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America's Russian Problem

By Melvin Goodman
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Russian-American relations over the past several years have taken on some of the most familiar aspects of the Cold War. The conventional wisdom is extremely one-side, concluding that Russian President Vladimir Putin is entirely responsible for the setback as a result of his actions in Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine and Syria, and that the Russian leadership is not trustworthy on any diplomatic or political level. This is a simplistic view.

Before there can be any progress in resolving the considerable differences between Moscow and Washington, it is paramount that the U.S. contribution to the imbroglio is recognized. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union twenty-five years ago, a brace of American presidents (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama) have taken advantage of Russia's considerable geopolitical weakness. Clinton was the first to do so with the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which marked a betrayal of U.S. commitments not to do so.

In conversations with Mikhail Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze, President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker emphasized that, if the Soviets pulled nearly 400,000 military forces out of East Germany, the United States would not "leapfrog" over East Germany to assert itself in Eastern Europe. The expansion of NATO was not only strategically flawed, but from the Kremlin's point of view it was a repudiation of those verbal guarantees.

Clinton expanded NATO by admitting former members of the Warsaw Pact, but George W. Bush went further by bringing in former Soviet republics, the three Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The Bush administration was even flirting with membership for Georgia and Ukraine, until German Chancellor Angela Merkel convinced President Bush that such a move would violate a “red line” that Putin had clearly established. Washington’s manipulation of Georgia had a great deal to do with the short war fought between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2008.

Bush’s abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which served as the cornerstone of strategic deterrence and the arms control relationship between Russia and the United States, was another example of the United States taking unnecessary advantage of Moscow’s geostrategic weakness. The ABM Treaty was abrogated in order to clear the way for a nationwide missile defense in California and Alaska as well as the deployment of a regional missile defense in Eastern Europe, which the Obama administration unwisely strengthened. The fact that the Bush and Obama administrations explained that the regional missile defense was needed against a possible attack from Iran made no sense, particularly in the wake of the Iranian nuclear accord that Russia fully supported.

Putin’s claims of U.S. interference in the parliamentary elections in Russia in 2011 as well as in the political upheaval in Ukraine in 2013-2014 are too easily dismissed in the United States, particularly in the mainstream media. Putin supported NATO’s actions in Libya in 2011 because he had “guarantees” that military intervention was needed to prevent a humanitarian nightmare and was not intended to promote regime change. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s self-aggrandizing claim that “we came, we saw, and he died” in referring to Moammar Qaddafi put the lie to U.S. importuning.

The Obama administration promised a “reset” in relations with Russia but there was no effort to institutionalize bilateral relations and, in a visit to Poland in 2011, President Obama announced the first steps in basing U.S. fighter aircraft in Poland, one more “leapfrog” measure. Obama also unnecessarily personalized the confrontation with Putin, and allowed Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter to stop high-level discussions between the Department of Defense and the Russian Defense Ministry.

President-elect Donald Trump now has an opportunity to move Russian-American relations off of dead center. He cannot ignore areas of controversy, including the unconscionable cyber intrusions in U.S. political websites as well as Russian aggression in Ukraine and Syria. At the same time, there are many issues of mutual interest that require diplomatic and political coordination, including strategic disarmament, nuclear proliferation, and international terrorism. Russian-American cooperation on the Iran nuclear agreement could be replicated elsewhere. Any cooperative arrangement dealing with the North Korea nuclear program would be facilitated by having Washington and Moscow on the same page.

There are already indications that Putin is willing to work with the United States on issues dealing with the Middle East, including Syria, as well as in Central Europe, where Russian and American military moves have created tensions in the European theatre. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesmen have even referred to the need for a “reset” with NATO, particularly the

need for normal relations. Any “reset” would require a sophisticated diplomatic intervention, and we will soon learn if a new and inexperienced national security team in Washington is up to the task.