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NATO Partisans Started a New Cold War With Russia

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When historians examine the first few decades of the so-called post-Cold War era, they are likely to marvel at the clumsy and provocative policies that the United States and its NATO allies pursued toward Russia. Perceptive historians will conclude that a multitude of insensitive actions by those governments poisoned relations with Moscow, and by the latter years of the Obama administration, led to the onset of a new cold war. During the Trump administration, matters grew even worse, and that cold war threatened to turn hot.

Since the history of our era is still being written, we have an opportunity to avoid such a cataclysmic outcome. However, the behavior of America's political, policy, and media elites in response to the latest parochial quarrel between Russia and Ukraine regarding the Kerch Strait suggests that they learned nothing from their previous blunders. Worse, they seem determined to intensify an already counterproductive, hardline policy toward Moscow.

U.S. leaders managed to get relations with Russia wrong just a few years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. One of the few officials to capture the nature of the West's bungling and how it fomented tensions was Robert Gates, who served as secretary of defense during the final years of George W. Bush's administration and the first years of Barack Obama's. In his surprisingly candid memoirs, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, Gates recalls his report to Bush following the 2007 Munich Security Council, at which Russian President Vladimir Putin vented about Western security transgressions, including the planned deployment of a missile defense system in Central Europe.

“When I reported to the president my take on the Munich conference, I shared my belief that from 1993 onward, the West, and particularly the United States, had badly underestimated the magnitude of the Russian humiliation in losing the Cold War” Yet even that blunt assessment given to Bush did not fully capture Gates's views on the issue. “What I didn't tell the president was that I believed the relationship with Russia had been badly mismanaged after [George H. W.] Bush left office in 1993. Getting Gorbachev to acquiesce to a unified Germany as a member of NATO had been a huge accomplishment. But moving so quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union to incorporate so many of its formerly subjugated states into NATO was a mistake.”

Specific U.S. actions were ill-considered as well, in Gates's view. “U.S. agreements with the Romanian and Bulgarian governments to rotate troops through bases in those countries was a needless provocation.”

His list of foolish or arrogant Western actions went on. Citing NATO's military interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo during Bill Clinton's administration, Gates noted that "the Russians had long historical ties with Serbia, which we largely ignored." And in an implicit rebuke to his current boss, Gates asserted that "trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching." That move was a case of "recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their own vital national interests." Indeed, events regarding Ukraine after Gates completed his memoirs illustrated that U.S. arrogance and meddling knew few bounds. U.S. officials openly sided with demonstrators who overthrew Ukraine's elected, pro-Russian government, and then reacted with shock and anger when Russia retaliated by seizing and annexing Crimea.

Gates's overall assessment of Western, especially U.S., policy toward Russia during the post-Cold War era was unsparingly harsh—and devastatingly accurate: "When Russia was weak in the 1990s and beyond, we did not take Russian interests seriously. We did a poor job of seeing the world from their point of view and managing the relationship for the long term." Unfortunately, Gates was one of the rare anomalies in the American foreign policy community regarding policy toward Russia.

His criticism, trenchant as it is, still understates the folly of the policies that the United States and its NATO allies have pursued toward Moscow. The treatment that three successive U.S. administrations meted out to a newly capitalist, democratic Russia was appalling myopic. Even before Vladimir Putin came to power—and long before Russia descended into being an illiberal democracy and then an outright authoritarian state—the Western powers treated the country as a de facto enemy. The NATO nations engaged in a series of provocations even though Moscow had engaged in no aggressive conduct that even arguably justified such actions.

The determination to confront Russia has only grown over the years, as the current tensions involving the Kerch Strait illustrate. When Russian security forces fired on three Ukrainian naval vessels that attempted to force a transit of the Kerch Strait (a narrow waterway between Russia's Taman Peninsula and Russian-annexed Crimea that connects the Black Sea and Sea of Azov), the United States and its NATO allies reacted furiously. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley branded Russia's conduct "outlaw actions."

An array of U.S. lawmakers and pundits advocate highly provocative steps in response. Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY) the incoming chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, urged an increase in U.S. arms sales to Ukraine, asserting, "If Putin starts seeing Russian soldier fatalities, that changes his equation."

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman James Inhofe (R-OK) threatened new sanctions on Russia and called for a coordinated response between the United States and its European allies. "If Putin continues his Black Sea bullying," Inhofe stated, "the United States and Europe must consider imposing additional sanctions on Russia, inserting a greater U.S. and NATO presence in the Black Sea region and increasing military assistance for Ukraine."

Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) echoed those views. Menendez called for tougher sanctions, additional NATO exercises on the Black Sea and more U.S. security aid to Ukraine, "including lethal maritime equipment and weapons." Some hawks even seem receptive to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's call on NATO to station warships in the Sea of Azov, even though such a step would likely lead to a shooting war between the West and Russia.

Far too many Western (especially American) analyses explicitly or implicitly act as though the United States and its NATO allies worked assiduously to establish cordial relations with Russia but were compelled to adopt hardline policies solely because of Russia's perversely aggressive conduct. That is a distorted, self-serving portrayal on the part of NATO partisans. It falsely portrays the West as purely a reactive player—that NATO initiatives were never insensitive, provocative, or aggressive. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, the opposite is closer to the mark; Russia's actions, both in terms of timing and virulence, tended to be responses to aggressive Western initiatives. Unfortunately, avid NATO supporters seem determined to double down, insisting that the Trump administration adopt even more uncompromising policies.

Contending that Moscow is to blame for the deterioration of East-West relations because of its military actions in Georgia and Ukraine, as U.S. opinion leaders tend to do, is especially inaccurate. The problems began much earlier than the events in 2008 and 2014. The West humiliated a defeated adversary that showed every sign of wanting to become part of a broader Western community. Expanding NATO and trampling on Russian interests in the Balkans were momentous early measures that torpedoed friendly relations.

Such policy myopia was reminiscent of how the victorious Allies inflicted harsh treatment on a defeated, newly democratic Weimar Germany after World War I. The NATO powers are treating Russia as an enemy, and there is now a serious danger that the country is turning into one. That development would be an especially tragic case of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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