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RUSSIA THREAT - The Strategic Argument for Re-Assessing America's Russia Policy ©

In this provocative thought piece, Major General Donald McGregor suggests it may not be too late to re-assess U.S.-Russia policy to avoid conflict in Eastern Europe and strengthen America's global position against the far greater threat from CCP China. What he proposes is not a Hillary Clinton 'Reset,' but a sober, strategic approach based on shared U.S-Russian concerns over China, and mutual understanding of each other strategic interests in Eastern Europe. This could lessen the potential for war and increase America's national security. Is now the time for a Nixon 'opening to China' moment with Russia?
Paul Crespo, President.

Can Conflict in Eastern Europe be Avoided? What about a Russia-China Alliance?

by **Don McGregor**, Senior Advisor, CADS
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With the escalating military exercises and rhetoric between NATO and Russia in and around Ukraine and other Eastern European states, is the region on the brink of war? Russia's aggressiveness over the past fifteen years and most recently its military buildup along east Ukraine is undoubtedly troubling and may set the stage for eventual conflict. But is a prediction of war premature? The answer may be – yes, and no.

While the usual suspects such as geopolitical maneuvering, resources, and bad blood play into interstate clashes – are all in abundant supply in Eastern Europe, we should consider the issue holistically and look at the root causes behind some of the friction. We should also understand that beyond avoiding war in Europe, it is also strongly in the U.S. national interest to keep Russia neutral in the broader Western conflict with CCP-led China.

BACKGROUND

After the fall of communism, former Soviet satellite nations such as Estonia, Latvia, and Bulgaria embraced democratic principles and ideologically moved west. Released from the Soviet Union's iron communist grip, they looked for western assistance and direction. Western powers, led by the U.S., initially developed several defense programs to work with the security apparatuses of each nation, recognizing these budding democracies were fragile and liable to corruption and exploitation – security was the first order of business for democratic adoption.

One fruitful U.S. program was the Department of Defense [State Partnership Program \(SPP\)](#), which evolved from a 1991 U.S. European Command decision to set up military exchanges in support of newly liberated former Soviet satellite countries. By aligning a state to a country like Latvia and Michigan or

Illinois and Poland, each country could witness, through exchanges, democratic principles of governance and civil-military relationships.

By 2004, seventeen former soviet satellite nations had SPP partners. By 2009, ten had joined NATO and the European Union, and shortly after, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia secured state partners California, North Carolina, and Georgia, entering them into the Western fold. Today, an additional four former communist states are NATO members, while Russian bordering states Moldova and Belarus joined NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council. The rapid pace of this western expansion and influence was impressive but very disconcerting for Russia.

ROOTS OF CONFLICT – DIVERGING PATHS

However, as the “new West” of former Soviet satellite states became democracies, Russia traveled in the opposite direction. After a decade of corrupt oligarchs and mafia-like governance, Russia elected ex-KGB agent Vladimir Putin to clean up the country. Something he did, at a price. By 2008, Putin had cleaned up much of the mess but at the expense of Russian democracy. He was seen as a necessary evil, even popular among many Russians, and he gained carte blanche to consolidate his power – not too dissimilar from his predecessors a century ago.

By 2012 Putin had circumvented Russian constitutional term limits switching back and forth between the office of prime minister and president. By 2018 he had secured another six-year term as president (he is already the country's longest-serving leader since Josef Stalin). As recently as January 2020, he solidified his hold on power, convincing a compliant Russian parliament to constitutional changes that would zero out his term and allow him to remain in power until 2036.

THE TURNING POINT IN NATO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

As NATO expanded east, despite the many assurance that it would not, 2007-2008 can be seen as a turning point for Putin and the west. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin warned NATO of its westward expansion stating, “I think it is obvious that NATO expansion has no relation with the modernization of the alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.”

A year later, against the advice of many U.S. officials, the Alliance invited Putin to attend the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest. It was here that Putin addressed his concerns about Ukraine and Georgia becoming NATO members stating, “to solve these [internal ethnic issues] they [Ukraine and Georgia] need not enter NATO...” In fact, his speech was an ominous warning of his plans to secure Russian presence among his neighbors.

In August of 2008, four months after the NATO Summit, Russia invaded Georgia purportedly to protect a secessionist state, South Ossetia, from a Georgian government crackdown. Ukraine was not far behind and in 2014 Russia seized Ukraine's Crimea peninsula and provided military support to separatist fighters in eastern Ukraine, stoking a civil war.

Even today, Russia continues its meddling and push westward as it occupies a portion of the Moldovan territory of Transdnistria without the consent of the Republic of Moldova. Russia also maintains its

nationalist-secessionist interference in Georgia, Chechnya, and Azerbaijan and its supranational influence in Belarus – all of which continue to go unchallenged.

DOES THIS LEAD TO WAR? RUSSIA'S SECURITY CONCERNS

Security experts and the media build a picture of potential interstate conflict in eastern Europe, concentrating on Russian military aggression and NATO's opposition. However, the nature of contention in the region is more likely intrastate than interstate, a distinction that dominated the twentieth century. This means we should look at the dangers through different paradigms.

Foreign interference among these states focuses on a battle for ideas within the state by outside forces through coercion or proxy, as the color revolutions of Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and Moldova show. According to the [12th annual report](#) of the Institute for Economics and Peace, a shift has occurred "from major interstate conflicts in Europe to civil wars." The West's counter to Russian interference is not so much NATO, as it is internal discord to unseat Russian proxies. Color revolutions have become the instruments of outside western influence and manipulation and could lead to more harm than good.

Internal interference in these neighboring Russian nations are perceived aggressions of property once controlled (or at least influenced) by Russia, as witnessed in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Rose Revolution in Georgia, or recent Russian accusations of the U.S. plotting a color revolution in Moldova.

While the former Soviet colonies clamoring for NATO protection have legitimate fears and concerns themselves, based on a long Russian and Soviet history of brutal domination, a paranoid Russia takes offense to the West's continual pursuit of economic and security expansion, not to mention obstruction in the internal affairs of Russia's neighboring nations. Even though there is no room for sovereign breaches anywhere globally, Putin's aggressive responses among bordering states should come as no surprise. Imagine Canada, Mexico, or, more realistically, Cuba or Venezuela aligning with Russian security alliances, as they have, now and before, to differing degrees, and you begin to understand the fear.

This is not an endorsement of Russian actions – invasions deserve no sympathy – but it is a much-needed perspective crucial for any diplomatic resolution.

ALTERNATIVE US-NATO APPROACH TO RUSSIA, AND THE GREATER CHINA THREAT

For this reason, the West, led by the U.S., should recognize, or at a minimum, comprehend Russian concerns of encroachment. This matter must be a part of any diplomatic calculus, meaning one person's progress is another's retreat.

Strategic necessity must outweigh our current troubles with Russia. Moscow could be a critical offset against a far more concerning foe. Comparatively, CCP-led China is America's long-term nemesis. It is on the verge of economically eclipsing the U.S. Add in its rapid military expansion, costly intellectual theft of U.S. property, foreign debt traps, aggression in the South China Sea, worsening Taiwan situation, and the freedom and sovereignty of the entire Indo-Pacific region is at stake. Not to mention U.S. global leadership within the next two decades.

It is in our interest to work through at least some of our differences with Russia. Looking at the situation through the lens of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” would help immensely. Despite serious Russian moves already in that direction, the U.S. cannot allow Russia to be seduced or pushed further into a truly “unholy alliance” with China. As seen by recent collective warnings by both nations against our support for Ukraine and Taiwan, both are moving closer - to our detriment. We should be pulling Russia away from China, not pushing them together.

THE GOAL? AVOIDING WAR WHILE GAINING RUSSIA’S ‘NEUTRALITY’

The immediate goal should be to ensure that while Eastern Europe remains a concern, it not become a flashpoint for war. Beyond that, it is in the U.S. strategic interest that Russia be at least be neutral and not an ally of CCP-led China. Through diplomatic channels, such as the decades-old NATO-Russia Council, whose communication channels still remain open, the West must reassure Russia that it has no desire to encircle it. But only to convince it that self-determination, not invasion, is the answer to their neighbors’ woes. If neither side talks, neither side will listen. As former British Prime Minister Harold McMillian said, “Jaw, jaw is better than war, war.” Attempting to find some common ground with Russia should not be ruled out.

Understandably, liberated former Soviet satellite countries have freed themselves from the yoke of communism and answered the call of democracy. As we mentioned, ten former Soviet countries are now members of the European Union while fourteen have joined NATO and more may be on the way. But for Russia, NATO’s front lines have moved east, and this is an ongoing threatening pattern.

Russia has responded with provocations, invasions, annexations, and intrusion in the sovereignty of its neighbors. Fear and distrust have set in and opposing visions of eastern Europe are at an impasse. The peaceful road ahead will require dialogue, recognition, and understanding. The U.S. cannot afford this clash with Russia in Eastern Europe to divide us even further as our more significant concern and danger lies in Asia.

CONCLUSION – TOO LATE? ONLY ONE WAY TO FIND OUT

While some believe President Putin and the Russian leadership have already become so entrenched in an anti-western and anti-US positions ([note the recent Russian declaration that designates the U.S. as an ‘unfriendly’ country](#)), that changing the dynamic is nearly impossible, we should at least try. Hopefully, it isn’t too late. But only by trying will we know for certain.

BIOGRAPHY

Major General (ret.) Don McGregor is a Senior Advisor at the Center for American Defense Studies (CADS). He spent five years on the Air Force European staff, running Joint exercises and advising two commanders at the O-6 level. While in the Pentagon as a General Officer McGregor administered the Secretary of Defense's National Guard's State Partnership Program (SPP). During Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, the general was intimately involved with training and equipping Ukrainian forces via their SPP partner - California. McGregor also worked with several other SPP partners to include Moldova, Georgia, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Romania. He holds a master's degree in Diplomacy and International Conflict Resolution from Norwich University.

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