

Washington's Anti-Russia Fixation

DOUG BANDOW

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The foreign policy establishment puts hatred of Moscow before America's interest.

The Cold War is back. Many analysts imagine a new twilight struggle against the People's Republic of China. More improbably, an equally dedicated band is treating the Russian Federation as America's eternal enemy. Indeed, members of an informal Russia as Enemy caucus at the Atlantic Council seem horrified that anyone would dissent from their preferred program of military containment and economic impoverishment.

Washington's interventionist "blob," as it has been called, prospers most when the U.S. has an enemy. The Soviet Union was the dominant threat during the Cold War, justifying an ever-expanding national security state. North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and the People's Republic of China added extra menace. The military-industrial-intellectual complex steadily grew, consuming all before it. Few benefitted more than Washington's think tank warriors.

Alas, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, implosion of the Soviet Union, and disappearance of the Warsaw Pact, inveterate hawks were embarrassed. How to justify continuation of the vast war machine created at such enormous cost? NATO officials even suggested shifting the alliance's focus to fighting the drug war and promoting student exchanges, a dramatic example of public choice economics in action. Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed tartly: "I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of villains. I'm down to [Fidel] Castro and Kim Il-sung."

For a time Moscow seemed off America's enemies list. The Russian remains of Ronald Reagan's infamous Evil Empire, which had stretched from Europe to the Pacific, were a national wreck, economically ravaged and politically destabilized. However, geopolitical collapse and humiliation, ostentatious and rampant corruption, and political incompetence and failure planted the seeds of antagonism and revanchism.

Worse, Western arrogance was at flood tide. U.S. and European leaders unashamedly broke their assurances that NATO would not expand, moving the alliance's borders to within a hundred miles of St. Petersburg. The Clinton administration led the transatlantic alliance into an aggressive war that dismantled Serbia, a traditional Russian friend—on whose behalf Imperial Russia entered World War I—and sought to exclude Moscow from the post-conflict settlement. Wesley Clark's courageous British deputy had to disobey orders to stop the reckless NATO commander from risking war to prevent Russian troops from forcing their way into Kosovo.

Western governments talked democracy and backed "color" revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, countries that had been part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. In 2008 the George W. Bush administration won NATO's assent to eventual NATO membership for the two states.

Claims that this promise was self-evidently unserious are belied by the alliance's steady creep eastward, incorporating even such security nonentities as Montenegro and North Macedonia. In 2014 Brussels and Washington campaigned to reorient Ukraine by shifting economic ties westward, encouraging a street putsch against the elected though corrupt president, and openly backing creation of a new pro-Western government.

All of these actions can be defended, but their negative collective impact on opinions in Moscow is unsurprising. Indeed, their backdrop was America's pretension to be the unipower, the hyperpower, the essential nation, the superpower which applied the Monroe Doctrine worldwide. That is, Washington treated planet earth as America's sphere of interest, insisting that the U.S., and the U.S. alone, was entitled to intervene anywhere at any time, against anyone for any reason.

Such hubris would have tested even a convinced democrat in the Kremlin. Imagine how the U.S. would have responded to similar circumstances. The Soviet Union expanding the Warsaw Pact to Cuba and inviting Canada and Mexico to join. Aiding the overthrow of an elected pro-U.S. president of Mexico. Anointing new officials as acceptable to the Kremlin. Renewing proposals for the country's inclusion in the Warsaw Pact. Providing military assistance in Mexico's ensuing border conflict with America.

Washington, D.C.—including the Atlantic Council's Russia as Enemy caucus—would erupt. There would be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Pro-war flash mobs. Fevered rants from members of the bipartisan war party. Congressional hearings, think tank webinars, embassy consultations, Pentagon briefings, and television specials. Newspaper editorials, opinion pieces, internet commentary, and policy studies. The Monroe Doctrine would be much-cited, along with talk of red lines, references to “vital interests,” and demands for action. It would be the Cuban Missile Crisis in the digital age.

Adding to hostility toward Moscow has been an almost touching—if unashamedly hypocritical, even sanctimonious—concern for human rights in Russia. No doubt, Vladimir Putin is a bad guy and has dismantled democratic freedom and civil liberties. Western governments are aflame because one Russian opposition leader has been wrongly imprisoned. This is a nationalist who declared “the reality is that Crimea is now part of Russia” and might be an even more dangerous geopolitical adversary than Putin.

Yet compare this to treatment of the PRC, a contender for the greatest offender against human rights on earth. Xi Jinping does not hold elections. Rather, he has recreated a personal dictatorship and personality cult rivaling that of Mao Zedong. Xi violates human rights wholesale: a million Uyghurs in reeducation camps, rampant persecution against every religious faith, destruction of political liberties in Hong Kong, demolition of Beijing's human rights legal bar, ever tighter online and media censorship, and much more. Yet the U.S. made a trade deal with China before the Trump administration decided that political expediency warranted treating Beijing as an enemy. The Europeans inked an investment pact with Xi only a couple months ago and won't join Washington's anti-China crusade.

Similarly, until recently most Western powers, with the U.S. in the lead, ostentatiously embraced the odious Saudi monarchy, which has created a far more complete and brutal dictatorship than in Moscow. There are no elections, no opposition activists, no independent journalists, no internet freedom, and no churches or synagogues. Critics are sliced and diced.

Even today the Biden administration refuses to sanction anyone who matters in Riyadh, let alone make the regime a “pariah,” as promised. The West continues to provide arms and munitions used by the Saudi royals to slaughter civilians in neighboring Yemen.

Pragmatism evidently reigns regarding policy toward China and the Kingdom. But suggest weighing similar considerations with Moscow? You must be a Putin shill.

Perhaps the most perverse result of this policy is driving Moscow and Beijing together. Even Frederick Kempe, the Atlantic Council’s president, acknowledged “that Russia’s growing strategic bond with China, underscored by this week’s moonshot agreement, is just one piece among a growing mountain of evidence that the Western approach to Moscow over the past 20 years has failed to produce the desired result.”

However, the Russia hawks assure us that a condominium between the two governments is impossible. Or unstable. Or unimportant. Or unsustainable. After all, caucus members insist, Russia has more to fear from an aggressive, growing, and ambitious China. These claims might be true, but there is one problem. The PRC has not targeted Russia, treated it as an enemy, and made a series of nonnegotiable demands. Hence Moscow’s eastward tilt.

Still, Russia as Enemy leaders argue that Moscow’s elite surely will come to their senses, and soon. All they need do is recognize the slightly delayed end of history, yield power, drop opposition to allied bases ringing Russia, exit the Donbass, return Crimea, abandon any foreign policy objectives which contradict Washington’s designs, accept Western dominance everywhere, and believe those who long targeted Russia are their friends. Good luck.

The conventional wisdom, which treats Russia as an existential threat to the world order, is unconvincing at best. Surely that leaves room for public debate. Not in the view of the Atlantic Council’s Russia as Enemy caucus, which seems determined to squelch dissent from within the institution’s ranks.

Two AC staffers, Mathew Burrows and my former colleague Emma Ashford, with whom I have not talked since she departed Cato, wrote a thoughtful and measured article citing the tension between advancing human rights and national security, criticizing a human rights first approach to Moscow, and urging a “look for incentives that might induce Moscow to take steps in line with U.S. interests.”

This modest proposal apparently created shock and hysteria within the Russia as Enemy caucus. Four days later UkraineAlert—AC is a vast realm broken into numerous seemingly semi-autonomous policy fiefdoms—issued an extraordinary rebuke entitled “New report on Russia policy misses the mark.” The “article is premised on a false assumption,” stated the announcement, which listed 22 scholars variously associated with UkraineAlert, Eurasia Center, Atlantic Council, and Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security.

Those listed explained that they “disagree with its arguments and values and we disassociate ourselves from the report.” Several signers unburdened themselves anonymously in *Politico*, expressing unbridled contempt for the Ashford/Burrows dissent. Horror also was expressed that AC accepted funding from the Koch Foundation, even though AC enthusiastically collects checks from foreign interests and American arms manufacturers, which (spoiler alert!) tend not to be fans of restraint and peace—for America, anyway.

Nor are members of the Atlantic Council's Russia as Enemy caucus alone in their intolerance of dissent. Official Washington largely shares the view that any argument for treating Russia with anything less than permanent hostility is not just mistaken, but so perverted and sordid that it should not be discussed in polite company. The blob does not want Americans to know that there are serious policy alternatives to constant intervention, sanctions, and war.

Washington policymakers routinely dismiss charges of groupthink and insist that they embrace dissent and debate. However, the AC contretemps, and dismissive comments highlighted by *Politico*, give the lie to such claims. Aside from expressing minor disagreements over specific means, anyone who doubts broader objectives, such as preserving primacy and exercising dominion, risks being a permanent outsider—including, it seems, at his or her own institution.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.