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**A Cold Peace? West-Russia Relations  
in Light of the Ukraine Crisis**

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**Deterring Russian Revanchism:  
Russia and U.S. Global Priorities**

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## **The new conflict with Russia**

Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent invasion of Eastern Ukraine is unquestionably the most serious crisis in European security since the end of the Cold War, and possibly since the pre-Détente era. It upends numerous assumptions that have underpinned U.S. and European foreign and security policy in the region since the 1990s. In particular, it overturns the assumption that while Russia had the capability to alter borders in Europe by force, it had no such intent, hence could be considered a benign and essentially pro-status quo power. These assumptions must be reconsidered in light of events in Ukraine. The United States, NATO and Russia are headed toward a new phase in their relationship, one that will be characterized by more conflict and less cooperation than was the case in the first quarter century after the end of the Cold War.

Some would thus argue that we are either facing or at risk of falling into a new Cold War. This is inaccurate at best. If the emerging new relationship between the United States, Europe and Russia will share many commonalities with the Cold War, it is not the same thing. The nature of the conflict today, the context in which it is playing out, and the relative importance of the conflict together differentiate the present situation markedly from the East-West contest that framed international politics in the fifty years that followed World War II.

Like the Cold War, today's clash has ideological as well as geopolitical dimensions. Ideologically, Russian President Vladimir Putin stands for a conservative authoritarianism that claims grounding in family values and his interpretation of Orthodox-Christian tradition. This conservative ideology is portrayed as an alternative to western European liberal democracy, which Putin portrays as decadent, immoral, and ill-suited for Russian society. Putin also portrays western liberalism as ill suited for many other societies, and presents his ideology as an alternative preferable to the values for which the United States and Europe have long stood.

This ideological contrast is not, however, so sharp as during the cold war, when Russian official rhetoric often portrayed the very existence of western capitalism as a de facto threat to the Soviet Union. Russia today makes no such claims. Nor does the ideology shape Russian foreign policy to the same the extent that communist ideology did. There is no equivalent to the Third International, no support for Putinist revolt in the developing world. Importantly, despite its criticisms of western mores, the Kremlin has not gone so far as to claim that its political system is fundamentally incompatible with liberal democracy. Soviet leaders may eventually have come to a similar view regarding the compatibility of communism and capitalism, but their rhetoric, coupled with the dogma that the capitalist system was destined to collapse of its own internal weaknesses, heightened overall tensions. The chasm between Putinism and western liberal democracy is not now so great.

Geopolitically, today's clash is reminiscent of the Cold War, but also not identical. In practical political terms the Cold War arose over the question of whether or not the countries of Central and Eastern Europe would be democratic after World War II, as the west believed had been agreed at Yalta, or whether they would be ruled by puppets of the Kremlin, as the Soviets felt was necessary for their security. In contrast, the root of the current conflict is whether or not Russia has a privileged sphere of interests in the regions along its current borders and a corresponding right to dominate weaker countries if their domestic or foreign policies run counter to what Russia sees as its interests. Not only are the countries immediately affected different, but the Cold War was about de facto control of Central and Eastern Europe, whereas today is about Russia's purported right to a sphere of influence in western Eurasia that justifies military intervention in neighboring countries.

In addition to these fundamental differences in the ideological and geopolitical essentials of the conflict, there are also important differences in the broader political and military context. To begin with, the military geography is starkly different from the Cold War. Russian armies are no longer in Central Europe, indeed, are unlikely ever to be again. The Russian military is meanwhile in the process of deep reform designed to transform it from a capability for large-scale war ground-war in Europe to a smaller, faster force that can intervene rapidly on Russia's periphery. Although the transformation has been slow, the Russian military remains weak and antiquated when compared with the combined strength of NATO. It does not pose a military threat to Europe anywhere close to the scale of the

threat posed in Soviet times. Even if they remain relevant, nuclear arms have also been greatly reduced in number from Cold War levels, the size of NATO forces in Europe has declined, and the capabilities of those forces have shifted away from a central focus on large-scale ground operations at the division level.

The world today is meanwhile vastly more integrated and more pluralistic than during the Cold War. China is a contender for global super-power status. North Korea, Iran, and possibly other countries have nuclear weapons programs that are pressing concerns. ISIS, Al Qaeda, and other Salafi Jihadist groups are likely to remain the leading security threat to the United States and its allies in the next decade, and the leading focus of U.S. efforts. The global economic context is also radically changed. Russia is integrated into global energy, and especially financial markets to an unprecedented degree – even as sanctions distance it from these markets. The physical and virtual integration of societies, and the profusion of weapons technology have spawned terrorist threats of a kind unknown during the Cold War.

For many reasons, therefore, the today's conflict with Russia will never have the central importance that the East-West conflict did during the Cold War. In Washington, especially, concern about Russian revanchism will compete for resources and attention along with a minimum of two other major concerns, the rise of China and the chaotic and dangerous evolution of the Middle East.

Moreover, the global context means that U.S. and European efforts to address the problems that Russia creates will frequently be torn between the need to cooperate with Russia on some fronts, for example, in defeating Salafi jihadist groups in the Middle East, on Iran's nuclear program, or in Central Asia, even as it seeks to contain and deter it from destabilizing steps in Europe. The new global context also creates mutual vulnerabilities that should serve both as checks and as levers against rapid escalation, dampening conflict, and, hopefully, encouraging sustained engagement, communication and measured policies on all sides. Together, these realities will make it very difficult for the United States to pursue a consistent, calibrated strategy toward Russia. It will be similarly difficult for Europe to do so.

### **Geopolitical and ideological drivers of conflict**

To make the perhaps obvious argument that the current clash with Russia will not be a strict return to the cold war, however, is by no means to claim that there is no clash. There is, in fact, a serious conflict, with a potentially dangerous side to it that should disturb not only experts in European security, but all those who concern themselves with maintaining a peaceful global order under the rule of law. Developing strategies to deal with the problem requires first an effort to understand its basic nature.

One view of the nature of the conflict with Russia is that it is geopolitical in nature, springing from the simple fact that Russia is too large to incorporate into the European system, and yet not strong enough to survive as a regional pole on its own. This condition creates inherent insecurity, leaving Russia at risk of invasion from a more developed Europe on the one hand, and unable to control its own territory on the other. Insecurity in turn encourages Russia to dominate its borderlands in order to create a buffer against the incursions of Europe and in an effort to protect itself against incursions from these borderlands themselves.

The Russian desire to dominate its borders was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Russian form of imperialism. Whereas the British and French empires were far-flung and included dispersed around the globe, the Russian empire was right on its doorstep. In a certain sense, Russia did not have an empire, it was an empire. The reduction in Russia's size that resulted from the Cold War settlement has, paradoxically, made the problem more acute since Russia has lost much of the buffer that it enjoyed under the Soviet Union and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only in the years following the Treaty of Brest Litovsk was Russia reduced in the degree to which it was after the end of the Cold War.

The historical reality of Russian domination of its border for centuries creates the misimpression that Russia has a right to dominate, while the geopolitical condition creates insecurity that itself reinforces the perceived need to dominate. The two factors are mutually reinforcing. It is important to recognize that, even in the post-Cold War era, the claim to a sphere of influence predates

even Vladimir Putin. It was Putin who objected most forcefully to the color revolutions, which he saw as a western plot to dominate countries that border on Russia. Russian objections to NATO enlargement, as well as statements regarding Russian privileges in its near-abroad, however, date from the 1990s. The tussle with Ukraine over Crimea, of course, dates to the early 1990s, when Russian backed Crimean politicians such as Yuriy Meshkov agitated for Crimean separatism.

If Russian concern with its near-abroad has both historical and more recent roots, what has changed in the last decade is both the intensity of what Russia views as encroachment on its territory as well as Russia's evaluation of its own capability to assert its rights against these countries. In the 1990s, Russia was in a state of chaos, reeling from the loss of its empire and the collapse of the ideological system that had guided it for eighty years. In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Russian economy began to recover. The relative strength of Europe and the United States meanwhile appeared in decline as economic troubles continued to plague Europe and the United States expended enormous resources for little apparent gain in Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The Russia-Georgia War of 2008 was the first indication of this willingness to pursue its regional agenda with military power. What has happened in Ukraine in 2014 affirms that Russian capability and will have both undergone a phase shift.

A purely geopolitical view of the conflict leads to a somewhat disturbing set of policy conclusions, however, since it implies that Europe and the United States will be in perpetual conflict with Russia. If the problem is essentially Russia's size, there is little that can be done, and the West will be perpetually in conflict with Russia over its borders. But today's conflict is not just about geopolitics, even if geopolitics plays a role. Ultimately, ideology is what leads the Kremlin to view the policies of states like Ukraine as a threat worthy of military response. Russian leadership feels insecure when countries like Ukraine take steps to move closer to the European Union because they believe that the import of the institutions and norms of the European Union – specifically pluralistic society and the rule of law -- will diminish their ability to influence and control the politics of these states. Even more grave is the risk of a demonstration effect – particularly acute in Ukraine – by which the success of the liberal democratic model in a society widely viewed as similar in character to Russian society disproves Putin's claim that Russia can only be managed and governed with a conservative authoritarian system.

### **The danger to the Baltic States and NATO**

The conflict with Russia is thus real, and has both ideological and geopolitical dimensions. But if the Cold War is not back, how seriously should we take the new challenge? What should be done about it?

The Kremlin's willingness to use force to change borders in Europe is hugely destabilizing for all of Europe and therefore not in Russia's own best long-term interests. But the danger that Russia's revanchist foreign policy poses to the United States, NATO, and stability in the broader Euro-Atlantic security sphere is complex and varied. The threat to non-NATO countries of western Eurasia—whether Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova -- is, in particular, different from the threat to NATO members. In contrast with the Cold War, the danger within NATO is also widely varied (and this is of course an inherent problem for the alliance). These variations are a function of the inherent vulnerability of the countries themselves on the one hand and Russian intentions and capabilities on the other. On the one hand these vulnerabilities are all interconnected, on another they are individual problems that call for and will receive individualized responses.

On one level, the threat is generalized and stems from the very fact of what has happened in Ukraine. Russian intentions in Ukraine have been a subject of some debate, especially about whether Russia acted strategically or spontaneously when it annexed Crimea. Some analysts argue that Russian actions in Ukraine are purely tactical and that Putin has not been acting according to a larger scheme to redraw the lines of Europe. Some analysts have argued that Putin's objectives are to redraw the lines of the post-color revolution order in Eastern Europe and Western Eurasia, not to redo the entire post-Cold War settlement. Specifically, he seeks to turn back the clock on NATO's 2008 Bucharest promise to bring Ukraine and Georgia into the Alliance.

This may all be true, but it is largely irrelevant, given what has happened. The problem is that the objectives are subject to change. The norms of security in Europe have been undermined by the Ukraine and Georgia invasions and the arms control regimes that have helped stabilize European security for decades have been enfeebled. Relations between Europe and Russia have taken a serious downturn. In these conditions, the impediments to testing NATO's mettle in the Baltics or elsewhere have naturally decreased. The incentives may be the same, but the downsides of any such meddling could easily appear to the current or any future Russian regime, relatively less severe.

At the same time, the threats are also specific and varied. Clearly, the threat to Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus is categorically different than the threat to NATO members. The contest between Russia and Ukraine over Crimea has been longstanding and the subject of multiple disputes between the two countries since the early 1990s. Russia's actions in Ukraine have been aimed at sustaining the status-quo, not at overturning it.

Any effort to destabilize the Baltics would be both a change in objectives. It would also be inherently more difficult since the Baltic states are inherently less vulnerable to the kind of hybrid strategies Russia has used in Ukraine. Democracy in the Baltic States is well-established, and seeking to undo democracy there would be a much greater challenge for Russia than seeking to prevent it from taking root in Ukraine. Democracy in the Baltic States is less of an implicit threat to authoritarianism in Russia to begin with because the Baltic States are culturally further from Russia than Ukraine, and have been part of Europe within the Russian bureaucracy for over a decade.

Most of all, the citizens of the Baltic States, Russian ethnic or otherwise, are members of the European Union. While the ethnic issues in these countries may be real, the divisions do not rival those that have existed in Ukraine over the course of the last decade. Ukraine was divided over NATO membership, with a significant portion of the Eastern populace preferring to stay out of NATO. In the Baltics, no such division exists. The standard of living is much higher, including for the Russian ethnic population. This means that any Russian operation to foment protest and separatism in the Baltics would not only be inherently more difficult than it was in Ukraine, it would also be subject to far more scrutiny and much more difficult to legitimize and sell. This is not to mention the fact that, unlike Ukraine, the Baltic States are part of NATO.

This is not to say that Russia has nothing to gain from meddling in the Baltics. Any Russian operation to destabilize NATO's Baltic members would almost certainly be grounded in the assessment that NATO was politically and militarily unprepared to respond. The objective would be to sow discord within the Alliance, and cast the shadow of doubt over Article V by progressively testing the waters. If the stakes are higher in the Baltics, in other words, the potential payoffs are as well.

## **Deterrence and engagement**

What is needed in these circumstances is a strategy that both deters and engages Russia. Deterrence is necessary because the assumptions, norms and institutions of European security have been eroded in the wake of Russia's invasion of Georgia and Ukraine, leaving few other options for re-establishing a stable security environment. Engagement is necessary, both to dampen escalation between the two sides – both having nuclear weapons – and because the long-term interests of Europe and the United States are to restore the Euro-Atlantic political order that includes Russia and was the objective of western policy for the last quarter century.

The implicit NATO strategy for defending the Baltics since they joined the alliance has been extended deterrence, the claim that the United States would be willing to use nuclear weapons to defend the Baltic States in the event of a Russian attack. The great advantage of this strategy is that it is very cost effective, since it requires no additional forces in the region, and permits the redeployment of those forces elsewhere. It is also, for this reason, and perhaps ironically, more politically feasible than forward deployed ground and air forces in Eastern Europe would be. The big problem, of course, is that extended deterrence lacks credibility against the kind of hybrid, limited warfare that Russia has used in Ukraine. That the United States would be willing to risk thermonuclear war and self-destruction to protect the Baltic States from minor incursions of ununiformed Russian forces and mercenaries is

dubious. This was not a problem in the period when the threat was relatively remote, but given the renewed threat, the deterrence problem is now real, and increasingly widely recognized.

The methods and purposes of deterrence are unfortunately not universally well understood. Deterrence differs from defense in that defensive strategies aim to prevent an adversary from achieving its objectives by force of arms or other measures. Deterrent strategies are intended to convince an adversary to change its objectives by making them appear either completely unachievable or unachievable at an acceptable cost.

The fact that NATO is not postured to defend the Baltic States from conventional or unconventional Russian attack is nothing new. NATO was not postured to defend, in the strict sense of the term, its allies, during the Cold War, but was instead postured to deter a Russian invasion through defense in depth. The problem with a defense in depth strategy today is that Russia would not need to fight in depth in order to achieve its political objectives. These objectives could be achieved by the simple occupation of a small portion of territory in one of the Baltic States. NATO's unity and meaningfulness as an alliance could be undercut if Russia were simply to occupy a small part of the Baltics with a single brigade and then sue for peace.

The objective of any NATO deterrent strategy must therefore be either to deny the possibility of occupying part of the Baltics or to make it so costly and risky as to rule the strategy out. Moreover, the deterrent strategy would ideally function with at least three layers – one tactical, one operational, and one strategic.

At the tactical level, the strategy would need to deter the kind of limited, hybrid warfare that was used to such effect in Crimea and, initially, in Eastern Ukraine. Developing an effective deterrent against this strategy is extremely difficult. It will require a combination of efforts to track and thwart Russian covert activities, increase risk for Russian operatives in the region, improve the livelihoods of ethnic minorities, and ensure effective police practices. It may also involve steps to strengthen cyber defenses and potentially some form of declaratory policy.

At the operational level, the deterrent strategy would have to involve either denying Russian forces the ability to hold territory in the Baltics, or make doing so so costly as to be unthinkable. Russian forces would have an enormous advantage geographically against NATO in the Baltics, simply by virtue of proximity to operating bases and the relatively short distance between the Russian border and the Baltic capitals. Only a massive investment of military capability in the region would enable NATO, through conventional means, to deny a committed Russian force of medium size the ability to take significant parts of Baltic territory and capture the capitals. Preventing Russia from holding part of the Baltics would require an extremely large NATO force deployed in North Eastern Europe, the Baltics themselves, and the North and Baltic Seas. Such a force would not only be very costly, it would also be exposed to pre-emptive attack, and politically a target of constant Russian recrimination that could undermine the need to sustain a working relationship with Russia on other matters. Serious questions about the speed with which it might deploy would also be raised.

If denial is not a serious option, the best strategy for NATO in the Baltics is a cost-imposition strategy that makes any such intervention so costly militarily that no current or future Russian leader would seriously contemplate it. A deterrent strategy that relies on cost imposition can be had with a much more modest force posture. Indeed, even NATO's current posture, given especially its airpower assets, could inflict significant damage on any force moving into the Baltics. This does not mean that the current posture should not be enhanced, especially as regards the speed of deployment which is a critical factor, but it does mean that this layer of effective deterrence is likely possible within the cost constraints that NATO countries currently face.

At the strategic level, deterrence must be grounded in an effort to demonstrate that salami tactics in which Russia has engaged in Ukraine will not, in fact, weaken NATO. To the contrary, it should be clear that they will strengthen the alliance and incur costs for Russia. The need to do both – strengthen the alliance and impose costs – is of course the crux of NATO's own strategic dilemma, since threatening to impose costs tends to divide the alliance. In this regard, the Alliance has fared well. Political unity has been good in the face of the Ukraine crisis. There have of course been differences of perspective, but in the end the United States and the European Union have managed multiple rounds

of sanctions, undertaken military steps to reassure Eastern Europe, and proved willing to incur costs to strengthen the current deterrent regime.

A robust deterrent strategy should moreover not be grounded solely on denial and threats. Ideally, NATO would also be postured to offer benefits to Russia for compliance and in the event of a crisis. The Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved fortuitously by the fact that the United States had deployed medium range Jupiter missiles in Turkey and was thus in a position to offer to withdraw them in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. Economic and financial sanctions offers Europe and the United States some leverage to reward compliance with our objectives, and should be sustained until the Kremlin takes concrete steps toward such compliance. Because NATO and U.S. force posture in Europe is limited today, however, the horizons for offering benefits are limited, a consideration that should be weighed in discussions of force posture changes.

Engagement is no easier than deterrence, yet it is equally important. Engagement is particularly difficult when Russian diplomats, by all accounts, refuse to engage and repeat talking points that both sides know are contrary to facts on the ground – for example regarding the presence of Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine. This approach to diplomacy is at best counterproductive because it irritates. At worst it is downright inflammatory because of the message that it sends about Russia's perceived willingness to avoid further conflict.

A larger challenge with improving engagement, however, is lack of clarity in Europe and the United States about who does and does not have influence in the Kremlin. Diplomatic engagement, even high-level diplomatic engagement, is of little use if the interlocutor is not part of the inner-circle shaping Russian policy.

Nevertheless, however frustrating, continued engagement is critical for two reasons. First Russia remains a player on the international stage. It is not in a position to offer much positive good, but can play a spoiler role, especially if the United States and its allies remain committed to the United Nations, as they should. Second, in the event of escalation or crisis, the ability to send messages about red-lines will be critical to escalation management.

It is thus very important that the maximum number of official and unofficial channels remain open. It is also essential that NATO invest in understanding which of those channels are liable to be most effective under which circumstances.

## **Strategic principles**

There are good reasons to be concerned about NATO's resolve and its capabilities for the enterprise that lies ahead. To believe that Russia can be deterred and security in Europe restored without significant costs – military, financial, and otherwise – is naïve. Europe and the United States have demonstrated a willingness to incur costs through sanctions at a level that many experts might have doubted was possible before the crisis began. This fact in and of itself is likely has some deterrent value against future Russian moves. At the same time, however, European militaries remain depressingly underfunded. Broader change in the willingness of European publics to spend on strengthening their militaries so that they can credibly defend themselves against the new security challenges of the twenty-first century, which include, but are not limited to Russia, is still sorely needed.

It is needed not just for NATO, but also for the stated aspirations of the European Union. If NATO is unable to stabilize security situation, the European Union will also suffer the consequences. A credible defense of NATO is a necessary precondition not only for sustaining the European Union's partnership with Eastern Europe, which it continues to seek, but also for sustaining the European Union itself. Putin's actions in Ukraine have made clear that he sees NATO and the European Union as linked. Given this, it would be foolish to assume that if the Kremlin successfully undermined NATO, the European Union would not suffer a serious blow as a result. If European citizens continue to believe in the value and importance of the European project, which they should, they will need to take NATO's future seriously, and invest resources accordingly.

What are the deeper principles the United States and its allies should stand for in this conflict? First and foremost, the commitment to defending and strengthening the European liberal-democratic order, which is intimately linked with the security of our own democratic system of government.

Second, a rules based international order, in which changes to borders are accomplished through the rule of law rather than the use of force. Third, the good not only of the people who are fortunate enough to live within its borders, but also the good of others, and this includes the Russian people.

This final principle will, in practice, be the most difficult to uphold, yet it is in many ways the lodestone for a any policy that is to avoid unnecessary war and succeed in the long run. It will be particularly difficult to square with the need to deter future Russian incursions. Any statements regarding deterrence must be chosen carefully to avoid the jingoism that too often characterizes statements from some NATO capitals. It will be important to make crystal clear that the problem that NATO has with Russia is not with the Russian people, but with the policies of the Kremlin, and specifically the willingness to use force to redraw borders in Europe. The nonchalance with which Russia has approached the conflict – as well as the downing of MH-17 -- is particularly noxious in contemporary Europe, where it undermines several decades of mutual efforts that have been made -- through military, legal, arms control, and other diplomatic arrangements -- to build lasting security in this once extravagantly violent continent.

NATO leaders must also continue to emphasize that Russia has a right to security and that the United States and NATO are respectful of this right under international law, and that our disagreement is over the particulars of the issue, not the right itself. The importance of certain issues such as access to the Black Sea fleet should be recognized as legitimate security concerns for Russia, even if Russia's methods of securing those interests is not acceptable.

The Russian claim that there are cases where the United States and other members of the international order violate the sovereignty of weaker states under the guise of humanitarian intervention. This is true, and the parallel would be apt were it not for the fact that Russia itself was the cause of the breakdown of order in Eastern Ukraine. To cause a civil war and then intervene to end it is not, by any reasonable standard, the moral equivalent of the several humanitarian interventions that the United States and its allies have engaged in since the end of the Cold War. There may have been tension within Ukraine over its relationship with NATO, but there was no war until the Kremlin created one.

Some escalation, and concomitant increases in tension, will inevitably arise as U.S. and NATO force posture in Central and Eastern Europe evolves. This should be accepted as the cost of deterrence. Yet at the same time, it will be important to recognize that tensions with Russia feed Putinism and that missteps could risk inviting attack. The United States and its allies should make every effort to eschew inflammatory rhetoric in the process. Equally, it is crucial to make a serious effort to constantly and consistently articulate the principles and rationales that underpin NATO policy, and especially any military moves such as changes in NATO force posture.

We are not facing a new Cold War, though if we were it might simplify things. Indeed, the challenge now for the United States and Europe is to sustain a strategic view and policies that consistently work toward the strategic objective of re-building momentum toward a Europe that is whole, free and at peace. The risks of a fragmented policy in which Europe and the United States work against each other, and in which the United States and Europe work against themselves in an effort to achieve short term gains, is great indeed. The United States will be consistently pulled in multiple directions on Russia policy and this will pose a challenge for deterrence. The European Union will need to decide whether or not it is serious about its Eastern Neighborhood partnership and if it is, pay the necessary price in its relationship with Russia.

Eventually, one can hope that change in Moscow will bring about a regime that is more willing to abide by the norms of security in Europe. In these circumstances, the United States and its Allies can consider a return to the conflict free-zone that Europe enjoyed for two decades after the end of the Cold War. Of course, change in the Kremlin could also bring even greater turmoil if it results in greater nationalism or, equally frightening, fragmentation and state collapse. In both the latter cases, however, the United States and Europe will be better served if current policies strengthen rather than weaken security and deterrence in Europe.