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U.S.-Russia relations today are more strained and more confrontational than at any time since the end of the Cold War. In fact, even some periods of the Cold War seemed more cooperative than our current era. For the first time since the end of the World War II, a European country has annexed territory of a neighbor. Emboldened by the relative ease of Crimea’s annexation, Vladimir Putin then went a step further and intervened in eastern Ukraine in an attempt to wrestle more territory away from Kiev’s control. Inside Russia, Putin has increased his autocratic grip, in part by blaming the United States for “fomenting revolution” against his regime. Once again, like the darkest days of the Cold War, Russian state-controlled media outlets portray the United States as Russia’s number one enemy intent on weakening if not even dismembering Russia. According to the Kremlin’s media, we are also responsible for many of the evils in other countries including the tragic civil wars in Syria and Libya and the Nazis who came to power in Kyiv. As someone who lived in the Soviet Union, I find the current level of vitriol against the United States and the West more generally even worse than during the Cold War days.

The Obama administration’s response to these Russian actions, in partnership with American allies in Europe, has been qualitatively different than any other period in the post-Cold War era. Dozens of Russian officials and companies are now sanctioned. Even during the most difficult periods of the Cold War, the chief of staff in the Kremlin was not on a sanctions list. In parallel, after decades of focus on other missions, NATO is now retrained again on deterring a threat from Russia. Two years ago, in his address to the United Nations General Assembly, President Obama argued that the three greatest threats to the world were Ebola, ISIS, and Russia.

In parallel to these actions and reactions between our two governments, majorities of Russians and Americans now view each other again as enemies.

What a tragedy. For last three decades, American presidents -- Democrats and Republicans alike -- sought to integrate Russia into the West and in parallel encourage democracy inside Russia. Both of those projects are now over.

How did we get to this point? What must be done now to pursue American national interests in our relations with Russia?

Diagnosis: The Domestic Sources of Russian Foreign Policy

Too often, we in the United States jump to the discussion of “what must be done” before properly diagnosing the problem. In the case of U.S.-Russia relations, we will only develop successful policy prescriptions if we accurately understand the causes of our current conflict with Russia. Getting the diagnosis wrong can lead to bad policy prescriptions.

One popular explanation of our current confrontation in Moscow and in some circles in Europe and the United States is that the United States and our allies in Europe have been pressing on Russia too hard for too many decades and Putin just had to push back. We lectured the Russians about markets and democracy, then expanded NATO, then bombed Serbia, then invaded Iraq, then allegedly supported color revolutions and the Arab Spring, and Putin finally felt compelled to strike back by annexing Crimea and intervening in eastern Ukraine, or so the argument goes. This explanation is wrong.

Although both Presidents Yeltsin and Putin both suggested that Russia should consider joining NATO at one point in their careers, NATO expansion was never popular in Moscow. Nor did most Russian officials support the NATO campaign against Milosevic, the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq, or so-called color revolutions in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine. Yet, these older policy differences cannot be cited to explain our current confrontation, because in between them and today, we had an intense and successful period of cooperation with Russia. We in the Obama administration called it the Reset. During the era of the Reset, from 2009-2012, President Obama and Russian President Medvedev worked together on several projects, which improved the security and prosperity of both countries. In this period, our two countries signed and then ratified the New Start Treaty, passed in the spring of 2010 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, the most comprehensive set of sanctions against Iran ever, and developed the Northern Distribution Network (NDN)—a mix of air, rail, and truck routes through Russia and other countries in Central Asia and the Caucuses to supply U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and reduce U.S. military dependency on the southern route through Pakistan. Our two governments also worked together to diffuse tensions in the Caucuses, and manage ethnic strife in Kyrgyzstan after the government there was toppled. In 2011, President Medvedev even agreed to abstain on UN Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973, which authorized the use of force against the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi. No Russian leader had ever acquiesced to a UN-approved military

intervention into a sovereign country. In this period, our two governments cooperated to increase trade and investment, including working together to help Russia obtain membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

During this period, NATO expansion was not a contentious issue in our bilateral relations. On the contrary, when President Medvedev attended the NATO summit in Lisbon in November 2010, he echoed other Western leaders in waxing effusively about NATO–Russia relations. “Incidentally,” he said, “even the declaration approved at the end of our talks states that we seek to develop a strategic partnership. This is not a chance choice of words, but signals that we have succeeded in putting the difficult period in our relations behind us now.”ⁱ Behind closed doors, President Medvedev engaged in a serious discussion with his NATO counterparts on missile defense cooperation.

During the heyday of the Reset, roughly 60% of Americans viewed Russia as a friendly country; a similar number of Russians had a positive view of the United States.

All of this cooperation, all of these positive attitudes towards each other’s country, occurred after NATO expansion, after the Iraq War, and after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. These factors, therefore, cannot be cited to explain the current era of confrontation.

A second explanation also places the blame on the United States, but for doing too little, not too much. Putin invaded Ukraine because Obama was weak, so the argument goes. Former House Speaker John Boehner succinctly expressed this kind of analysis when he said on October 27, 2014,

“When you look at this chaos that’s going on, does anybody think that Vladimir Putin would have gone into Crimea had George W. Bush been president of the United States? No! Even Putin is smart enough to know that Bush would have punched him in the nose in about 10 seconds.”

In fact, in response to Putin’s more belligerent policies, the Obama Administration began to pivot away from cooperation with Russia long before Putin intervened in Ukraine, including most dramatically cancelling a summit planned in Moscow in September 2013. The truth of the matter, however, is that the United States has never had effective policy options to deter Russian aggression in its neighborhood. Putin actually did invade a neighbor, Georgia, during the Bush administration in August 2008, and President Bush did not punch him in the nose or stop that intervention. Nor did President Ronald Reagan prevent the Soviet-inspired crackdown on Solidarity in December 1981. Likewise, President Johnson could not stop Brezhnev from intervening Czechoslovakia in 1968, and President Eisenhower failed to prevent Soviet tanks from rolling into Hungary in 1956. Whether Democrat or Republican, no U.S. president has ever succeeded in

detering Soviet/Russian military intervention in Eastern Europe in those countries not members of NATO.

The driving force of our current clash with Russia is not American policies, but domestic politics in Russia and Ukraine, specifically Putin's response to popular challenges to his authority and the authority of his former ally in Kyiv. These are forces over which the United States had little control.

Relations with Russia began to deteriorate rapidly after Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 and his decision to suppress popular opposition to his rule. In December 2011, tens of thousands of Russian protested against a falsified parliamentary election. Not since 1991 -- the year that the Soviet Union collapsed -- had so many Russian mobilized on the streets against the government. Putin's old social contract -- economic growth in return for political passivity -- was no longer sufficient to appease these middle class protestors. He needed a new argument for legitimacy, so he turned against the United States, labeling us again as Russia's enemy and calling those demonstrating against him American agents. In particular, Putin argued that the United States was seeking to topple his regime. Like the old days, the United States was interfering in Russia's internal affairs, "We know, regrettably, that...some representatives of some foreign states are gathering those to whom they are paying money, so-called grant recipients, carrying out instruction sessions with them and preparing them to do the relevant 'work', in order to influence, ultimately, the election campaign process in our country."ⁱⁱ Putin, his aides, and his media outlets accused the leaders of Russian demonstrations of being U.S. agents. While I was ambassador, these same media outlets constantly propagated the idea that President Obama sent me to Moscow to foment a "color revolution" against Putin's regime. President Putin and his government also blamed the United States for fostering instability and regime change in the Arab world.

During this period, U.S. policy towards Russia did not change. Rather, Putin's policy towards the United States changed radically.

Putin also blamed the United States for fostering regime change against his ally, President Yanukovich, in the fall of 2013. Putin always sees the hidden hand of the CIA behind popular protests since, in his view, individuals cannot act on their own. When Yanukovich fled Ukraine in February 2014, after a desperate effort by Western intermediaries to forge a compromise between the Ukrainian government and the protestors, Putin blamed the United States again. To exact revenge against the new government in Kyiv as well as the "double-crossing" West, he first annexed Crimea and then intervened in the Donbas in support of secessionist groups there.

Two years later, Putin intervened in Syria to make sure his ally, Mr. Assad, did not suffer the same fate as Mr. Yanukovich in Ukraine. Putin's intervention in Syria had everything to do with propping up Assad and very little to do with fighting ISIS.

Putin's intervention in Ukraine was initially very popular among Russians. Putin's perceived success among Russians in battling neo-Nazis in Ukraine, the evil

Americans, and the decadent West more generally will make it hard for him to change course. To maintain his argument for legitimacy at home, Putin needs perpetual conflict with external enemies—not full-scale war or a direct clash with the United States or NATO -- but a low-level, yet constant confrontation to support the narrative that Russia is under siege from the West.

Prescription: Stay the Course

If my explanation for our new confrontation with Russia is correct, then certain policy prescriptions should be followed and others avoided.

Above all else, this conflict did not start as a result of a particular U.S. foreign policy action, so seeking to “correct” some U.S. foreign policy will not produce a change in U.S.-Russian relations. For instance, Putin did not intervene in Ukraine to stop NATO expansion, because NATO expansion to Ukraine was not on the agenda in 2014. Likewise, the United States cannot stop promoting regime change in Russia as a way to win favor with Putin, because the Obama administration was never and is not today promoting regime change in Russia. Equally dangerous would be to forget about Putin’s actions in Ukraine and pivot to start making deals with the Kremlin, as Mr. Donald Trump, the Republican Party’s presumptive nominee for the November 2016 presidential election, has suggested. Such a policy would prove to Putin and his government that they can annex territory, use military force, and then wait patiently until the United States and Europe grows tired of confrontation and seek cooperation again. Suggesting moral equivalency between Russian behavior and American actions abroad is also very damaging to our national interests. For instance, when Donald Trump says, “well, we are doing a lot of killing ourselves ...” in response to a question from MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough about Putin’s policies, he hands the Russian leader a public relations win.

Instead of searching for corrections in our past policies, we need to stay the course with our current policies. The Obama administration, together with our European allies, responded correctly to Putin’s belligerent actions in Ukraine. Obama outlined the stakes at play in his speech in Tallinn on September 2, 2014, explaining that Russian intervention in Ukraine “is a brazen assault on the territorial integrity of Ukraine -- a sovereign and independent European nation. It challenges that most basic of principles of our international system -- that borders cannot be redrawn at the barrel of a gun; that nations have the right to determine their own future. It undermines an international order where the rights of peoples and nations are upheld and can’t simply be taken away by brute force. This is what’s at stake in Ukraine. This is why we stand with the people of Ukraine today.”ⁱⁱⁱ The West’s unified and comprehensive response to Putin’s aggression was impressive and effective, but now needs to be maintained and deepened.

Support Ukrainian Reform

Putin is waiting for Ukrainian economic and political reform to fail. Our goal must be to do all that we can to help Ukrainian reform succeed. There is no better way to rebuff Putin's belligerent foreign policies and autocratic domestic practices than to consolidate democracy and strengthen market practices in Ukraine.

Under difficult circumstances, the Ukrainian government has achieved success. In close cooperation with the IMF, the Ukrainian government has reduced government expenditures, raised heating tariffs, tightened monetary policy, and eliminated energy dependence on Russia -- all difficult but important reforms for stimulating again economic growth.

Ukrainian military reform and expanded training also continues, supported by American assistance. The \$600 million in security assistance that the United States has committed to Ukraine has increased the effectiveness of Ukrainian military forces to deter future Russian offensives. This support must be continued.

Ukraine's new leaders also have proven capable of enacting major institutional reform. For instance, the overhaul of the police patrolling system, aided by support from the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), has been remarkably successful. Ukrainian civil society remains robust, and continues to pressure the government to maintain momentum on reform. U.S. support for Ukrainian civil society has been a smart, impactful investment.

At the same time, more needs to be done. Above all else, the influence of Ukrainian big business conglomerates in politics needs to be reduced. The new government has to make more credible commitments to fighting corruption. U.S. policy should assist them in making these commitments, through aid conditionality, technical assistance, and political support.

The United States and our European allies also should be doing more to reach out, nurture, and support directly the people in the Donbas, including the 1-1.5 million of them currently displaced in other parts of Ukraine. They need short-term humanitarian assistance, as well as long-term support—education, housing, and retraining—to rebuild their futures.

Strengthen NATO

The probability of a Russian attack of a NATO ally is low. Putin does not have a master plan to recreate the Soviet Union. Putin is not irrational. Already, his Novorossiia project in Ukraine has failed. We should not exaggerate the Russian threat.

At the same time, Putin will take advantage of opportunities, including splits within the alliance or ambiguities about NATO's commitment to defend all members. We must deny him new opportunities, and reduce to zero his doubt about our commitment to defending all NATO allies against military threats. That's why President

Obama made the right decision to dramatically increase the size of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) to \$3.4 billion. That's why NATO's plan to deploy four battalions on a rotational basis in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is the right decision to complement a series of decisions taken earlier, including the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, to strengthen NATO's deterrent capacity. The United States should participate in one of these deployments and at the same maintain our bilateral military cooperation with all of these countries.

Lift Sanctions (at the Appropriate Time)

The United States and our allies should lift sanctions against Russian companies and individuals immediately after Putin and his surrogates in eastern Ukraine implement the Minsk agreement. Lifting sanctions beforehand would be terribly damaging to American and European credibility. Likewise, a partial lifting of sanctions in return for a partial implementation of Minsk is a dangerous, slippery slope. Sanctions put in place in response to the annexation of Crimea should stay in place until Russia leaves Crimea, however long that may be.

Counter Russian Propaganda

The United States government should not seek to counter Russian propaganda with American propaganda. Instead, the best method for countering disinformation is real reporting from credible journalists in Russia, Ukraine, and other countries in the region. American direct funding of these media outlets would taint them. Instead, our focus should be on providing short-term training opportunities, yearlong fellowships at American and European universities, and internships at Western media organizations. Education and the free-flow of information are our best tools in this long struggle against Russian propaganda.

Work with the Russian Government on Issues of Mutual Interest

Even after Putin decided to portray the United States as an enemy to bolster his domestic support, he continued to engage with President Obama and his administration on a limited set of issues on which our interests overlapped. For instance, during this period of confrontation, our two governments still managed to work together to remove chemical weapons from Syria and to maintain unity in the P5+1 process to achieve an agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. When opportunities to cooperate with Russia arise on issues of mutual benefit, we should pursue them, and not link cooperation on these issues to progress on other issues of disagreement.

We should not continue to pursue engagement, however, without results. Putin's military intervention in Syria, for instance, has achieved his goal of shoring up the Assad and his regime, at least in the short-term. The United States has no interest in associating with that objective. If the Obama administration continues to work with Russia on Syria, we must demand more from our Russian counterparts, and push them to pressure Assad to do more, including allowing more humanitarian assistance reach to distressed Syrian communities, and engaging more seriously in a political negotiation process.

Deepen Engagement with Russian Society

Many Russians in the government, business, and society quietly believe that Putin's current course of confrontation with the West does not serve Russia's long-term economic and strategic interests. We should not isolate these people, but instead maintain contact with them. The United States and our European allies should increase efforts to engage directly with the Russian people, including students through exchanges and scholarships, peer-to-peer dialogue with non-government organizations, and allowing Russian companies not tied to the state to continue to work with Western partners. There is no better way to undermine Russian propaganda than a three-week trip to Palo Alto. There is no better way to show that Americans are not obsessed with "destroying Russia" than to send Russian students to spend an academic year in our schools and universities. Likewise, there are no better ambassadors for our country than young Americans studying at Russian universities or interning in Russian companies. The more interaction we can promote between our societies, the better.

Many Russian civil society leaders have been forced to leave Russia. The United States and our allies should increase our efforts to support these people now living in exile, either through scholarships and fellowships to attend universities or work at think tanks, or through direct financial support for their organizations operating from outside Russia.

ⁱ Medvedev's remarks at the NATO summit in Lisbon, at

http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/audio/audio_2010_11/20101120_101120f-01.mp3.

ⁱⁱ Putin's remarks to the United Russia Congress, November 26, 2011, as cited in Miriam Elder, "Vladimir Putin Rallies Obedient Crowd at Party Congress," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/27/vladimir-putin-party-congress>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia," Nordea Concert Hall, Tallinn, Estonia, September 3, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>.