

The United States and Russia must not Sleepwalk

At this moment of history when the United States and European democratic countries are confronted by pressing problems especially Islamist terrorism and a gigantic migration crisis, U.S. foreign policy should be based more on appraisal of present practical factors and less on remembrance of things past such as the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

This general remark is prompted by Obama administration statements and intended policies. One are the assertions on a number of occasions in February 2016 of U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter that Russia by its aggression is the most important security threat to the United States, and that U.S. plans to counter this were a signal aimed at deterring Russia from any further aggression.

A significant change in policy was announced in February 1, 2016 by the Obama administration that it would vastly increase its request for military spending in Central and Eastern Europe, from \$789 million to \$3.4 billion in the 2017 fiscal budget. As a result, the U.S. will preposition equipment in those areas, and an armored combat ready brigade would rotate in the region. This would mean a greater military U.S. presence on the territory of NATO allies, ready to respond to Russian action.

This U.S. policy is a reinforcement of the NATO Wales Summit Declaration of September 5, 2014 that was concerned with "Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine (that) have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe, whole, free, and at peace."

NATO was created to safeguard Europe against Stalin's Soviet

Union but essentially it has no real function since the “evil empire” ended in 1991. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine is rightly condemned by the international community. There is no excuse for the Russian bombing strikes on February 15, 2016 of medical facilities and schools in different areas in Syria held by rebel forces that killed at least 20 people and injured many more.

Yet, appalling as the Russian actions are, they do not in themselves constitute a threat to Western Europe let alone the U.S. Nor are the Russian submarine patrols and the military maneuvers on its western borders an indication of the possible start of World War III.

Three factors are relevant for American policy. One is that, in spite of political differences between Russia and the U.S. on Syria and other issues, there is no likelihood of any direct military confrontation between the two countries. Nor is conflict likely with NATO countries though understandably, Romania, Poland, and the Baltics, are fearful of a country that invaded Georgia, annexed de facto Abkhazia and south Ossetia, and violated NATO air space.

A second factor, usually forgotten or ignored, is the May 27, 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, signed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, President Bill Clinton and leaders of fifteen other NATO countries that the two sides did not consider themselves as adversaries, and that they were determined to give concrete substance to their shared commitment to build a stable, peaceful, undivided Europe. They agreed there be no stationing of large numbers of troops along borders shared by Russia and NATO countries.

A third factor is that many NATO countries are unlikely or unable to participate in any serious operation. NATO countries are supposed to contribute 2 per cent of GDP for defense purposes, but in 2015 only five (U.S. with 3.6 per cent, UK,

Poland, Greece, and Estonia) did so.

By now it is clear that President Vladimir Putin is not only a skilled politician who has consolidated his autocratic rule in Russia by a variety of ways, including elimination of critics. His main aim is to make Russia a major player in the political theater of the Middle East as well as in international politics generally. Moscow wants to dine as an equal with Washington, alone if possible.

Putin has succeeded in making the international community aware of at least two things. The immediate one is recognition that Russian actions in Crimea and elsewhere in Ukraine cannot be overturned.

The second factor for the west is that important issues, such as the destruction of ISIS, a settlement of the Syrian civil war and the future of Syrian President Bashar Assad, controlling the unprecedented migration of millions from the Middle East, or dealing with Turkey that downed the Russian warplane on November 24, 2015, cannot be resolved without Russian participation. British Foreign Minister Philip Hammond has commented, "There is only one man on this planet who can end the civil war in Syria by making a phone call, and that's Mr. Putin."

The problem for US policy and harmonious relations is how properly to respond to the growing role of Russia. On one hand Russia is exerting its muscle role in a number of disagreeable ways: selling Iran its S-300 air defense system and other advanced weapons and nuclear reactors; fulfilling an arms deal with Egypt; supporting militarily the regime of Syrian President Assad; being friendly with the terrorist group Hezbollah; and building the Eurasian Economic Union as a challenge to Western economic institutions.

On the other hand, Russian has played a positive role in a number of ways: in arms control treaties, and the START

treaty; in working together with the United States in ending Assad's stock of chemical weapons ; in working together in Afghanistan against the Taliban; in planning, or suggesting it would make air strikes against ISIS; and agreeing at the meeting in Munich on Feb 11-12, 2016 of the International Syria Support Group to a limited cessation of hostilities in the civil war.

Desirable though it may be to limit Russian influence in the Middle East, it is too strong to argue or see it as an automatic adversary. The U.S. priorities should be otherwise. The Obama administration must recognize Russia as an essential player in dealing with the real priorities: the defeat and elimination of ISIS; the response to Islamist terrorism; a political settlement and stabilization of Syria, irrespective of the different views of the fate of Assad; and a realistic and firm solution of the staggering migrant crisis facing Europe.

The U.S. and western leaders in formulating their policy toward Russia should learn from history. No one can favor a contemporary version of the Crimea War 1853-56 in which Russia was pitted against the UK, France, and the Ottoman Empire.

Above all, the events leading to the outbreak World War I should be remembered and must not be repeated. The U.S. and Russia must not sleepwalk as the European powers did in the days before the war in 1914. Historians are still divided about why that war happened and which country and which political leaders, if anyone, were to blame. The warning is there. Wrong priorities in foreign policy in a complex international arena, refusal to accept changing power relationships, and excessive or belligerent reaction to differences of opinion must not lead to a catastrophic conclusion.