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How to Avoid a New Cold War

SAMUEL CHARAP AND JEREMY SHAPIRO

This year, the tragedies and outrages of the Ukraine crisis have dominated headlines and thinking about Western relations with Russia. There can be little doubt that the United States and its European allies and partners need a response to the Russian annexation of Crimea, to the destabilization of eastern Ukraine, to the separatists' downing of a civilian airliner—and to the threat to global order that all of these actions represent.

But the need for a response does not imply that any response will do. The response thus far has seemed more focused on punishing Russia and its leaders for their moral transgressions than on addressing the problems in Western-Russian relations that led to this impasse. A serious response should be grounded in a broader strategy that reflects the stakes in this critical relationship for regional stability and global order, as well as an understanding of how things went so terribly wrong.

In attempting to understand what went wrong, the Western press and Western policy makers tend to focus on the person of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and on his baleful influence on Western-Russian relations. This type of "great man" theory of history has the dual advantage of both simplicity of explication and clarity of response. If one man destroyed the relationship, then ridding ourselves of him will go most of the way toward righting it. Indeed, the targeting of European Union and US sanctions against Putin's inner circle in recent months seemed designed to undermine his authority and set the stage for a palace coup.

However, focusing on the man at the top is a dangerous approach that has often (as with Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya, or Bashar al-Assad in Syria) led Western policy astray. In the case of Russia, Putin is clearly a charismatic and important leader who exercises a great deal of control over policy. But his current policies, much as Western counterparts might find them distasteful, are hardly marginal in Russia; his approval rating stood at 85 percent in July and opposition to him—both within his system and without—has been systematically neutralized. Moreover, the views he currently espouses are more a consequence than a cause of the problems in Russian-Western relations. Most importantly, if he were to disappear tomorrow, none of the fundamental problems would be resolved. Indeed, Putin's departure could well make those problems worse, since his successors might be yet more in tune with the nationalist and anti-Western strains so prominent in Russian political culture.

A broader strategy for addressing the problems in Russian-Western relations needs to move beyond Putin and revisit the arc of the relationship between Russia and the West in the post–Cold War period. The Ukraine crisis has sparked a debate about the enlargement of Euro-Atlantic institutions—NATO and the EU—after 1991 and the future of that process. On the one hand, there are those who blame the crisis on enlargement: It was Western encroachment, they claim, that precipitated Russia's moves, and thus they imply that the way forward is to provide Russia with guarantees that enlargement will cease. On the other hand, there are those who believe that enlargement cemented democratic gains in postcommunist Europe and protected vulnerable states from Russian aggression. They argue that the proper response to the crisis is to quickly grant membership in the Western institutions to Ukraine,

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Georgia, and any other Russian neighbors interested in joining.

Both groups are missing the fundamental issue: whether Russia ever can be a normal partner for the West. If one believes that the last 20 years demonstrate that Russia is innately hostile to the West and its values, and will never accept genuine partnership, then conflict becomes inevitable. Aggressive efforts to contain or confront Russia in light of the current crisis are therefore both necessary and without significant downside. By contrast, if instead one reads (as we do) the history of the post–Cold War period in a tragic light—as a series of miscalculations about the compatibility of continued institutional enlargement with a cooperative security relationship between Russia and the West—then there is a need to find a balance between sanctioning Russia for its recent transgressions of international norms and keeping the door open for better relations in the future.

THIS TIME IS DIFFERENT

This dispute echoes a key historical debate—namely, whether the Cold War began due to fundamental contradictions between the West and the Soviet Union or due to a series of misunderstandings and miscalculations on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Yet even those historians who point to the latter set of causal factors do not deny that the contradictions existed. Indeed, the Soviet Union was an expansionist, ideological power with global ambitions and deep hostility to

Western interests. Post-Soviet Russia is unpleasant, and has transgressed a number of key international norms in the past year, but it is not the Soviet Union.

In other words, despite the surface similarity between today's debate on Russia and the historical debate about the Cold War's origins, closer examination reveals the key difference: Fundamental incompatibilities cannot account for the current conflict. That 2014 would see outright confrontation between Russia and the West was an unexpected development for political leaders on both sides. As late as June 2013, Putin and US President Barack Obama issued a Joint Statement on Enhanced Bilateral Engagement, which said: "The United States of America and the Russian Federation reaffirm their readiness to intensify bilateral cooperation based on the principles of mutual respect, equality, and genuine respect for each other's interests. Guided by this approach, today we reached an understanding on a positive agenda for relations between our countries. . . . This wide-ranging program of action requires enhanced engagement at all levels." Nine months later, Obama would introduce unprecedented sanctions on Russia for its actions in Ukraine.

While the current conflict might not have been inevitable, in the months and years leading up to the February 2014 invasion of Crimea, the Euro-Atlantic institutional architecture had increasingly become a source of friction between Russia and the West. That is not to say institutional enlargement caused the Russian invasion, as University of Chicago political scientist John Mearsheimer, among others, would have it. However, it is only possible to understand the Russian decision-making process on Crimea and Ukraine by situating it in the broader context of the post–Cold War order in Europe and its flaws. Equally, to understand the Western decision-making process on Ukraine, one must take into account the hugely significant achievements of that order.

EASTERN PROMISES

The institutional enlargement path that the West embarked on in the mid-1990s has transformed much of postcommunist Europe for the better—an outcome that was far from inevitable in the early 1990s. But it is clear that this path had an inherent flaw from the start, primarily in how the West dealt with Russia and its neighbors. Ever since, the West has done its best to manage the

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HISTORY IN THE MAKING

100 years
1914 – 2014

"The dilemma which had opened the road to power for the Bolsheviks continued to beset the new regime when power had fallen into its hands. The feverish attempt to catch up the time-lag which separated the Russian economy from that of the West had proved fatal to the Russian autocracy. It had frustrated the ambitions of Russian liberals. The attempt had now to be made once more in the new conditions."

Edward Hallett Carr
"The Background of Revolution"
August 1953

consequences of that flaw. The Ukraine crisis put an end to the balancing act.

The story begins in the critical period of 1989–91, when the post–World War II settlement was rejected in favor of a new Europe. The wildly successful decision to make the newly reunited Germany a full member of NATO and the European Community created a precedent for the rest of postcommunist Europe: enlargement, with slight modification, of the existing Euro-Atlantic institutions in order to facilitate the region's ongoing democratic and economic transformations.

The inherent flaw in this expansion was that NATO and the EU could never fully integrate Russia. Moreover, Russia would never accept integration on nonnegotiable Western terms. The alternative—a wholesale revision of the institutional order so that Russia could be comfortably accommodated within it—would have been a huge risk. Moreover, Russia was so weakened by its own postcommunist transformation that it could not block the enlargement process, and (until recently) it demonstrated no will to do so. In any case, after German reunification, Western decision makers were confident that the expansion of the status quo would pay quick dividends.

And it certainly did. Although there has been significant backsliding in recent years in Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, on the whole EU and NATO enlargement contributed to developing the secure and pluralistic market democracies we now see throughout Central and Eastern Europe. This was no foregone conclusion in the 1990s; indeed, as the Arab Spring demonstrates, such sudden transitions are usually much more fraught and frequently fail to produce consolidated, prosperous democracies. The stabilization of Central and Eastern Europe was a significant achievement of which Western statesmen are justifiably proud.

To achieve this geopolitical miracle, Western leaders naturally used the tools available: NATO and the EU. Although not designed for stabilization, these institutions turned out to be a good fit for that purpose. Postcommunist aspirants believed that membership would provide them with the levels of security and prosperity that the West enjoyed. Western policy makers in turn used the institutions to guarantee a root-and-branch reform of these countries' security sectors and domestic political economies.

Since the Central and Eastern Europeans greatly desired to join well-established organizations, there was no real negotiation over the terms of membership. NATO and EU officials were given free rein to roam the halls of former Warsaw Pact countries' ministries to impose Brussels's rules and recreate new structures in its likeness. Aspiring members had to adopt the existing rules in order to join the club.

THREAT PERCEPTION

The use of these organizations for the stabilization of Eastern Europe did come at a cost, for which the reckoning is now coming due. Even if Russia had become a market democracy and sought membership (which, of course, it did not), NATO and the EU would not have been able to absorb such a large country with the multiplicity of economic, social, and security problems that would have come with it—unless the institutions were to change dramatically to accommodate that challenge. But the basic premise of NATO and EU enlargement was that the rules were not negotiable. Further, the use of the institutions for a stabilization program for all of postcommunist Europe except Russia created the impression that they were continuing their original purpose of containing Soviet/Russian influence through new, more modern means.

The key question for European security remains what to do about the relationship with Russia.

Because Russia could not be integrated like other postcommunist states, both sides pursued a policy of what might be called "partnership without membership." This policy did create a dense fabric of interaction between Russia and the West. It came in forms such as the NATO-Russia Council and the EU-Russia "strategic partnership," involving everything from twice-yearly summits at the presidential level to highly technical regulatory convergence efforts. There was also a wide variety of pan-European structures created in part to serve as a bridge to Russia: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty; the Vienna Document (a confidence- and security-building regime); and the Open Skies Treaty, which provides for military transparency through observation flights. While these arrangements never fully satisfied either side,

they formed, until the Ukraine crisis, a cornerstone of the European institutional order by providing multiple forums for increased dialogue, interaction, and cooperation with NATO's only potential adversary in Europe.

The goal of the partnership without membership model was easy to understand, though difficult to achieve. As its relationships with the Western institutions broadened and deepened, Russia would gradually develop into a globally integrated market democracy, and, crucially, it would no longer view the enlargement of these institutions as a threat. By increasing the quality and quantity of interaction with Russia, the West hoped Moscow would come to see the membership of its neighbors in Euro-Atlantic institutions as beneficial to Russia.

The risk inherent to the model was that it offered no contingency plan if things did not turn out the way its designers hoped. Initially, it seemed as though there was no need to plan for the worst during the period of increased cooperation and high hopes in the early years of the Putin presidency, and particularly following 9/11. The Putin of that period used rhetoric that might shock us if he were to use it today. Speaking to the BBC in March 2000, he said, "Russia is a part of European culture. I simply cannot see my country isolated from Europe, from what we often describe as the civilized world. That is why it is hard for me to regard NATO as an enemy. . . . We believe that it is possible to speak even about higher levels of integration with NATO. But only, I repeat, if Russia is an equal partner." Asked if Russia could join NATO, Putin responded, "Why not?"

Soon after that period, the relationship started to unravel. Russia's increasingly autocratic governance was a factor in this process, but far more important was the widening chasm in perceptions of regional integration. Even when the West and Russia were successfully cooperating on shared threats and challenges, from Afghanistan to nonproliferation to counterterrorism, Moscow still viewed Euro-Atlantic integration for Russia's neighbors as inherently threatening to its interests.

To Russia, this threat perception seemed uncontroversial—its neighbors were gradually being incorporated into political-economic and security blocs that Russia itself could not join. Regardless of the intentions of these countries or the blocs, such a move was bound to be threatening to the excluded state. But to the West, Moscow was denying its neighbors the right to make their own choices on foreign and security policy, which was disturbingly reminiscent of the Soviet Union's attitude toward the Warsaw Pact countries. This remains the fundamental chasm dividing the two sides: a regional integration project that, while not intended as an anti-Russian effort by its authors or the states that aspire to membership, Russia cannot (and does not desire to) join.

An action-reaction spiral set in, whereby EU/NATO moves to the East and Russian countermoves would serve only to escalate the confrontation. In April 2008, NATO's Bucharest summit declaration proclaimed that Ukraine and Georgia "will become" members of the alliance. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia and recognized its two breakaway regions as independent states.

Later that year, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership, an enhanced economic and political offering to Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—but not Russia. Meanwhile, Russia championed its own regional security and economic integration projects, which took the form of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Sanctions must be accompanied by an offer to negotiate new institutional arrangements.

NIGHTMARE SCENARIO

The Ukraine crisis began in the context of this contest for influence in what Europe and Russia used to call their "common neighborhood." In late November 2013, the Ukrainian government called off preparations to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, the key "deliverable" of the Eastern Partnership. Negotiations on these accords had closely conformed to the past practice of institutional enlargement, even if no immediate prospect of membership was offered in this case. Aspirant countries were expected to adopt EU norms and regulations wholesale in return for trade liberalization, visa facilitation, and closer political association. Instead, under pressure from Putin, President Viktor Yanukovych reversed his plan to sign the agreement, days before he was scheduled to do so at a major EU summit.

In the following days, several thousand Ukrainians came out to protest Yanukovych's
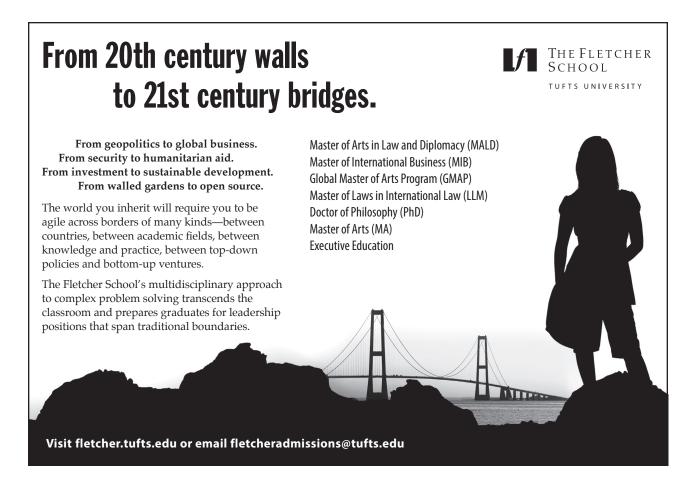
about-face on Kiev's central Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square. These peaceful, unarmed protests would likely have petered out had they been allowed to run their course. On the night of November 30, however, someone in the government—as yet unidentified—made the decision to use force against unarmed student protesters. The next day, upwards of 500,000 people rallied where there had been only 10,000 before. Despite the EU flags on the Maidan in November, the protests were now about overthrowing Yanukovych's corrupt authoritarian regime. Beginning with that first use of force, the government and the radical avant-garde of the protesters (mostly armed far-right nationalist groups) engaged in an escalatory spiral of violence.

On February 21, Yanukovych and opposition leaders signed an agreement, brokered by EU foreign ministers and Russia, intended to end the crisis. It called for returning to the 2004 constitution with limits on presidential powers, holding early elections, and ending the occupations of streets and buildings. However, the agreement collapsed immediately as Yanukovych fled the capital (and eventually left the country) while his government disintegrated. In these extraordinary circumstanc-

es, the parliament took extraconstitutional action and voted on February 22 to remove him from office and install a new government.

While the West celebrated a democratic breakthrough, the Kremlin saw these events as the latest in a series of regime change efforts meant to undermine its influence. These fears were reinforced by the composition of the new Ukrainian cabinet. A third of its top officials (ministers and above) came from the far-right and virulently anti-Russian Svoboda party, and 60 percent hailed from the four former Hapsburg provinces in the west of the country, the historical hotbed of Ukrainian nationalism. Putin and his inner circle seem to have concluded that the collapse of the February 21 agreement resulted at least in part from a Western plot to install a loyal government in Kiev—one that included far-right leaders who threatened to revoke Russia's basing agreement in Crimea, quickly move Ukraine toward EU and NATO membership, and cut the bilateral links on which Russia's energy and military-industrial sectors depend.

In the final days of February, when Putin decided to insert special forces, paratroopers, and other servicemen into Crimea, he sought to pre-

vent a strategic setback in Kiev from becoming a strategic catastrophe: Russia's nightmare scenario of being completely pushed out of Ukraine by the West and its institutions. His decision was intended to secure the most important Russian physical assets in Ukraine, namely the Black Sea Fleet base at Sevastopol, and to coerce the new Ukrainian authorities into accommodating Moscow's broader interests in the country. That action and the subsequent efforts to destabilize eastern Ukraine were driven by a perceived need to guarantee that the nightmare scenario will not come to pass. As Putin himself put it during an interview in late May:

> I will reiterate: where are the guarantees that the coup d'état, this second color revolution that happened in Ukraine, won't be followed by NATO's arrival in Ukraine? Nobody has ever discussed this issue with us in the past two decades. I'd like to emphasize that nobody has conducted a meaningful dialogue with us on this. All we heard was the same reply, like a broken record: Every nation has the right to determine the security system it wants to live in and this has nothing to do with you.

While Russia's gambit in Ukraine has yet to play itself out as of this writing, its actions there have already relegated the partnership without membership paradigm in Western-Russian relations to the dustbin of history. A whole host of institutional arrangements involving Russia has been effectively gutted. Even if the conflict in Ukraine itself can be quickly ended, the confrontation between Russia and the West will remain. This presents serious risks for the stability of Europe.

RAISING THE RISKS

The Ukrainian tragedy notwithstanding, the key question for European security remains what to do about the relationship with Russia. While it might be tempting to simply put aside the disputes of the past in the name of moving forward, these disputes are very much at the core of what divides Russia and the West today. They need to be addressed if we hope to avoid long-term confrontation.

In response to Russian actions in Ukraine, the emerging Western strategy is threefold: to assist and deepen integration with the new Ukrainian government and Russia's other vulnerable neigh-

bors; to sanction and isolate Russia; and to reassure Central and Eastern European NATO members. Effectively, the West has doubled down on the institutional enlargement policy, reinforcing previous gains and expanding the institutions' reach farther East—Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have now all signed Association Agreements with the EU. It is clear that Russia will see these efforts not as a response to its actions in Ukraine but as an opportunistic continuation of the same post–Cold War policy that it has long decried as a threat to its security interests. This strategy has the benefit of being responsive to the politics of the moment and morally justified. However, it seems destined to deepen the confrontation. A newly assertive Russia is likely to continue to push back against enlargement, and the cycle of action and reaction will continue.

Under these circumstances, providing new NATO security guarantees or EU membership to ever more vulnerable states on Russia's borders raises the risks of a direct conflict with Moscow. And it is nearly impossible for the West to make good on security guarantees for these countries. Russia has made clear that it views keeping Euro-Atlantic institutions out of its neighborhood as a vital interest, while Europe and the United States do not view the security of Russia's neighbors as fundamental to their interests.

Post-Soviet Russia is unpleasant but it is not the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War, many questioned whether the United States would sacrifice New York to defend Berlin. Today, few if any believe that it would do so for Kiev. In the event of a showdown, Washington would face a choice between transgressing heretofore sacrosanct security guarantees or risking war with a major nuclear power. Are the principles at stake—the right of every country to make its own foreign policy choices and freely choose its own alliances—really worth either of these outcomes? This question has been asked regarding previous rounds of enlargement; the difference today is that Russia has proved its willingness to act and thus demonstrated that this is no longer a rhetorical question.

Avoiding that unpalatable choice will require recognizing that the post–Cold War policy of institutional enlargement, despite its successes, has run its course. The West's continuing insistence that the only path to stability and security in Europe is for Russia's neighbors to be absorbed

into Euro-Atlantic institutions is now begetting threats to stability and security in Europe.

A NEW DEAL

Acknowledging that fact does not mean that the West must accept Russian domination of its sovereign neighbors. Instead, new arrangements are needed that are acceptable to both the West and Russia. Achieving such a deal is possible, but it will require both sides to compromise. The West would have to accept that the model that worked so well in Central and Eastern Europe will not work for the rest of the continent; institutional arrangements will have to be acceptable to Russia in order for them to succeed. Russia would have to strictly adhere to the limits such new arrangements would impose on its influence in the region, and forswear military intervention in the affairs of its neighbors.

Achieving such a bargain in the current atmosphere of mutual mistrust and recrimination will be extremely difficult. But it is not impossible. The first step is for the West to adopt a compromise along these lines as its long-term goal. The policy response to the current crisis should then be structured around achieving that goal. This does not mean that the West should simply accommodate Russian demands—the proposed bargain requires Russia to make difficult compromises too. Negotiations will likely have to be combined with elements of coercion in order to succeed. Such a strategy would offer Russia a path toward security in its neighborhood without confrontation with the West, but it would also entail isolation and confrontation if Russia refuses to agree to the new bargain.

In practical terms, sanctions must be accompanied by an offer to negotiate new institutional arrangements. Such an offer would not be unprecedented. In 2009, then–Russian President Dmitri Medvedev put forth a very similar proposal in the form of a draft European Security Treaty. The document was certainly flawed, but it was grounded in widely accepted principles such as respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence, as well as the renunciation of the use of force.

The dismissive Western response to the proposal stemmed from concern that it was intended to undermine NATO and the EU. Even the relatively Russia-friendly German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier felt the need to emphasize that any discussion of European security could not challenge existing institutions. He declared, "[T]o avoid any possible ambiguity: The EU, NATO and the OSCE remain the cornerstones of European security. . . . What has taken us decades to build is not up for discussion." But it was specifically those cornerstones that Russia wanted to discuss. This time both sides will need to demonstrate a willingness to enter into negotiations without such taboos or other preconditions.

This is a policy of necessity, and so it is difficult for any Western leader to embrace publicly. It is abhorrent to many even to contemplate compromising the principles of enlargement that contributed to the successful transitions in Central and Eastern Europe. But the alternative is a confrontation with Russia that the West does not want, in order to uphold principles that it will ultimately be unwilling to defend. ■

From *Current History*'s archives…

"The United States and its European allies became significantly more secure when Kremlin leaders abandoned their dreams of building an alternative to the West and instead sought to integrate into the West. A democratic Russia anchored in the Western community of states would serve the long-term security and welfare interests of citizens in both Russia and the West. Conversely, a Russia disengaged, especially a future Russia ruled by autocrats, would become a new threat to the West."

Michael McFaul "Russia and the West: A Dangerous Drift," October 2005

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