



## Washington must stop challenging other major powers in their neighborhoods

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Every reasonable person understandably cheered the demise of the Soviet Union (a true “evil empire”) in 1991. But one unfortunate effect was to free the United States to meddle around the world in regions that previously were well outside Washington’s security perimeter. Not only did the absence of a powerful adversary entice the United States to launch ill-advised regime-change crusades in the Middle East, it has led U.S. policymakers to adopt military stances in the immediate neighborhoods of both Russia and China that are provocative and potentially catastrophic.

Indeed, a succession of U.S. officials have displayed contempt for any concept of even limited “spheres of influence” for other powers in the international system. Condoleezza Rice, George W. Bush’s secretary of state, made that point explicitly in response to Moscow’s 2008 military intervention in Georgia. She scorned the notion of Russian primacy along the perimeter of the Russian Federation as the manifestation of “some archaic sphere of influence.” Secretary of State John Kerry clearly holds similar views. In November 2013, he even declared that “the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over.” Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Kerry asserted that “you don’t in the twenty-first century behave in nineteenth century fashion” by invading a neighbor.

Taking the notion of the United States as the sole remaining superpower to an extreme, those officials have pursued policies that aimed at asserting U.S. primacy in both Eastern Europe and East Asia. That approach has led to the ratcheting up of dangerous tensions with both Russia and China.

U.S. leaders need to be far more sensitive to how Washington’s actions appear to the governments and populations of other major powers. For example, the United States understandably wants to preserve navigation rights in the South China Sea, but any Chinese threat to those rights is purely hypothetical at this point. Sending U.S. warships into waters so close to China is bound to be seen by the Chinese as a menacing act. That is especially true when Washington is rather unsubtly backing the Philippines and Vietnam in their territorial disputes with Beijing (despite pro-forma statements of neutrality). Imagine what the American reaction

would be if China gave military aid to Mexico and Caribbean countries to better stand up to the United States regarding territorial grievances, and then sent warships of its own into the Gulf of Mexico, ostensibly to assert a right to freedom of navigation.

A similar lack of sensitivity is evident in U.S. policy toward Russia. Not only did Washington exploit Russia's temporary weakness to expand the NATO alliance eastward into the old Central and East European satellite empire of the USSR, U.S. leaders have adopted an activist policy even toward former portions of the Soviet Union itself. One might well ask when and why the Baltic republics, Georgia, and Ukraine became vital interests of the United States.

But despite the proximity of those entities to Russia, the United States and its allies act as though they should have the dominant influence. The three Baltic republics are now full NATO members with an Article 5 guarantee. In other words, by treaty, Washington has pledged to consider an attack on any of those countries as an attack on the United States. U.S. leaders have not gone quite as far with Georgia and Ukraine, but there is a vigorous lobbying effort within the pro-NATO foreign policy community to add them to the roster of members as well.

But it is not just alliance membership that is creating tensions with Russia. The United States now almost continuously deploys advanced military aircraft and warships on Russia's western frontier, and there have already been nasty "near miss" incidents. The apparent intention to station four battalions of NATO ground forces in the Baltic Republics is not likely to reduce tensions. Indeed, the potential for a military collision is all too apparent.

Again, a thought exercise is useful. How would Americans feel if another major power enlisted the Central American countries and tried to enlist Canada and Mexico in a military alliance directed against the United States? We would regard that as a profoundly unfriendly and potentially very threatening act. Why do we assume that Russians should act differently to similar U.S. conduct on their border?

That is not to say that either the Chinese or Russian regimes are model governments. They are far from it. But geography matters. Whatever the domestic nature of a major power, it is going to try to preserve preeminence in its neighborhood. The United States will continue to ignore that basic reality of international affairs at its great peril.

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