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America's Dangerously Misguided Russia Policy

By Evan N. Resnick

Synopsis

The Obama Administration's confrontational policy towards Russia over Ukraine is dangerously misguided on two counts. Not only is Ukraine of marginal geopolitical significance to the United States, but the White House badly needs Moscow's cooperation on the far more salient issues of counter-proliferation, counter-terrorism, and counterbalancing a rising China.

Commentary

RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION of Crimea and its backing of secessionist rebels in Eastern Ukraine have set the Kremlin on a collision course with the West. The United States and its European allies have angrily retaliated by imposing economic sanctions against Moscow and deploying additional NATO troops to Eastern Europe.

The Obama Administration has also signalled that its next step may be to send arms to the Kiev government. In turn, the Putin regime has even further raised the region's temperature by flying Russian nuclear bombers into the airspace of the United Kingdom and other NATO states. From Washington's vantage point, this frightening escalation of tensions between the world's two most formidable nuclear powers is deeply misguided.

Game not worth the candle

Firstly, it is unnecessarily dangerous because although Russia's aggression against Ukraine is contemptible and brutal, it does not encroach on any US vital interests. Ukraine has never been a formal ally or even informal strategic partner of the US, has minimal trade or investment links with the US, and since becoming independent in 1991 it has been a political and economic basket case.

Ukraine's forced re-absorption into Russia's sphere of influence hardly tilts the balance of power in Europe towards Moscow. To put it bluntly, the game is not worth the candle: it is not worth risking World War III to keep Ukraine out of Russia's clutches.

Secondly, the Obama Administration's preoccupation with Russian aggression in Ukraine prevents it from cultivating cooperation with Russia on matters of far greater geopolitical concern. Most importantly, Russia is a partner to the ongoing P5+1 talks with Iran regarding the latter's nuclear programme, which are reportedly on the threshold of delivering a major agreement. Moscow has a history of nuclear cooperation with Tehran, having defied repeated American urgings over the years to abandon construction of a civilian nuclear reactor at Bushehr. Just a few months ago, Russia concluded a deal to construct two additional reactors at Bushehr.

If tensions over Ukraine continue to escalate, it is not hard to imagine the Putin regime defecting from the P5+1 process and taking up a spoiler's role on the Iranian nuclear issue. Inauspiciously, just a few months ago, the Russian leader scuttled the US-funded Cooperative Threat Reduction programme, which over two decades had achieved enormous success in securing and destroying Russia's Soviet-era nuclear weapons and fissile materials.

Also, since the late 1990's, both the US and Russia have been frequently targeted by radical Islamist terrorist organisations. Despite the two countries' shared interest in counter-terrorism, bilateral cooperation on this score has been erratic. To wit, even prior to the Ukraine crisis, Russian authorities allegedly withheld from the Federal Bureau of Investigation key details concerning the Chechen terrorist Tamerlan Tsarnaev which might have enabled the FBI to foil the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, over the long term a full-fledged strategic partnership between the US and Russia would more effectively counterbalance a rising China. This is the only country in the world that has the potential to challenge not just America's longstanding regional dominance of East Asia, but even its hegemonic global position. China poses an even greater danger to a much weaker and much closer Russia. Ominously, along the two countries' 2,500-kilometre shared border, the Chinese population already outnumbers Russia's by a staggering 20:1 margin that is expected to grow over time.

Finlandise Ukraine, "Reset" Russia Relations

Rather than continuing to ratchet up tensions with the Kremlin, the Obama Administration should instead propose a negotiated resolution to the crisis that assuages the deep Russian insecurities that spurred Moscow's aggression in the first place. Genuine Russian support for a peace agreement in Ukraine will likely only be secured if the US and its European allies agree to end sanctions against Russia, indefinitely refrain from extending NATO and EU membership to Ukraine, and abstain from the provision of both lethal and non-lethal military assistance to Kiev.

Given Ukraine's weakness and highly unfortunate location, both US and Ukrainian policymakers must recognise that the least bad option is for that country to be "Finlandised": similar to Finland during the Cold War, Ukraine will have to accept neutrality and a de facto Russian veto over its foreign policy behaviour as the price for a modicum of domestic political autonomy.

Once the Ukraine issue is taken off the table, the path will be cleared for the White House to immediately establish a more constructive working relationship with Moscow on counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism, and lay the groundwork for a future strategic partnership to balance China.

Successive US administrations since the end of the Cold War have repeatedly engaged in unnecessarily confrontational and threatening behaviour towards Russia and in the process have repeatedly fumbled the opportunity to genuinely "reset" the bilateral relationship. After standing aside as the Russian economy melted down in the early 1990's, American policymakers proceeded to expand NATO right up to Russia's borders and unilaterally abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty of 1972 that formed the centerpiece of nuclear arms control between the two countries.

Most recently, the Obama Administration helped catalyse Russia's invasion of Ukraine by fanning the flames of political opposition to pro-Russian Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich, which resulted in his overthrow. Having forfeited several easier opportunities to build a stable bilateral relationship with Russia that furthers rather than retards vital US interests, Washington has little choice now but to seize the much harder one that is presently on offer.

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