



The Uncomfortable Alliance

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Greater cooperation with Russia in the struggle to defeat the Islamic State terrorist group (ISIS) and other extremist elements in the Muslim World is now being urged by a number of prominent Americans. Russia and America both have a problem with Islamists, goes the argument, so we should work together to defeat the common enemy.

This is correct, insofar as both countries have the same definition of "the common enemy." However, we do not, and therefore the next administration's exploration of possible cooperation with Russia must begin with an examination of the sharp differences in our self-defined national interests. Two in particular stand out.

First, Iran, which in spite of last year's nuclear deal remains a sworn enemy of America. For decades the U.S. government has judged Iran to be the world's leading sponsor of terrorism. Today, Tehran is steadily increasing its influence in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the Middle East. It is able to do so, in no small part, because Russia has been, and remains, a major ally, selling Tehran billions of dollars of advanced weaponry and deploying its troops to fight along side Iranian forces in support of the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria. Russia has also become a key investor in Iran's nuclear effort, helping it to build one key nuclear facility - in the southern Iranian port city of Bushehr - and contracting with Tehran to build more in coming years. Diplomatically, Moscow has long provided cover for Iranian rogue behavior in multilateral forums (such as the United Nations). Meanwhile, military coordination between the two countries has steadily expanded, as witnessed most recently by Russia's use of Iranian air bases to carry out strikes in Syria.

Second, Vladimir Putin's Russia is both imperialist and expansionist. With the exception of China, all of Russia's neighbors today feel under varying degrees of threat. The Kremlin, as always, claims that it is acting defensively, and only because it feels threatened by NATO expansion. In point of fact, however, that Alliance was withering on the vine prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It would therefore be more accurate to say that the threat Russia feels from its West is not NATO but rather the example of political freedom in bordering countries - namely Ukraine, Georgia and the Baltic States - whose economic progress provides an additional unfavorable comparison with Russia.

Because Russian citizens will eventually know how their neighbors live, these ideas are inherently dangerous for President Putin's kleptocratic dictatorship, which relies on its ability to propagandize its own citizens. In part because that danger would lessen if Ukraine came under Russian control or became a failed state, Russia invaded and continues to threaten Ukraine. The resulting sanctions - and the threat of more to come - were a major factor in Russia's decision to stop its advance in Eastern Ukraine.

Since then, to break the consensus regarding continued economic pressure against it, Russia has put diplomatic and military pressure on Europe. It has likewise challenged the air defense zones and territorial seas of Scandinavian countries, made nuclear threats, bombed targets in Syria that resulted in increased refugee flows into Europe, and massed troops on Ukraine's border. This destabilizing behavior is not in America's strategic interest, nor is it consistent with our moral values.

Moscow is a party to the 1994 Budapest Accords and the 1975 Helsinki Act and numerous other signed documents designed to protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. However this means little to Russia, which violates such understandings at will - all because its leaders think they can get away with it. It is no different with the multiple pledges made to Secretary of State John Kerry regarding Syria, where Russian soldiers and planes were primarily concerned with helping Bashar Assad - even if that meant foregoing ISIS targets to attack American allies.

All this portends future trouble for America, not only with Russia but globally as well. If the United States does not stand behind commitments made in treaties and agreements, and if it does not impose costs on Russia for its breaking of a tactical arrangement in Syria, our existing agreements worldwide will come into question. Longstanding friends will have to hedge their geopolitical bets, and may align with those unfriendly to America for security, while U.S. adversaries are sure to be emboldened.

What, then, is the next president to do with Mr. Putin, whose word is unreliable at best, and whose actions continue to threaten American interests? Now is the time for both the Trump and Clinton camps to ponder the answer to that question.

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