Dealing with a prickly Russia

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A major challenge facing both the United States and the nations of the European Union is to adopt a policy toward Russia that protects important Western interests without unduly antagonizing Moscow. It is clear that the effort has not been going well. The ouster of Ukraine's relatively pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovych, following massive public demonstrations in early 2014, triggered an especially acute crisis in relations between Russia and the Western powers. Moscow's decision to annex Crimea and encourage secessionist forces in eastern Ukraine promptly led the United States and the EU to impose an assortment of economic sanctions.

East-West tensions are now at their highest level since the end of the Cold War nearly a quarter century ago. Russian military aircraft conduct provocative flights near the borders of NATO members, especially in the Baltic region. NATO engages in provocations of its own, including the semi-permanent deployment of forces in Eastern Europe and conducting military exercises in the Black Sea and elsewhere on Russia's doorstep.

The latest crisis may be the most severe in the post-Cold War era, but the West's relations with Russia have been deteriorating throughout that period. Moscow deeply resented NATO's decision to expand into Central and Eastern Europe, especially the addition of the Baltic republics in 2004. Russian officials believed, with good reason, that NATO enlargement violated pledges that the United States and its allies had made when the Kremlin acquiesced to a united Germany's membership in NATO.

In addition to anger over NATO's enlargement, Russian officials fumed that the Western powers were trampling on long-standing Russian interests in the Balkans. Russian leaders viewed NATO's decision to prevent the partition of Bosnia, and especially the alliance's 1999 war against Serbia to detach its restless province of Kosovo, as taking advantage of their country's temporary economic and military weakness. The subsequent decision by the United States and its key EU allies to bypass the UN Security Council (and a certain Russian veto) to recognize an independent Kosovo in 2008 further inflamed Moscow's anger.

Russia's military action against Georgia on behalf of two secessionist regions later in 2008 sent a dual message to the West. One was that contrary to Washington's insistence that the Kosovo episode was unique, the Kremlin viewed the situation in Georgia (and perhaps elsewhere) as sufficiently similar to apply the Kosovo precedent on outside military intervention. The second message was that the Western powers needed to abandon any desire for further NATO expansion, especially flirting with the notion of offering membership to Georgia and Ukraine.

The growth in East-West tensions spilled over into issues outside Europe. Russian officials, already smarting over the actions of the United States and its allies regarding Kosovo, believed that they had been tricked again when a crisis brewed involving Libya. Although wary, Russia went along with a UN-approved humanitarian mission to prevent dictator Muammar Gheddafi's security forces from attacking civilians. But the Western powers quickly transformed that effort into a mission to help rebel factions oust Kaddafi from power. Once again, the Putin government concluded that the West had engaged in deception to circumvent a possible Russian veto in the UN Security Council.

Animosity also flared over policy toward Syria. Washington resented Moscow's continued reluctance to endorse harsh sanctions to pressure Bashar al-Assad to relinquish power. Frustrated US officials, including UN Ambassador Susan Rice and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, condemned Russian foot dragging in especially vitriolic terms. Their most undiplomatic tone further damaged East-West relations.

Thus, what has occurred over the past 18 months is not a sudden, unpredictable disruption in relations between the West and Russia. It is instead the culmination of trends that have been building for more than two decades. The key question is: Where does the relationship go from here?

There is still time to repair relations and prevent the emergence of a full-blown second Cold War. But that requires greater realism and flexibility on the part of Western policymakers than we have seen to this point. It would probably be easier to formulate a more conciliatory policy toward Moscow if the government of Vladimir Putin were a genuine democracy. Instead, today's Russia is what analyst Fareed Zakaria aptly described as an "illiberal democracy" - a system that holds somewhat competitive elections and has some protections for individual rights, but is basically a system rigged in favor of those who already hold political power. Western governments must learn to maintain decent ties with such a regime, much as we might wish that the situation was different.

Even more important, Western opinion elites need to stop viewing Putin's Russia as a reincarnation of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. In marked contrast to those malignantly expansionist powers, today's Russia seems to have far more limited, largely defensive, ambitions - focused on maintaining a sphere of influence along Russia's borders. That is a far cry from the continental ambitions of Nazi Germany or the global ambitions of the Soviet Union. Moreover, Russia lacks many of the characteristics of an aggressive power on the rise. An aging, shrinking population and an unbalanced economy heavily dependent on high prices for its commodity exports does not provide the solid foundation for an expansionist power.

Creating a more cooperative relationship requires a crucial change in Western (especially US) policy. American officials regard the existence of spheres of influence as illegitimate in the 21st century international system. Both former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and current Secretary of State John Kerry have explicitly condemned the concept. That hostility is unrealistic and myopic. Great powers understandably are more concerned about developments, particularly hostile developments, in their immediate neighborhoods. And contrary to recent rhetoric, the United States is no exception.

A better relationship with Russia requires Western recognition that Moscow is going to insist that Ukraine never be part of the EU or NATO. It also means realizing that any Russian government is likely to regard a NATO military buildup in Eastern Europe as a profoundly hostile act. Finally, it means acknowledging the reality that persisting in the current regime of economic sanctions will annoy (and may even damage) Russia, but it will not cause the Kremlin to disgorge Crimea.

More fundamentally, it means that the West needs to view Russia as a prickly, but conventional, great power, not a malignantly expansionist state. Moscow can help solve a number of problems in the international system, including North Korea's worrisome nuclear program, just as it has already helped develop a peaceful solution to the Iran nuclear issue. Russia is also an important ally in the fight against radical Islamic terrorism.

There are some substantive policy differences between Moscow and the Western allies on how to deal with Iran and Syria. Although supportive of the P5+1 negotiations with Tehran that ultimately produced an agreement to constrain Iran's nuclear program, the Kremlin is also pursuing a more conciliatory bilateral policy toward Iran. The West certainly is not happy with Moscow's decision to sell S300 air defense missiles to the clerical regime. Nevertheless, Russia and the Western powers have important interests in common regarding Iran, and they need to maximize cooperation.

The policy differences with respect to Syria are more pronounced, but there are still underlying mutual interests. Russia believes that the West's demand that Assad relinquish power is incredibly myopic. The Kremlin has now escalated its commitment to help the beleaguered Syrian autocrat, providing military hardware and even showing signs of deploying Russian military personnel. Russian officials warn their Western colleagues that ousting Assad will create a power vacuum greatly benefiting ISIS. The initial US and European response to Russia's escalation has been extremely negative, but Western leaders need to be more flexible. Moscow's action makes an ISIS triumph less likely, and that is very much in the West's own best interests. On the Syrian issue, Russia can provide important indirect security benefits to the Western powers and seems willing to do so.

Conversely, if the West insists on treating Russia as an adversary, the Kremlin can create nasty disruptions in a number of arenas. Even worse, the policy of the United States and its allies is creating an incentive for Moscow to form a de facto alliance with Beijing, which would have adverse global implications. Not only is trade between Russia and China dramatically on the rise, the two governments are increasingly coordinating their policies throughout Central Asia and other regions. Most worrisome for the United States, Russian and Chinese air and naval forces have just completed a major exercise in the Sea of Japan - sending an unsubtle message to both Washington and America's principal allies in East Asia.

Putin's Russia may not be the easiest great power to deal with, but the West would assuredly not benefit from a new Cold War. Yet the current Western policy toward Moscow is simultaneously ineffectual and provocative. A course correction is badly needed.

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