Containing Russia

Michael A. McFaul

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Western leaders hoped that a newly independent Russia would consolidate democracy and capitalism at home and join the Western community of democratic states. At the time, Russian President Boris Yeltsin promoted these ideas, at least rhetorically, and President George H.W. Bush aimed to support these objectives. The Cold War was over. Cooperation was the new order of the day.

Thirty years later, those optimistic aspirations have failed. American administrations made mistakes, including most importantly not providing more diplomatic, economic, and political assistance in helping Russia in the early 1990s to navigate the triple transformation from empire to nation-state, autocracy to democracy, and command economy to market economy. But Russian domestic changes under President Vladimir Putin have been the central driver of renewed conflict between the United States and Russia, especially in the last several years.

During his two decades in power, Putin first undermined Russia's fragile democracy and increased the state's role in the economy. As Russia became more autocratic, friction between Russia and the West increased. Over time, Putin cast the United States as an enemy, blaming Democrat and Republican administrations alike for

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fomenting revolutions in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and in 2013–14, the Arab world in 2010–12, and Russia in 2011–12. By his third term, Putin had pivoted hard and defied the norms of the liberal international order—first by annexing Crimea in 2014, then by intervening militarily in Syria in 2015 to prop up one of the world's most vicious dictators, and most audaciously, by interfering in the U.S. 2016 presidential election.

The United States is not destined to be in conflict with Russia because of the balance of power between Russia and the United States, or historical and cultural differences. Nevertheless, positive opportunities within bilateral relations are unlikely to emerge while Putin is in power, which he may be for a long time.

American foreign policymakers, therefore, must craft and sustain a long-term strategy for containing Putin's belligerent actions abroad and simultaneously cooperate with Moscow on a small set of issues of mutual benefit. In parallel, American leaders in government, as well as the nongovernmental and the private sectors, must look to increase connectivity with Russian societal actors, even when not engaging the Russian government. We accomplished these multiple tasks during the Cold War. We can do it again.

Containment must include several policies in parallel. Most importantly, NATO's deterrent capabilities must be enhanced. After Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine, NATO leaders initiated new measures to strengthen deterrence, including a pledge by all members to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP; forward deployments of light-armed brigades in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland; and greater resources for countering cyber and disinformation operations. Regarding conventional grounds forces, however, NATO needs greater capability to deter a Russian attack. The United States must signal recommitment to defending our allies. The best way to keep the peace in Europe is to ensure Putin knows the high costs of military operation against a NATO member.

A second key pillar is to maintain the current economic sanctions regime against Russian companies and individuals until Putin changes course. The United States worked closely with allies and partners to put in place the most comprehensive sanctions ever against Russian individuals and companies as punishment for Putin's outrageous annexation and military intervention. U.S. diplomats must maintain sanctions now, as fatigue is growing in Europe. To lift sanctions before Putin changes his actions in Ukraine would send a terrible signal.

A third component of a successful containment strategy is to help democracy and markets in Ukraine consolidate. After an initial push of assistance from Europe, the United States, and the IMF, disappointment with Ukrainian President Volodmyr Zelensky is returning to Western policy debates. Zelensky's dismissal of several reform-minded ministers, as well as the recent politicization of U.S.-Ukraine relations, has not helped. The United States needs to engage more deeply with the Ukrainian government and society to assist democratic and market reforms. Nothing scares Putin more than a thriving economy and liberal democracy on his border.

In parallel to containment, U.S. policymakers must engage the Kremlin on a small number of mutually beneficial issues, including, most urgently, the extension of the New START treaty. Not only does this treaty prevent a needless nuclear arms race, but its comprehensive verification measures also provide valuable information about Russia's nuclear weapons and modernizing systems. Washington and Moscow also should cooperate on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, on sharing information about terrorist organizations, and on working together on nuclear nonproliferation and climate change.

Finally, as American leaders seek to implement a strategy of both containment and limited engagement with Putin's government, nongovernmental organizations, business leaders, and universities must expand direct contacts with their counterparts in Russian society. Not all Russians support Putin's autocratic policies at home and belligerent actions abroad. Those inside Russia who still seek to return to democracy and rejoin the West should be encouraged, not isolated.