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CAN U.S. AND RUSSIA LOOK BEYOND DIFFERENCES AND FIND COMMON GROUND?

America needs to tweak its misguided Russia policy

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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 retaliated by imposing economic sanctions against Moscow and deploying North Atlantic Treaty Organization (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 further raised the region's temperature by despatching nuclear bombers perilously close to the airspace of the United Kingdom and other NATO states. Russian bombers have also increasingly transited the airspace over East Asia, particularly in the vicinity of Guam, which is home to a major US airbase.

Meanwhile, only last week the Russian government additionally announced its imminent withdrawal from the 1990 Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty.

From Washington's vantage point, this frightening escalation of tension between the world's two most formidable nuclear powers is deeply misguided. First, it is unnecessarily dangerous because although Russia's aggression against Ukraine is con-

temptible and brutal, it does not encroach on any vital US interests.

Ukraine has never been a formal ally or even informal strategic partner of the US, has minimal trade or investment links with America and since becoming independent in 1991, it has been a political and economic basket case. To put it bluntly, it is not worth risking World War III to keep eastern Ukraine out of Russia's clutches.

HIGHER PRIORITIES

Second, the Obama administration's preoccupation with Russian aggression in Ukraine (and with Mr Putin's repressive rule inside Russia) prevents it from cultivating cooperation with Russia on matters of far greater concern to American national security. Most importantly, Russia shares with the US a broad interest in counter-proliferation and is a partner to the ongoing P5+1 talks with Iran regarding the latter's nuclear programme.

However, 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. Only 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 becoming a spoiler on the Iranian nuclear issue to spite his Western antagonists. Inauspiciously, the Russian leader only re-

cently 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 1990s, both the US and Russia have been frequently targeted by Islamist terrorism. Despite this shared interest in counterterrorism, however, bilateral cooperation in that domain has been erratic. Even before the Ukraine crisis, the Russian authorities allegedly withheld from the Federal Bureau of Investigation key details concerning the Chechen terrorist Tamerlan Tsarnaev, which might have enabled the Federal Bureau of Investigation to foil the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.

Most importantly, over the long term, a rising China will present a much greater threat to the security of both the US and Russia than the latter two countries will pose to each other. China alone has the potential to challenge not only America's longstanding regional dominance of East Asia, but also its hegemonic global position. The People's Republic poses an even greater danger to a much weaker and much closer Russia, with which it shares a massive 4,200km border.

Although China's growing power and assertiveness provide the most compelling rationale for closer security cooperation between the US and Russia, the latter has increasingly

gravitated towards Beijing. The two countries, which are already bound by the 2001 Shanghai Cooperation Agreement, recently upgraded their relationship to the status of "comprehensive strategic partnership".

RESETTING US-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 probably only be secured if the US and its allies agree to end sanctions against Russia, indefinitely refrain from extending NATO and EU membership to Ukraine, and abstain from the provision of military assistance to Kiev. Once the Ukraine issue is taken off the table, the path will be cleared for the White House to immediately work on establishing a more constructive working relationship with Moscow on the far more crucial issues of counter-proliferation, counterterrorism and China.

Successive US administrations since the end of the Cold War have 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 largely standing aside as the Russian economy melted down in the early 1990s, American policymakers proceeded to expand NATO right up to Russia's doorstep and unilaterally abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty of 1972 that anchored nuclear deterrence between the two superpowers. Most recently, the Obama administration helped precipitate Russia's invasion of Ukraine by fanning the flames of political opposition to pro-Russian Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich, which resulted in his overthrow.

Each forfeited opportunity to establish a more stable bilateral relationship has further exacerbated Russian insecurity, resentment and hostility, thereby making the task increasingly difficult to achieve.

Even at this gloomy juncture, though, there are grounds for optimism that dogged diplomacy can still produce a rapprochement: Unlike during the Cold War, when the geopolitical interests of the two states were almost completely antithetical, today they overlap to a surprising degree. If anything, international political history has repeatedly shown that the presence of such shared interests and especially the rise of deadly threats to them can eventually bring together even the bitterest rivals.

A more realistic US policy on Ukraine can expedite matters by providing the Putin regime with a potent inducement to shed an increasingly anti-American posture that makes little sense in terms of Russia's own national interest.

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