

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *Romney and Russia: Complicating American Relationships*

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Mitt Romney has become the inevitable Republican presidential candidate. He's hoping to paint Barack Obama as weak, but his attempt at a flanking maneuver on the right may complicate America's relationship with Eastern Europe and beyond.

Romney recently charged Russia with being America's "number one geopolitical foe." As Jacob Heilbrunn of *National Interest* pointed out, this claim embodies a monumental self-contradiction, attempting to claim "credit for the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the one hand [while] predicting dire threats from Russia on the other." Thankfully, the U.S.S.R. really is gone, and neither all the king's men nor Vladimir Putin can put it back together.

It is important to separate behavior which is grating, even offensive, and that which is threatening. Putin is no friend of liberty, but his unwillingness to march lock-step with Washington does not mean that he wants conflict with America. Gordon Hahn of CSIS observes:

*Yet despite NATO expansion, U.S. missile defense, Jackson-Vanik and much else, Moscow has refused to become a U.S. foe, cooperating with the West on a*

*host of issues from North Korea to the war against jihadism. Most recently, Moscow agreed to the establishment of a NATO base in Ulyanovsk.*

These are hardly the actions of America's "number one geopolitical foe." Romney's charge is both silly and foolish.

This doesn't mean the U.S. should not confront Moscow when important differences arise. But treating Russia as an adversary risks encouraging it to act like one.

Moreover, treating Moscow like a foe will make Russia more suspicious of America's relationships with former members of the Warsaw Pact and republics of the Soviet Union—and especially Washington's determination to continue expanding NATO. After all, if another country ostentatiously called the U.S. its chief geopolitical threat, ringed America with bases, and established military relationships with areas that had broken away from the U.S., Washington would not react well. It might react, well, a lot like Moscow has been reacting.

Although it has established better relations with the West, Russia still might not get along with some of its neighbors, most notably Georgia, with its irresponsibly confrontational president. However, Washington should not give Moscow additional reasons to indulge its paranoia.