

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

How Reflexive Hostility to Russia Harms U.S. Interests

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During his confirmation hearing last week, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, U.S. President Donald Trump's nominee for secretary of state, took a tough stance on Russia, describing it as "a danger to our country," even as Democrats criticized him for being insufficiently harsh. This is typical in the era of Trump, when those on both sides of the aisle routinely portray Russia as a dire threat to the United States. This bipartisan enmity toward Russia has pushed even Trump, whose rhetoric on the country often vacillates between open hostility and admiration, to adopt reflexively hawkish policies, from purposeless sanctions to nuclear saber rattling.

But rather than altering Russian behavior, these policies are all too often making the situation worse. A more effective Russia policy is possible. It would acknowledge the difficult realities of today's U.S.-Russian relationship while focusing on both deterrence and reengagement, as needed. Regrettably, it cannot be achieved so long as the United States' reaction to Russian actions is reflexive hostility and confrontation.

THE CONFRONTATIONAL STATUS QUO

It is not surprising, given Moscow's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, that many Americans are hostile to Russia. Although the scope of the interference remains unclear—and the impact questionable—it nonetheless feels like a violation. Yet today's inflammatory rhetoric is still notable. Former Vice President Joe Biden recently wrote, for example, that "the Russian government is brazenly assaulting the foundations of Western democracy." Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, a Democrat from New York, has called on Trump to "train his fire on the foreign adversary, Russia, that attacked us." And Democratic Representative André Carson of Indiana warned of a "new Iron Curtain descending across Europe."

Unfortunately, this threatening rhetoric not only serves to keep tensions high but also produces knee-jerk policy responses focused on mindless confrontation. Take last year's sanctions legislation, the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Although sanctions are rarely effective, the Obama administration's Russia sanctions were at least narrowly targeted and included clear conditions—notably Russia's compliance with the Minsk

process to end the war in eastern Ukraine—under which they could be removed. CAATSA, in contrast, is largely punitive and offers no clear path for Congress to consider lifting the sanctions, thus providing no incentive for Russia to change its behavior.

The Trump administration, although reticent at first, has also taken confrontational steps in recent months. Some of these steps were clearly justified, such as the expulsion of Russian diplomats in response to the attempted murder in the United Kingdom of a Russian defector using a banned nerve agent. Yet others were far less so. In December, for example, the administration agreed to provide lethal aid to Ukraine—a step the Obama administration had avoided for fear of escalating the conflict there—despite any clear rationale for how it might improve the situation.

The White House’s policy documents have also presented a belligerent stance toward Russia. The National Security Strategy, released in December, describes Russia as one of the “revisionist powers,” listing it as a challenge along with “rogue regimes” such as Iran and North Korea. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, meanwhile, includes provisions for new low-yield nuclear weapons and cruise missiles explicitly designed to counter Russia’s nuclear arsenal. Many experts, such as Olga Oliker and Vipin Narang, worry that such weapons may simply make conflict with Russia more likely.

Even the recent strikes on Syria reflected this animosity. The strikes were limited, largely avoided Russian targets, and did not result in escalation. Yet some officials in the administration had argued for broader strikes that would affect Russian assets; the president even went so far as to taunt Russia about potential strikes in tweets. Thankfully, it appears that the more cautious approach advocated by U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis prevailed.

HOW TO REENGAGE

Today’s confrontational rhetoric and policies toward Russia often ignore reality and highlight the need for an alternative approach. A more accurate assessment of Russia today would certainly acknowledge that the country has engaged in belligerent behavior, including repeated attempts at election meddling and violent murders of Russian defectors inside Western countries. It would also recognize Russia’s continued aggression toward its neighbors, including military action in Georgia and Ukraine, and its profoundly undemocratic political system. Yet at the same time, it would affirm that there is an underlying rationale for many of these actions. Some, such as the seizure of Crimea, reflect security concerns—in that case, the need to maintain Russian military bases inside Ukraine. The same can be said of Russia’s development of new nuclear weapons, which is a response to the George W. Bush administration’s decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which effectively initiated a new arms race. Domestic politics play a role, too. Russian President Vladimir Putin fears the West’s more open political systems, and he benefits from today’s antagonism, which helps prop up his domestic popularity.

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Ultimately, a more realistic U.S. approach to Russia would reflect the limits of what Washington can and cannot achieve and thus define U.S. interests far more narrowly. At the most basic level, Washington has a clear interest in preventing Russia from dominating Europe, a possibility that is today so far-fetched as to be laughable. Despite the talk of a new Cold War, Russia is not the Soviet Union. The United States also has a clear interest in preventing Russian from meddling in the United States' domestic politics and in the domestic politics of its closest allies, whether that takes the form of hacking, election meddling, or other violations of sovereignty.

At the same time, the United States also has an interest in avoiding pointless conflict with Russia over states that are simply not that important to U.S. national security, including Syria and Ukraine. Although Washington's broader stake in regional and global stability may extend to diplomatic or humanitarian engagement in these countries, it is not sufficient to justify military involvement or the risks of inadvertent escalation with Russia. It is unfortunate that in recent years, policymakers in Washington have often construed U.S. interests so broadly as to be meaningless. Instead, they should focus on—and more clearly define—the U.S. interests that are of true concern. This includes maintaining Russian cooperation on key global issues, such as nonproliferation, Iran, and North Korea. The good news is that these narrow interests are actually achievable. By shifting away from confrontational rhetoric and policies, Washington can lower tensions, create effective deterrence on issues of critical importance, and reengage with Russia on topics of mutual interest.

A BETTER WAY FORWARD

First on Washington's to-do list should be to establish redlines with Russia. One of the biggest problems in U.S.-Russian relations in recent years has been the failure to effectively communicate U.S. interests. There is ambiguity over whether NATO will expand further, whether Washington will respond to cyberattacks, and whether it is willing to go to war to defend non-NATO members such as Georgia and Ukraine. A clearer indication of redlines would help deter Russia. Some, such as further meddling in U.S. elections, other violations of U.S. sovereignty, and Russian military action against a NATO treaty ally, are obvious and the crossing of them should be met with a clear response. Other possible redlines will require careful consideration: for example, when does Russian interference in the domestic politics of close allies require a U.S. response?

Violations of these more definite redlines should be met with responses that are not just clear but also flexible and creative. Rather than imposing another pointless round of sanctions or focusing on a military buildup, for example, the United States could react to future election meddling by using its extensive global financial intelligence network to publicly release information implicating key Kremlin figures in corruption. Diplomatic expulsions and financial restrictions on Russian state companies, meanwhile, may be a proportionate and effective response to meddling in the domestic politics of allies. Military options—from troop deployments to arms sales—should always be the last resort.

Second, Washington needs to understand that many of Russia's actions against Western countries in recent years would not have been possible without the existence of vulnerabilities

within the West, whether the increasingly partisan nature of politics in the United States, weak cybersecurity provisions, or a NATO alliance in which members rarely contribute to the common defense. Although some of these problems are easier to fix than others, they nonetheless point to how to shore up U.S. defenses.

Two key problems should be prioritized. Whether through the investigation led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller or through the congressional intelligence committees, the American people deserve to know the scope and impact of Russian involvement in the 2016 election. A coherent picture of actual events is the only way to move toward effective safeguards against future meddling. At the same time, policymakers should build on recent improvements in NATO members' military spending to spread the burden of defense more equally. Military spending should not be the only metric here. Washington must push other NATO member states to develop the capacity to contribute to the alliance's military capabilities, making NATO less a U.S.-led organization and more an alliance of equals.

Finally, U.S. policymakers must try to reengage with Russia; the heated rhetoric of the last few years has seen the virtual dissolution of U.S.-Russian diplomatic ties. This has inhibited the capability of Russia and the United States to resolve crises and work together on mutual interests. The ability of U.S. and Russian diplomats to cooperate on nonproliferation issues, for example, ultimately helped produce the Iran nuclear deal.

North Korea is a key issue for both states; bringing Russia into multinational discussions on North Korea could help with crisis resolution while improving deteriorating U.S.-Russian diplomatic ties. More important, however, is a return to arms control negotiations, because many of the current generation of treaties are failing or are scheduled to lapse soon. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty—of which Russia may today be in violation—offers one such negotiating opportunity, as does the pending expiration of the New START treaty in 2021.

A POLITICAL ROADBLOCK?

Ultimately, the key barrier to improving U.S.-Russian relations is political: in the current U.S. domestic climate, the incentives to emphasize hostility are heightened. The Trump administration is motivated to act harshly toward Russia to counteract suspicions tied to the ongoing special counsel investigation, and the president's opponents find hostility an excellent way to implicate Trump in Russia's bad behavior.

These incentives have led to an incoherent overall approach to Russia. Just this week, Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, announced new sanctions on Russia related to its actions in Syria, a policy that was almost immediately contradicted by the White House. The administration's approach to Russia appears to be caught in a stalemate between Trump's more conciliatory impulses and the more hawkish instincts and rhetoric of his advisers and of Congress. Meanwhile, the White House seems to have no plans to prevent or deter future election meddling by Russia.

Yet even if it proves impossible in the Trump administration to develop a long-term strategy for U.S.-Russian relations, today's focus on hostility is fundamentally counterproductive.

Policymakers on both sides of the aisle should bear in mind that knee-jerk hostility to Russia—whether overblown rhetoric or confrontational policy responses—is likely only to make the situation worse in the long run.

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