Russia is back: a bully to former Soviet holdings in Europe, a challenge to the United States and its European allies, and one of the self-proclaimed leaders of an alleged post-Western World. A balanced policy toward Russia has never been easy to adopt specifically, execute efficiently, and embrace publicly. The most effective way for the United States and Russia to deal with each other is to stop talking backward and start looking forward, with limited expectations over what can be achieved together and more awareness about what cannot be achieved against the other. Russia is an overachiever whose ambitions exceed its staying power. The West must keep it at a distance until it stands ready to move away from a history that lingers ominously.

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago Russia was a mess — no longer an enemy or even a rival but certainly not a friend or partner. What was feared most was a collapse of the Russian state that might turn the country into something resembling the former Yugoslavia, en pire. Despite its weakness, then president Boris Yeltsin insisted, “Russia isn't Haiti…. Russia will rise again.”1 Events have confirmed Yeltsin's warning. Not only is Russia not Haiti, it is not Serbia either, willing, that is, to submit to a U.S.-sponsored adjudication of its territorial claims in the neighborhood. Nearly one century after it was hijacked by a revolution that gave it a new name, Russia is back: a bully to former Soviet holdings in Europe, a challenge to the United States and its European allies, and one of the self-proclaimed leaders of an alleged post-Western World.

This is not just a burst of imperial nostalgia nor is it a moment of post-bipolarity funk. This is not a rebellion against an all-powerful United States that did not make time for

Russia when it was time to do so, and against a unifying Europe that did not make room for its larger neighbor. As always, ghosts linger. Decades of bad Soviet governance failed to bury centuries of Russian imperial history. La grande Russie does not stay silent or passive for long: its vocation is to be heard and to expand, not to withdraw and to shrink. Shorn of nearly one-quarter of the Soviet Union's post-1945 territory, Russia still remained too big, too near, and too nuclear to be treated with dismissal. It may not be a dominant European power, but it is still a domineering power in Europe. As Russia longs for its imperial past, the vexing question is how to impress upon its government the limits of a self-image that the Russian state can no longer sustain and that the West need not tolerate any more. Barely past the Cold War, we cannot let Russia be Russia.

Moscow cannot expect to regain its imperial hold over half of Europe. And the United States cannot afford to leave the leadership role it assumed on behalf of half the world — we must let the United States be the United States. The answer now, as it was before, is patience. This is not a military test, it is a diplomatic test.

The end of the Cold War was abrupt. There was no ceasefire, no peace conference, no formal treaty, and no specific settlement. As the Soviet Union held an unprecedented estate sale, the West helped itself — Europe in the East, Germany in Europe, and the United States everywhere. Left behind was a Russian state that had been forgotten since 1917 but which lost no time to question its condition. “Mort à jamais?” asked Marcel Proust. Dead, to be sure, but not forever, or even for long. Clearly, it was not wise to dismiss centuries of a Russian history that had expanded by the size of one Belgium a year for 300 years, brutally imposed the Russification of ethnic minorities, and relied on authoritarian and totalitarian rule to subjugate its own people. Now, it is the turn of Russian President Vladimir Putin to deny Russia’s most recent defeat and ride an anti-Western posse against the world’s “one center of authority, one center of force, and one center of decision-making.” But that moment, too, will pass. Just give it time, one more time. As Russia’s economy runs out of gas, so to speak, it also finds itself short of energy — meaning, people and even security space. Over time, an under-developed, depopulated, and encircled Russia will have no credible alternative to closer cooperation with the West. Too much history and too little geography separate Moscow from a dangerously ascending China, the reported alternate choice.

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Early on, Yeltsin whimpered that absent any winner, the Cold War had produced no loser either. “We’re not talking about a relationship between superiors and inferiors but between equals,” he wanted his “friend” U.S. President Bill Clinton to know. After all, many now claimed Russians themselves had liberated their country from communism and rid the world from the Soviet Union. Echoes of Tall–eyrand at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 who objected to having a defeated France treated as a co-equal? “If there are still allied powers,” he told his victorious interlocutors, “then, I do not belong here.” The legendary French diplomat was one of a kind. But in October 1991, on the eve of its final collapse the Soviet Union was also invited by the triumphant state to co-chair the Madrid Conference that then-Secretary of State James Baker viewed as “the end game for peace” in the Middle East. In the fall of 2008, the violence and intensity of the war in Georgia were, according to former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, “eye openers” and demanded “a different set of lenses.” “Russia’s behavior,” he declared at the time, “has called into question the entire premise of our dialogue and has profound implications for our security relationship going forward — both bilaterally and with NATO.” On the whole, though, Gates ignored his own warnings, as did the United States’ European partners and the second U.S. president Gates served as secretary of defense. On the contrary, like his two immediate predecessors, a newly elected Barack Obama, too, set to reset relations with Russia, as if to make amends for his two predecessors. The attempt seemed effective at first, including a New Start Treaty with Dmitry Medvedev. Yet soon after his return to the presidency, Putin reasserted his will to readjudicate the verdict of history, which had ruled in favor of those who “not simply robbed” but altogether “plundered” his country. Never mind the lack of evidence; where Gorbachev evoked Europe as a “common home,” four Russians out of five now have a negative view of the United States and 71 percent feel the same of the European Union, with barely 40 percent expecting some improvement in future relations.

A Crisis of, by, and about Russia

The new confrontation between the West and Russia is no more about Ukraine than the war in Georgia in 2008 was just about Georgia. Neither country is a core U.S. interest, nor are they likely to gain NATO or EU membership any time soon. In the end, Ukraine, like Georgia earlier, is a crisis of, by, and about Russia, and what makes that crisis “our” problem is a Russian behavior that threatens the European institutional and territorial order built over the past 60 years. However at fault the West is for not doing

2 Duff Cooper, Talleyrand (New York: Harp & Brothers, 1932), 229.
enough in either of these countries after the Cold War, recent events have not been the West’s fault. Paradoxically, Putin’s emphatic warning to Georgia and Ukraine to stay out of NATO resonates as a warning to all to be sure to join as early as they can.

From the start, Putin was not discreet about his intentions, how he viewed Russia, and what he thought of the West. In his first major speech after returning to the office he had momentarily relinquished, Putin urged Russians “not to lose themselves as a nation” and reject the “standards imposed … from outside” at the expense of “our traditions.” In a dubious rendition of Ronald Reagan 30 years earlier, in Munich in February 2007, the Russian president unveiled his version of the “evil empire” as a U.S.-led, post-Christian Western world charged with exporting godlessness, permissiveness, and moral depravity. Dismissive of Gorbachev’s earlier interest in a common home in Europe, Putin conceived one of his own: no longer Russia in Europe or even Europe with Russia, but Europe to Russia and even, at least for the post-Soviet space, Europe in Russia.

Why Nikita Khrushchev chose to return Crimea to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1954 is more puzzling than Putin’s decision to take it back 60 years later. This is hardly the work of “a first class strategist,” as argued by John Mearsheimer. Putin would rather be a proletarian intellectual who goes to the geopolitical barricades to fight for what he believes more than for what he knows: the “Great Russian hegemony” dedicated to “a great renewal … for the whole world” that, wrote Fyodor Dostoyevsky, was endangered by a Western civilization whose invasion “begins with luxury, fashions, scholarship, and art — and inevitably ends in sodomy and universal corruption.” That same conviction makes of Putin a “gambler” prepared to bet heavily on the self-determination of “the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.” When an unexpected opportunity came up in February 2014, after the Ukrainian president was forced to leave Kyiv, Putin took the bet. In four weeks, and without exceeding the forces Russia was allowed to station in Crimea, it was over.

Even he, Putin has claimed, was “surprised” at how easy it was. In a blink of an eye, he had shattered the post-Cold War European order.

Nor is the renewed clash between Russia and the West about some irresistible analogy. Making of Putin “a partially comical imitation of Mussolini and a more menacing reminder of Hitler” is no more constructive than comparing Nazi Germany and post-Soviet Russia. The sole commonality between Crimea in 2014 and the Sudetenland in 1938 is the unwillingness of the Western democracies to wage war, against Russia now and against Germany then. That they should have done so in 1938 is not enough to make the case for war now. History does not grant time-outs for the review of bad calls. Conditions with Ukraine are not comparable to Munich before the war or at Yalta in early 1945 when the war was settled, or even during the 1948 Berlin Crisis that provided a first test of containment. In any of these or other circumstances, Putin is no more a menacing reminder of Hitler or, for that matter, Stalin than Obama or Angela Merkel is a reincarnation of Neville Chamberlain.

“There will be costs for any military intervention,” warned the U.S. president in February 2014, immediately before Russia annexed Crimea. But pray tell, what was there for Putin to fear after he had witnessed, one year earlier, Obama’s reluctance to enforce his own “red lines” in Syria with the “unbelievably small” strike threatened by his secretary of state? The military balance in Europe has never been as favorable to Moscow since, arguably, the 1950s. After the military option has been taken off the table, what is left, then, is a bit of self-serving pontification — about being on the wrong side of history, dixit Obama — which is

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8 Michael Birnbaum, “Putin says ease of action in Crimea was surprise,” The Washington Post, March 16, 2015.


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hardly enough to deter an adversary whose sense of history goes the opposite way.

**Patient Containment**

“Not to rush to judgment,” advised US diplomat and the architect of “containment” George Kennan after the breakup of the Soviet Union.\(^\text{10}\) Patience, patience — is that again what we need, but for how long and how far? Kennan did not say then. Is there a need to know now? The immediate nature of a crisis is how it begins, but the lasting measure of policy is how it ends. In Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Putin started something, but what? Clearly, the costs of his action have been mounting. Does the Russian president know where he is going, and will he know when to take the proverbial ramp off the crisis he started?

After World War II, the strategy of containment was adopted as a third way between appeasement and brinksmanship, the two strategic options pursued by the Western democracies during the interwar years — the former to avoid war until war grew irresistibly out of the latter. Fears that containment would not roll-back Soviet advances were proven wrong, and there is no evidence that a different strategy would have achieved roll-back faster. What is evident now, however, is that after some initial geopolitical confusion, the Soviets were stopped as the architects of containment and calibrated their responses to repeated instances of Soviet brutality in their half of Europe. Thus, patience paid off, as had been anticipated. While the Soviet Union ran out of time and gave way to Russia, the United States gave the states of Europe the time to become a European Union able to accommodate the states that had been left behind after World War II.

**Do Not Let Russia be Russia**

How best to assist Ukraine begins with the sorry recognition that little can be done now to keep it entirely whole and free. Twenty-five years of Western neglect and bad governance, combined with centuries of Ukrainian territorial and cultural intimacy with Russia, stand in the way. The echoes of past calls for the early “liberation” of Eastern Europe still resonate. At Yalta, Churchill was blunt: “If you want to conquer Russia, we’ll let you do it,” he told the Polish government in exile. The facts of power continued to prevail over justice in 1945 as Roosevelt sought to parlay his concessions for “a little something somewhere else.”\(^\text{11}\) That was just the beginning, however. “What are you proposing to do?” John Foster Dulles was asked as the Soviet tanks were moving in Hungary a bit more than a decade later. “The day of liberation may be postponed,” answered Eisenhower, who feared the “suicidal” consequences of “brinksmanship.” Over Berlin in the summer of 1961, Kennedy was even cruder: “better a wall than a war,” he reportedly said.\(^\text{12}\) Repeatedly, then and later in Czechoslovakia and Poland, the choice remained the same. Face the fact unless there is a shared will to face a war. As of this moment, Russia’s annexation of Crimea will not be reversed any time soon, if ever, separatist enclaves in Eastern Ukraine are set to stay, and preventing further amputation is the best that can be expected.

Better de facto partition than confrontation? History still shapes Ukraine’s destiny — two peoples in one country without a constitutional formula for unity. But geography, which exposes the country to seven neighbors, also gives Ukraine pivotal importance for Russia and the West. Attempts by either to build Ukraine up as its strategic outpost against the other will not go unanswered and would deepen an increasingly dangerous geopolitical fracture in the heart of Europe. Warnings of ever-more severe or forceful Western actions (including economic sanctions on Moscow and arms deliveries to Kyiv) and fears of ever-worse Russian military threats (to and beyond Eastern Ukraine) have reached a critical point, the former unable to deter the latter and the latter unable to mute the former. Should a second Cold War erupt, in whatever form, future historians will find Russia and the United States both guilty, one for aggression and the other in absentia.

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10 Quoted in Talbott, op. cit., 401.


historians will likely find Russia and the United States both guilty, one for aggression and the other in absentia — not to forget the EU as a passive bystander. But before it all gets out of hand, better for all parties to negotiate “little some-things” that would account for Russia’s economic vulnerability and the West’s military passivity. The goal is not to abandon Ukraine to itself but to save it from itself: national suicide is not a form of defense, nor a model of deterrence, however heroic it sounds.

National suicide is not a form of defense, nor a model of deterrence, however heroic it sounds.

Russia is back, admittedly, but consider its condition. However influential it claims to be, this is a demandeur state whose power suffers from a lack of capabilities, including people; dwindling market power, including oil; and shrinking security space, with an expanding NATO in the west, an ever stronger and more intrusive China in the east, and an increasingly unsettled and even threatening Islam in the south. These are geographic and economic realities that Gorbachev already understood at a time when trade, mostly with Eastern Europe, amounted to less than 4 percent of the total Soviet economy, while the Chinese economy was only about to start its double-digit, decade-long surge. Now, Russian trade represents 30 percent of GDP, with more than half of its exports going to the West, mostly to Europe and mainly oil and gas sales that remain the major share of Moscow’s revenues at market prices that are entirely outside its control. Add to this Russia’s need for Western capital for the purchase of technologies and you have it: who needs whom? This means that even as the West lacks the military will to deter Putin in the short term, it has the economic power to alter Russia’s behavior before long. In the meantime, Russia is not a European country like any other. It is too big, too close, and too nuclear to be provoked; but it is also too demanding, too resentful, and too threatening to be indulged.

Let the United States be the United States

When asked what he thought of Western civilization, Mahatma Gandhi reportedly answered that “it would be a good idea.” At 65 years of age, the Western alliance, too, still looks like a good idea whose time is not gone. The obstacle to keeping the idea in practice is not, mind you, a matter of European capabilities or U.S. commitment. Rather, the obstacle is a diminished confidence that available capabilities will be committed effectively; absent such confidence, the will to act is lacking. For the European allies who got used to relying on the United States for waging, winning, and ending their wars during the past century, the recent display of inefficacy in Iraq and Afghanistan is troubling. There is no one else to pick the baton of leadership. But for Americans who have repeatedly urged Europe to do more, the institutional stall since the 2008 financial crisis is exasperating. There is no one better to accept a share of that leadership. More faith in the West and its two main institutions would make the fears of Russia and its intentions less acute.

These concerns have surfaced before, but now their resonance is heightened not only by Russia’s resurgence in the east but also by Germany’s influence in the EU and the United States’ announced drift to Asia and the other new influential powers. More than two decades after the Cold War, rarely has Russia prevailed militarily more than it does now. Rarely, too, has the balance of economic influence been as favorable to Germany; and rarely has the United States sounded less European. In other words, the Western alliance is once again troubled by a Russian problem that the United States can no longer ignore, a German problem that the EU can no longer hide, and a U.S. problem that NATO can no longer dilute.

For the United States, this is a surprisingly disappointing end to a century of total wars that were fought in Europe mostly to keep Germany down and Russia away while settling the United States in.

Back to the basics, then: patience, patience — what else? This is how the Cold War was won and half of Europe redone. This is the way the remaining half of Europe will rejoin the continent to make it whole after it has been kept free. The 1955 neutralization of Austria, concluded at a time when Moscow could have imposed partition, is an adaptable precedent. For 40 years after that, Austria was
left out of the Western institutions but the West was not kept far away from Austria. During that timeout, Austria became a non-member member of the European Community, thereby easing its transition to full EU membership in 1995.

Meanwhile, a calibrated response to Russia’s action in Ukraine includes a measure of acquiescence for what cannot be reversed, more constructive engagement for what can be achieved, and the active denial of what cannot be accepted. Limited acquiescence to the changed conditions in the eastern provinces, including greater autonomy and local governance, is morally justified if it makes time to fix Western Ukraine while convincing Putin to take some time and stop there. That will take a lot of money for the former and a lot of convincing for the latter. But more than any other state since World War II, Russia has paid dearly for crossing a critical point beyond which expansion proved to be self-defeating.

Constructive engagement would do well. Case-per-case cooperation can help — in Iran, Syria, North Korea, and elsewhere — to facilitate and even enforce an agreement, to initiate and even smooth communication, or to stabilize a bad situation. Russia has capabilities and connections that are useful in the context of interests and goals that are compatible or even overlap with U.S. and Western interests and goals. Russia is too much of a land power to accept isolation as it were an island.

A balanced policy toward Russia has never been easy to adopt specifically, execute efficiently, and embrace publicly. Much in that balance is historically distasteful and politically unrewarding. In the West especially, it would now look like condoning repression at home and rewarding aggression abroad by sanctioning a territorial breakup inspired and enforced by Russian power. But you engage the interlocutors you have, Ukraine is already broken, and there is no one willing or able to put it back together at this time. In sum, the most effective way for the United States and Russia to deal with each other is to stop talking backward and start looking forward, with limited expectations over what can be achieved together and more awareness about what cannot be achieved against the other.

Stay the Course
“There are good crises and there are bad crises,” wrote Walter Lippmann in March 1933. “A bad crisis is one in which no one has the power to make good use of the opportunity [to break a deadlock] and [it] therefore ends in disaster. A good crisis is one in which the ... power and the will to seize the opportunity are in being. Out of such a crisis come solutions.” The Ukraine crisis has caused too much damage to be called "good," whatever the standards. Yet, used as a strategic scapegoat, Ukraine forces the West to confront a determined challenge to the European order built against the Soviet Union and enlarged in spite of Russia. Leading the charge, Putin showed good timing: Europe is broke and NATO astray. This gives Russia an opening to both Western institutions by engaging some member states that need its money or can use its influence: Cyprus and Greece, for instance, looking for a way out of austerity; or Hungary, leading a growing peloton of EU skeptics; or fringe political parties like the French Front National, envious of Putin’s leadership style. Never before have the states of Europe faced a more complete institutional crisis; even Pope Francis chastises them for lack of charity and vision.

Building an “ever closer union” in Europe was never expected to be any easier than sustaining a “more perfect union” in the United States. That is the odd thing about hard things: they are hard. But to make matters even harder, never since the end of the Cold War has NATO seemed to count less — absent in Iraq, ineffective in Afghanistan, powerless in the East, and ignored in the
South. As the EU or NATO goes, so does the other: having grown together, both institutions complement and need each other. Predictably, then, amidst talk of a U.S. pivot to Asia, the EU and its members still expect perpetually renewed strategic reassurances from the United States, the NATO senior member and a non-member member state of the EU. But in the meantime, the United States still endlessly awaits additional contributions from its NATO allies, 21 of which are also members of the EU, a non-member member of NATO since the Berlin-plus arrangements granted the EU access to NATO planning, NATO European command options, and the use of NATO assets and capabilities.

Forget about “fatigue” and keep a comparative perspective on costs. One central lesson of the 20th century is that the United States’ problems often grow out of Europe’s failures — to end the wars it started and manage the peace it imposed — while another lesson is that Europe’s problems often result from the United States’ absence — allowing peace to falter and war to resume. As the boundaries of permissible differences with Russia are tested anew, the most audacious strategy is to complete the vision that inspired the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 and the Rome Treaties in 1957. These kept the Soviet Union out, Germany down, and the United States in. As stated by President George HW Bush in Mainz, Germany on May 31, 1989, these enabled this generation of Europeans and Americans to be the “heirs to gifts greater than those bestowed to any generation in history: peace, freedom, and prosperity.”

Stay the course, then. Ukraine’s turn to be whole and free will come too. Nearly 100 years after the 1917 revolution, Russia is a part-time European country unlike any other, but it is an overachiever whose ambitions exceed its staying power. The West must keep it at a distance until it stands ready to move away from a history that lingers ominously.