Russia-US Relations: Brinkmanship and Hostilities Continue

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During an appearance at the Munich Security Conference last month, Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev lamented that strained relations between the US and Russia have pushed the world toward "a new Cold War." While such a characterization of the current relationship is misleading and imprecise – the stark ideological differences that divided the world into two distinct blocs have given way to a more complex set of global affairs – relations between the two countries have indeed reached a post-Cold War low. Over the past two years, in the view of the West, Russia's annexation and destabilization of parts of Ukraine, Putin's intervention in Syria, Russia's military modernization, and the Kremlin's inflammatory rhetoric and intransigence in the nuclear arena have contributed to increasing tensions, distrust, and hostilities between the two countries.

Foreign Interventions

Russia's military seizure of Crimea after the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 came as a shock to the US and its NATO allies, and represented an unexpected challenge to the post-Cold War international order. Specifically, the annexation of Crimea upended the norms and expectations surrounding European security embodied in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which stated that states should not use force to change borders. Furthermore, Russian actions in Ukraine were in direct violation of its 1994 pledge to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity in exchange for Ukraine giving up nuclear weapons. Despite tough, targeted US and European sanctions and a pledge to honor a peace treaty, the Kremlin continues to provide weapons, leadership and Russian troops to armed separatists in Eastern Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis has also brought to an end the majority of military-to-military contacts between the US and Russia, arguably at a time when they are needed most.

Russia's support for Syrian President Bashar al Assad and subsequent buildup of troops and military assets in the region has been another source of pressure on its relationship with the US. While the US-led coalition in Syria has sought to depose Assad and weaken the Islamic State, Russian moves in Syria, just as in Ukraine, sought to raise its profile on the global stage and turn military advances into diplomatic leverage. President Putin this week stated that Russia would be withdrawing its forces from Syria, reflecting what the Russian President called the Kremlin's achievements of nearly all its objectives in the country. Indeed, it appears that Russian military action has laid the groundwork for talks that will allow Assad to remain in power.

Military Modernization

These foreign interventions have taken place amid major Russian military upgrades to its conventional and nuclear forces. Behind the curve in conventional weapons, Russia aims to make 70 percent of the army's equipment modern by 2020. A particular focus has been the use of conventional naval cruise missiles and other standoff weapons to allow the Russian military the same kind of long-distance readily usable firepower the United States has enjoyed since the first Gulf War. Russia's ability to hit targets in Syria from the Caspian Sea represented a recent demonstration of this newfound capability. Furthermore, Russia has been developing its theatre range capabilities, such as the Iskander short-range missiles, which if deployed Kalingrad Oblast, can reach any target in the Baltic states and Poland, but still fall below the lower range limits of treaties such as the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear

Forces (INF) Treaty.

These changes have been coupled with the modernization of operational tactics, such as Russia's largely successful use of special operations forces – "little green men" equipped with modern body armor, encrypted radios, and night vision equipment – in Crimea.

Russia is also upgrading its nuclear forces. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and economic turmoil that followed, Russia was unable to modernize its strategic nuclear forces. As part of its effort to overhaul outdated Cold War systems, Russia is procuring eight new Borei Class SSBN ballistic missile submarine as well as a new generation of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and nuclear submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). While the strategic modernization program appears to be aimed at replacing dated systems, Russia's nonstrategic nuclear modernizations, coupled with its "escalate to deescalate" doctrine are concerning for the US and its allies. This strategy, believed to be part of Russian classified doctrine, refers to the use of low-yield, non-strategic nuclear weapons as a means to "deescalate" a large-scale conventional conflict. In addition to force modernization, Russia appears to be returning a nuclear posture reminiscent of the Cold War, including increased patrols of strategic bombers and submarines.

Nuclear Dangers

Over the last two years, the Kremlin has escalated its nuclear rhetoric and forcefully rattled its nuclear saber. From open threats to use nuclear weapons, to statements by government officials and state-run media boasting Russia's nuclear capabilities, President Putin has not been bashful in highlighting Russia's nuclear resolve. Nuclear messaging – subtle and overt – was apparent during the Ukraine crisis, during which Russian officials, including Putin, warned of "surprising the West with our new developments in offensive nuclear weapons." Russia has also increased the number of patrols of its nuclear-capable bombers, dangerously approaching and even violating the airspace of NATO and EU members. Just last week, the French navy detected a Russian ballistic missile submarine off the French Atlantic coast in the Bay of Biscay. The actual military utility of this action is highly questionable and seems to point to the value President Putin finds in nuclear messaging.

Apart from its general nuclear saber-rattling, Russia has outright rejected US proposals for deeper arms control reductions. In 2013, President Barak Obama, building on the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), proposed a further one-third reduction in each country's strategic nuclear weapons. To date, Russia has shown little interest in being America's arms control partner, citing concerns over regional missile defense systems deployed in or near Europe and US conventional strike capabilities. Clashing priorities have make further reductions impossible for the foreseeable future.

Complicating relations further, Russia remains in violation of the INF Treaty. That accord required the US and USSR eliminate and permanently renounce all of their nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers. However, In July 2014, the US Department of State claimed that Russia had violated its obligation under the INF Treaty by testing ground-based cruise missiles that violate INF limits.

Finally, Russian cooperation on nonproliferation matters has sharply deteriorated since the invasion of Crimea in 2014. Last year, Russia informed the US that it would refuse further US assistance in protecting its largest stockpiles of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium. During the 1990s, the US invested over $2 billion in what was called the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program. CTR was part of a post-Cold War global effort to reduce the nuclear threat by destroying weapons, submarines, installing security measures at facilities containing high-risk material, and a myriad of other threat reduction initiatives. The Russians, disdainful of receiving any form of assistance from the US, insist that they can effectively and independently secure their nuclear material and facilities. US officials cast seriously doubt on these assertions and argue that there is still much work to be done around nuclear security in Russia. Furthermore, Russia will not be participating in the upcoming Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, DC, yet another sign of the recent noncooperation of the two countries in this area.

So while tensions between the US and Russia certainly do not add up to a "new Cold War," distrust is deep, and the

two nations find themselves at the opposite side of the table at almost every turn. It appears that for now, the best hope for any cooperation—at least during this U.S. presidential election year– are informal discussions involving non-governmental organizations and US and Russian officials and transparency building measures, such as lab to lab cooperation or exchanges of military officers.

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