

The West Has Failed to Find a Constructive Role for Moscow

Robert Hunter, Center for Transatlantic Relations and former US Ambassador to Nato, February 2015

| U.S. FOREIGN POLICY |

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Europe needs a strategy created from understanding of Russia's past

The ceasefire [bargain struck in Minsk last week](#) was at best the end of the beginning — and may not even have been that. [Vladimir Putin's seizure of Crimea](#), his attempt to destabilise all of Ukraine, and his intimidation of other countries on Russia's periphery are his latest answers to the question of how the west should accommodate the remnants of the Soviet empire. They have rightly been rejected. But the western reply — sanctions, perhaps lethal weapons for Kiev — is pure tactics. We need a strategy.

George HW Bush's answer to the Russia conundrum was to create a "Europe whole and free and at peace", embracing everyone. He sought to avoid in Russia a repetition of Germany's humiliation after the first world war, which had led to the revanchism of the 1930s. Bill Clinton continued in the same vein. The Nato-Russia founding act, negotiated while I was US ambassador to Nato, accepted limits on force deployments to central Europe. [Ukraine would benefit from western co-operation](#), but its status would not be finalised until an effort had been made to create a constructive place for Russia within the European security system. The west, and then Mr Putin, lost interest in finding that place.

Nothing excuses Mr Putin's violation of sundry international treaties upholding the inviolability of frontiers and giving guarantees to Russia's neighbours, including Ukraine. But we cannot create strategy without understanding the past. While Moscow, too, was less than co-operative, the west (and particularly the US) took advantage of a weakened Russia. In 2002, Washington gratuitously abrogated the anti-ballistic missile treaty, which had given Moscow psychological parity with Washington even after it lost the cold war. America's decision to deploy missile defences in central Europe violated the spirit if not the letter of the Nato commitment not to send forces there.

Nato expanded, encompassing the Baltic states and other countries, contributing to a Russian feeling of encirclement. And in 2008, Nato declared that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members". When Georgia's then president Mikheil Saakashvili tested that commitment in 2008, Mr Putin struck back, sending troops into Georgian territory. No Nato ally helped Georgia defend itself. The lessons Mr Putin learnt then might go some way to explaining what he has done in Ukraine.

The question now is how to recast Europe in a way that preserves Nato and all its commitments, extends widely the economic benefits of EU engagement, gets Mr Putin to respect international borders, fosters a productive future for Ukraine, and provides a respected and engaged role for Russia. Ideas exist; even Dmitry Medvedev, then Russian president, put forward proposals in June 2008. (They were roundly ignored.) In the end, it may not be possible.

Failure would carry high costs. It would mean a long isolation for Russia, more conflict and suffering for Ukrainians and continued uncertainty for the rest of Europe. For the US, it could mean an end to valuable co-operation with Russia on issues such as the Iranian nuclear programme, and having to put off other important tasks around the world. And a permanent state of confrontation cannot be good for anyone.

American leadership is indispensable in Europe. Mr Putin does not take seriously ministrations by European leaders. The US, Russia's "equal" from cold war days, is the only diplomatic interlocutor he takes seriously. The allies also

expect deeper US engagement. They sent troops to Afghanistan for one all-embracing reason: so the US would remain in Europe and deal with Russia, as only it can. For the sake of its own interests and Europe's, the US has to honour its part of that bargain.

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