrapies. And Moscow today behaves like St. Petersburg did then, demanding foreign deference, most importantly consideration of its geopolitical interests, inclusion in international decision-making, and respect for its borders.

Unfortunately, Washington and Brussels squandered Putin's early goodwill. The once-great Russian bear was down, and it seemed for the count. So Western governments ran roughshod over their prostrate counterpart. The allies lied to both Gorbachev and Yeltsin about expanding NATO, dismantled long-time Russian friend Serbia, promoted "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine, promised to bring both into the transatlantic alliance, and encouraged a street putsch against an elected, though corrupt, generally pro-Russian president in Ukraine. All the while the West justified its behavior by insisting that no one is entitled to a sphere of influence and Washington was representing all mankind when it intervened in other states' affairs.

The West was blind to its hypocrisy. In the aftermath of the war in Georgia, triggered by Tbilisi's attack on separatist territory containing Russian soldiers, an oblivious John McCain declared that "in the 21st century nations don't invade other nations." He apparently forgot that five years before he fervently demanded that the U.S. invade Iraq. (In fact, he was a great enthusiast for war, advocating that America attack multiple countries. He even sang a little Beach Boys ditty about bombing Iran.)

One can only imagine how Washington — and especially McCain — would have responded had Russia behaved like America: Expanded the Warsaw Pact into Central America. Sponsored revolutions against elected governments in Ottawa and Mexico City. Proposed Warsaw Pact membership for Canada and Mexico. Dismantled the Washington-friendly state of Colombia. The shrieking would have been heard across the Atlantic, and citations of the Monroe Doctrine would have filled newspapers, airwaves, and cyberspace. McCain would have led a mob from Capitol Hill to the White House demanding war, instant and total.

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This still doesn't justify Moscow's brutal response in Ukraine, of course. But having destroyed Iraq based on a lie, thereby destabilizing the region, unleashing al-Qaeda/ISIS, empowering Iran, wrecking minority religious communities, and unleashing a tsunami of sectarian violence that killed hundreds of thousands of people, Washington officials should dispense with the sanctimony. Or they might ask Mexico, which lost half of its territory to an aggressive, young United States. Georgia and Ukraine are stuck in a bad neighborhood with a belligerent big neighbor, and America can't change that.

Four points stand out. **First, though Ukraine has been badly treated by Moscow, the issue matters not much for American and European security.** Ukraine long was part of the Russian Empire (in both old and new variants). Washington never worried about Kyiv's status since Moscow was the key player.

Ukraine is closer to Europe, which therefore should have a greater interest in that nation's stability. The Europeans, however, recognize that Russia's mistreatment of Ukraine — seizing Crimea and backing separatism in the Donbass in the east — is *sui generis*. Putin has done nothing to indicate he wants to try to swallow Ukraine, an impossible task, and if he won't do that he isn't likely to launch a blitzkrieg to overrun Europe (with three times Russia's population).

The main impact of Moscow's Ukrainian misadventure is making Kyiv's membership in NATO unlikely, since present rules bar admitting a country with active border disputes with a neighbor.

But that fits with European opposition to Ukraine's inclusion. Since the conflict started in 2014, the more distant U.S., pushed by a curious coalition of pro-war Republicans and anti-Trump Democrats, has been most determined to confront Moscow.

Second, Putin's government doesn't threaten the United States. A direct attack on America is inconceivable. As for the Europeans, even they, at least those not on Russia's border, dismiss the likelihood of war: if they were worried, they would be spending more than 1 percent plus change on their militaries. There is a lot of sparring between America and the Russian Federation in peripheral areas — Syria, Cuba, Venezuela, Libya — but these are of marginal importance. And if Washington did not treat Moscow as an enemy through sanctions and more, the latter would be less likely to reciprocate by routinely challenging U.S. interests. Russia's human rights situation is atrocious, but murder, kidnapping, torture, mass imprisonment, and foreign aggression don't bother American officials when conducted by Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and more.

Third, current U.S. policy is bizarrely pushing Moscow and Beijing together. Richard Nixon transformed the Cold War by engaging China and turning the geopolitical gap between them from a ditch into a chasm. Now Russia and the People's Republic of China are working together against America. Some analysts seek to reassure by insisting that the two will inevitably break up. Others counsel that nothing can be done to prevent such cooperation.

More likely, however, the future is uncertain and will be influenced by U.S. behavior. There is much mischief that the two could do together against the United States. The worse America's relationship with Moscow, the greater Russia's inclination to obstruct Washington as a matter of course. At the margin, a Beijing–Moscow axis could play a greater (and malign) role in Burma, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Libya, North Korea, Central Asia, the Balkans, and elsewhere.

Fourth, the U.S. can't afford any grand new international crusades. Washington squandered trillions of dollars — and thousands of lives — in Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, the U.S. is effectively bankrupt. President Donald Trump and the Republican Congress went wild, simultaneously hiking outlays and cutting revenues. The COVID-19 pandemic, by increasing social expenditures and depressing taxes, will end up adding as much as \$16 trillion to the national debt. The Biden administration is pushing a tsunami of spending unconnected to personal and national need. As a result, America will soon break its previous record of debt at 107 percent of GDP, set in the aftermath of World War II. Alas, the impact of an aging population will only intensify. By 2050 the Congressional Budget Office figures that number will be an astounding 200 percent.

It's time for America to make a deal. President Donald Trump had an opportunity to do so, but he didn't. But his room to maneuver was constrained by false claims of election collusion in 2016, supplemented by a bipartisan smear campaign. Republicans didn't want to give up their traditional Cold War enemy, Moscow, which Democrats suddenly found politically convenient to denounce. The president's appointees joined the permanent bureaucracy to consistently undercut his approach, continuing Washington's previous anti-Russia policy, increasing sanctions and further alienating relations.

In contrast, Biden has been denouncing Russia for years. Indeed, he called Moscow a threat while describing China as a "competitor." But that gives him an opportunity to play a modern Richard Nixon. Biden can "go to Russia" metaphorically — the summit is being held in Switzerland — and stabilize a relationship that is too important to lose.

The outlines of an offer aren't hard to draw. Election interference should be verboten by both sides — the U.S. actually is far more guilty of such meddling than is Russia. So should be cyber-expeditions, other than intelligence-gathering, which is an inherent part of international relations. Washington should be prepared to retaliate, but cutting diplomatic staff in response is perverse and counterproductive.

European governments should take a similar approach. For instance, they could offer to drop repeated complaints that Russia is not a democracy — were they really shocked to discover this fact? — in return, say, for Moscow halting assassinations on European soil. After all, the Europeans' humanitarian sensitivities instantly disappear when it comes to accepting Saudi money for weapons used to kill Yemeni civilians. Brussels has similarly accommodated Turkey, which has kidnapped perceived enemies, meaning most anyone who criticizes President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, from Europe.

Even more important, the U.S. and its NATO allies should offer to end NATO expansion. Inclusion of North Macedonia and Montenegro (at least the latter is a great movie set!) demonstrate that the process has outrun any potential usefulness. What's next? Bringing in the Duchy of Grand Fenwick? Most important, the U.S. should pledge that neither Georgia nor Ukraine will be added. Indeed, this decision should have been reached long ago. Including them is not in America's interest — they would bring conflict and controversy into the alliance — and could trigger escalation by Russia.

In return, Moscow should end its support for Ukrainian separatists, while Kyiv should follow its promise and grant greater autonomy to the Donbass region. Ukraine would be politically and militarily neutral but left to decide its own economic destiny. Such a compromise might displease Ukrainians, who of course would remain free to set their own course. But they have no right to NATO membership and defense by America. The U.S. should simply make clear the Americans won't be coming — whether it is military aid today or soldiers (and possibly nukes) tomorrow.

Beyond the big issues, the U.S. and Russia should accept that there will be geopolitical competition. Then Biden and Putin might engage in some horse-trading. Washington and Moscow could cooperate on counter-terrorism after Washington leaves Afghanistan. The Russians could drop their involvement in Cuba and Venezuela and tighten sanctions on North Korea, while the U.S. could exit Syria and leave Libya for Moscow to work out with the medley of European and Mideast states involved. Any number of additional deals might beckon.

Candidate Biden promised to “defend our democratic values and stand up to autocrats like Putin.” He's already backed away from a similar pledge regarding Saudi Arabia. Russia, as a nuclear-armed great (though no longer super) power, deserves even greater consideration. Not because of Putin's innocent or Moscow's benign conduct but because the authoritarian bear is the present reality. America is better off dealing with Moscow productively than imagining isolation and confrontation will result in a nicer Russia and a safer world.

Someday, hopefully, the Russian people will enjoy a system that is democratic, honest, and open. In the short term, maintaining peace and solving common problems should be Washington's priority.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently met Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and declared, “There are many areas where our interests intersect and overlap, and we believe that we can work together and indeed build on those interests.” That would be a worthy agenda for the upcoming Biden–Putin summit.

Washington already has been through one cold war with Moscow. With an increasingly powerful China on the horizon, America should avoid a repeat.

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