

Why 'Contain' Russia?

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Russian behavior throughout the Ukrainian crisis has fueled talk about Russian neoimperialism. The specter of Moscow-inspired separatism in eastern Ukraine reflects the worst fears of analysts on both sides of the Atlantic and brings back talk of a new Cold War. In short order, no matter what happens in Ukraine, we are likely to hear calls for a policy toward Russia drawn from the Cold War: neo-containment.

That's the wrong prescription. Consider the evidence of Russian neoimperialism. Heavy meddling in Ukrainian domestic politics is but the latest manifestation of a trend that began long before the crisis in Kiev. Neoimperialist rhetoric reached a high point in the Russian parliamentary campaign of 2003, during which even prominent liberals embraced the idea of imperial restoration.

There is no doubt that the rhetoric is there, as is crude Russian interference in Ukrainian politics. There is also the meddling in Moldova, which was presented by a Kremlin messenger with a plan to restructure itself so as to accommodate Russian preferences and the ambitions of Transnistrian separatists. Georgians' attempts to restore their country's territorial integrity, close down Russian bases, and put an end to breakaway Russian-sponsored regimes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were met in Moscow with the kind of contempt usually reserved for outright aggressors.

But what has all this rhetoric really produced? Here the picture gets a good deal more ambiguous. In Ukraine, Russian interference on behalf of Viktor Yanukovich appears to have produced the opposite result. Allegations of Russian complicity in Viktor Yushchenko's poisoning can only undercut, not strengthen, Russian influence in Ukraine. In Moldova, the Kremlin plan was met with a polite but firm "nyet." In Georgia a little over a year ago, the "rose revolution" swept into office a team of independent-minded pro-Western politicians after Moscow intervened on behalf of then-President Eduard Shevardnadze.

And in Georgia's breakaway province of Abkhazia, widely viewed as a Russian protectorate, Moscow recently had to threaten economic sanctions against its own client regime to prevent the candidate it did not endorse from winning the presidency of the quasi-state.

It appears that despite all the talk about Russia's neoimperialism, its record of accomplishment is a good deal more limited than its ambitious rhetoric.

Russian behavior in this instance reflects first and foremost a very glum picture of a country still struggling to come to terms with its difficult Soviet legacy. Sick, aging and shrinking, Russia is ill-equipped to meet the manpower challenges of rebuilding its old empire and sustaining economic growth at home. Despite growing defense spending, the Russian military, unrivaled in the space of the former Soviet Union, has limited capabilities for power projection and has been unable to restore peace in Chechnya. Russia still has a formidable nuclear arsenal, yet in the course of recent U.S. presidential debates about national security, it was deemed highly important to secure Russian weapons of mass destruction from terrorists.

Domestically, the "managed democracy" has brought about neither stability nor security for the Kremlin, which is confronting an ever-growing list of challenges, from terrorism to insubordination of regional elites. A prominent Russian public relations consultant confessed in a newspaper interview that his Kremlin paymasters fear a repetition of Ukraine's "orange revolution" in Moscow.

All of which brings this question to the fore: How does one contain a regime that is already dangerously weak at home and abroad and the alternative to which could be an even worse regime? Are we really prepared to pull the plug on cooperative threat reduction, on the NATO-Russia Council, on the Proliferation Security Initiative, on the six-party talks on North Korea, on NATO's Partnership for Peace, etc.?

Are we ready for the alternative: a series of robust military assistance programs to some of NATO's newest members and aspirants, a battle of ideas with Russia, a deliberate policy of isolating it in the international arena and actively discrediting its regime at home?

Although weak, Russia still has the capacity to do considerable mischief if its leadership concludes it has been driven into a corner. Western pressure would continue to weaken Russia, raising anew the issue of the safety and security of its weapons of mass destruction and related materials. Western pressure could also lead to a chauvinistic backlash in Russia.

Our policy, which essentially has remained the same since 1991 -- keeping the door open to a broad strategic cooperative effort with Russia and expanding a web of relationships with its neighbors, while not reacting to every Russian outburst -- is working. Anyone doubting that ought to look at two rounds of NATO enlargement, something that pessimists claimed Russia would never allow; at U.S. security cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus region and Central Asia; and at the rise of democracy in Ukraine.

Whether it likes it or not, Russia is doing a fair job of self-containing. We can't stop its leaders from backing themselves into a corner. But we don't need to follow in their footsteps. Before we commit our energies to the task of containing Russia, let us ask ourselves whether the capital -- political, economic and military -- can be better used elsewhere on more urgent problems.

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