

Mutual Restraint

By Ted Galen Carpenter

It is not an exaggeration to describe the current relationship between Washington and Moscow as a Second Cold War, despite the persistence of denials in some foreign policy circles. The United States and its European allies maintain an array of economic sanctions against Russia, continue to add new member states to NATO, and increase both the scope and pace of NATO military exercises in Russia's immediate neighborhood. The United States is taking additional hostile measures, including withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and refusing to commit to the renewal of either the Open Skies Treaty or the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

For its part, Russia harasses NATO planes and ships—often in extremely reckless ways—operating near its borders. Moscow also meddles in elections and political controversies in the United States and several European countries. Finally, the Kremlin defies America's long-standing Monroe Doctrine by establishing close political and military ties with anti-U.S. regimes in the Western Hemisphere.

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The U.S.-Russia relationship is increasingly toxic, and that situation creates very serious dangers. Relations have become so tense that both sides apparently are on hair-trigger, “launch on warning” status for their strategic nuclear forces. That situation was incredibly risky during the original Cold War, leading to at least one incident in 1983 when Moscow nearly launched its missiles, mistakenly believing that an attack by U.S. nuclear forces was underway. It was a great relief to humanity when both countries seemed to adopt a more relaxed posture after the Soviet Union's dissolution. The return to the original version is ominous and profoundly dangerous.

Because of their growing feud, Washington and Moscow are missing opportunities to cooperate on matters of mutual concern. Both countries should collaborate more closely to reduce the threats posed by Islamic terrorist movements. Russia and the United States also have (or at least should have) a common interest in containing China's expanding influence, especially in mineral-rich Central Asia. Both countries also would benefit from greater cooperation in dealing with North Korea and working toward reducing the problems that that unpredictable nuclear-weapons state poses to East Asian and global stability. In short, there are abundant reasons for the United States and Russia to restore a cooperative relationship. But that approach means adopting more realistic positions and objectives—especially on the part of the United States.

One crucial prerequisite for both countries is to let bygones be bygones as much as possible. Washington has engaged in multiple provocations toward Russia over the past quarter century. It was arrogant and insensitive when U.S. leaders violated the informal assurances that George H.W. Bush's administration gave to Moscow that it would not seek to expand NATO beyond the eastern border of a united Germany. Even the first wave of expansion—bringing Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into the Alliance—was unwise. Later rounds that admitted not only the remaining countries of the defunct Warsaw Pact, but also the three Baltic republics that had been integral parts of the USSR itself, constituted even worse provocations. The subsequent attempts by both George W. Bush and Barack Obama to gain NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia were especially brazen “in your face” antagonis-

tic initiatives. U.S. and European Union interference in Ukraine's internal affairs to help demonstrators in the so-called Maidan Revolution unseat the elected pro-Russian president before the end of his term and replace him with a staunchly pro-Western government eliminated the last vestige of Moscow's tolerance.

Such ill-advised moves were at least partly to blame for the Kremlin's angry disenchantment with the West and helped trigger Vladimir Putin's ugly pushback. The Russian response included baiting Georgia into launching a doomed war against Russian “peacekeeping” forces occupying part of the country. An even more destabilizing response was Putin's annexation of Crimea following the Maidan Revolution. Moscow also launched initiatives to undercut U.S. power in the Western Hemisphere by strengthening the ties to Cuba it inherited from the Soviet era and by making





common cause with Washington's new enemies in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Putin's regime also took steps to interfere in U.S. elections and conduct a propaganda campaign to exacerbate racial, social, and ideological tensions inside the United States.

Although in theory it would be optimal for both countries to walk-back their provocations, such an option is not feasible in most cases. For example, the United States is not going to withdraw from NATO in the foreseeable future, nor demand that the memberships of nations added since the end of the Cold War be rescinded. Even if Moscow were to make such a demand, it would be a nonstarter. But expecting Russia to tolerate Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO is equally unrealistic. Both of those countries are not only in what the Kremlin regards as rightfully a Russian sphere of influence, but they are in Russia's core security zone. Moscow was too weak to prevent NATO from incorporating the Baltic republics in 2004, but the country is now both stronger and more determined to prevent a repetition with Georgia and Ukraine.

Likewise, Washington's insistence that Russia repeal its annexation of Crimea and return the peninsula to Ukraine is pointless. Maintaining sanctions on Russia until the Kremlin meets that unrealistic demand is doubly pointless. Among other factors, Moscow is determined to retain its crucial naval base at Sevastopol. Having that base end up in a foreign country occurred only because of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Moreover, Russians point out that Crimea was part of Russia from the 1780s until 1954, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, for reasons that were never clear, transferred the territory to Ukraine. Since Ukraine and Russia were both part of the Soviet Union, his decision didn't seem to matter much at the time. But now it does, and Russians consider keeping Crimea a vital national interest. The last thing Putin or his advisers are willing to do is risk having a U.S. or NATO base someday replace Russia's base. President Donald Trump and other Western leaders need to accept the reality that Russia will not relinquish Crimea. Sticking to the current demand only perpetuates a

Image: (Above) Russian tanks travel as part of a military convoy to the Georgian city of Zugdidi. Reuters/Umit Bektas.

Image: (Left) Soldiers from NATO's newest seven members honor the alliance's expansion. Reuters/Thierry Roge.

dangerous impasse in the West's relations with a major power.

A feasible *modus vivendi* regarding Ukraine would require concessions from both the West and Russia. One unconditional U.S. concession should be to terminate all arms sales to Kiev, since those sales are needlessly inflaming an already dangerous situation. By the same token, Moscow's continued backing of armed separatists in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region is highly destabilizing. An achievable settlement would entail Russia's willingness to sever all ties with those forces, provide reasonable monetary compensation to Ukraine for the loss of Crimea, and sign a new treaty with Kiev explicitly recognizing the sanctity of the new borders. In return, the NATO members would need to provide a written pledge that Ukraine would never be eligible for membership in the alliance and lift sanctions imposed on Russia because of the Crimea annexation.

Additional steps would be important to repair relations between the United States and Russia, and between NATO and Russia. One key step would be to end the mutual military provocations. Russia would need to draw back its forces from its western border with NATO members, especially the Baltic republics, and cease its missile buildup in the Kaliningrad enclave. The United States and its allies would have to greatly downgrade the size and frequency of NATO war games near Russia—in the Baltics and eastern Poland, and in the Black Sea region. Washington also would need to end the fiction that its constant rotational

deployments of U.S. military forces in Eastern Europe do not constitute a “permanent” presence.

Several bilateral disputes also would have to be addressed and mutual restraint practiced. Washington and Moscow have accused each other of violating provisions of the INF Treaty. The Trump administration cited alleged Russian deployments of new, illicit missiles of such range as a reason the United States formally withdrew from the treaty on August 2, 2019. Although Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted that Russia was “solely responsible” for the treaty's demise, the reality is more complex. In particular, it is not clear whether Russia's latest generation of ground-launched cruise missiles violate the treaty.

The issue of new missiles needs to be resolved as part of an overall effort to reduce NATO-Russian military tensions throughout Eastern Europe. Neither side benefits from allowing the wholesale deployment of new generation intermediate-range missiles. Indeed, both the United States and Russia should seek to bring another key power, China, into negotiations for a new, more comprehensive INF treaty. China has resisted calls for its adherence to the existing INF, and Beijing is acquiring a significant capability with such missiles. Neither Russia nor the United States can afford to ignore that development.

The wisdom of Washington's withdrawal from the INF Treaty was highly questionable. The Trump administration's stated intention to leave the Open Skies Treaty and Washington's continued coyness about New START is even worse. Abandoning Open

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Image: Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro and Russia's President Vladimir Putin shake hands in Beijing, China. Reuters/Miraflores Palace/Handout.

Skies will reduce our own access to information about Russian military activities and breed further suspicions on each side about the other's intentions and maneuvers. Such a development hardly fosters stability. Abandoning New START would be utterly reckless, paving the way for a revived race to develop and deploy more strategic nuclear missiles. Instead of diplomatic bluffing and gamesmanship, serious, constructive bilateral negotiations need to proceed immediately to prevent the expiration of both treaties.

The United States has a legitimate complaint about Moscow's behavior on one especially volatile issue: interference in U.S. elections. True, some of the allegations about the Kremlin's role are shrill and wildly exaggerated. Too many Democrats have used "Russian interference" as an all-purpose excuse for their own defective electoral strategy in the 2016 election that

led to Donald Trump's startling upset victory over Hillary Clinton. That being said, there is substantial evidence that Moscow used a variety of techniques in an attempt to tilt the election in favor of Trump, who had expressed the desire for better relations with Russia. U.S. intelligence agencies also have uncovered evidence that Russian operatives are exploring ways to do the same in 2020.

It is unlikely that Russia's initiatives had any material impact on the 2016 balloting. Nevertheless, Trump administration officials should make it very clear to the Kremlin that even attempts at meddling have a serious, negative impact on U.S.-Russia relations. Granted, Washington's protests would have greater credibility if the United States did not have a lengthy record of meddling in the political affairs of other countries, but it still is appropriate



to express objections to Moscow about its conduct. This is an issue on which Putin and his associates would be wise to beat a prompt retreat.

Another Russian action that U.S. leaders have a right to protest is Moscow's escalating role in the Western Hemisphere. Russia definitely has become involved in Venezuela's political turbulence. Moscow is a major financial prop for Nicolas Maduro's staunchly anti-U.S. government, and the Kremlin has provided tangible military backing as well. In December 2018, Russia even deployed two nuclear-capable bombers to Venezuela, and in March 2019, it sent some two hundred military personnel to help Caracas refurbish its air defense system. Several hundred Russian mercenaries also appear to be operating in the country to train and assist Maduro's murderous security forces in dealing with regime opponents. The presence and backing of those troops may even have stiffened Maduro's resolve to remain in power instead of seeking exile in Havana when anti-regime demonstrations mushroomed in May 2019.

Russia's policy in Venezuela represents a direct challenge to the Monroe Doctrine. So too do the growing economic and military ties between Moscow and Nicaragua's leftist government. Since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in the early 1820s, U.S. leaders have regarded patron-client economic and military relationships between foreign powers and Latin American nations as a threat to the security of the United States. Cuba became a Soviet political and military client for decades, precisely the situation the Monroe Doctrine aimed to prevent, and the relationship has continued with Russia. A repetition of that development with other countries is highly undesirable from the standpoint of U.S. interests.

U.S. leaders should make it clear that a continuation of the Kremlin's meddling in the Western Hemisphere will have a markedly negative effect on already tenuous bilateral relations. It is appropriate for Washington to insist that Russia's relations with Caracas, Managua, and Havana be confined to normal diplomatic ties and limited economic ties. Kremlin ambitions to have those countries serve as Russian military clients, or even economic dependents, is unacceptable.

Preserving Washington's long-standing sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere points to what needs to be the foundation of a new, less confrontational relationship with Russia. Just as the United States should insist that Moscow respect the Monroe Doctrine, it is imperative for U.S. leaders to accord the same respect to a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. That approach requires some essential new thinking on the part of U.S. policymakers.

Washington must accept the reality that spheres of influence are still very much a part of the international system. Indeed, as the world becomes increasingly multipolar diplomatically, economically, and to some extent even militarily, major powers will likely become even more insistent on such prerogatives. Russia is hardly the only country behaving in that fashion. We are witnessing a similar stance as China flexes its geostrategic muscles in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, and elsewhere in East Asia. Washington needs to quell its desire to maintain primacy on a global basis in the face of growing challenges. Eastern Europe is a relatively easy place for the United States to back away and respect another major power's sphere of influence. Doing so also is a crucial first step in a true reset of U.S.-Russian relations. ▢