

Treat Russia as a True Partner

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Western countries rarely appreciate Russia's capacity for sacrificing its interests to larger international objectives. Rather, the West tends to view Russia as a state that is frequently assertive and prone to becoming a revisionist power. Thus, the appropriate response requires that the West stand firm with Russia on key principles and show flexibility on some tactical issues. According to this reasoning, Russia may be helpful on occasion, but it can't be an equal partner and trustworthy friend.

The historical record defies this perception by providing multiple examples of Russia's actions on behalf of Western nations. The Russians perceive their identity as historically tied to the West. At least since the early 19th century, Russia frequently shouldered the burden of defending the West from military invasions by hostile powers and worked to establish institutions for international peace.

After defeating Napoleon, Russia led the coalition of status quo powers by providing stability in Europe within the Holy Alliance. When that coalition fell apart during the Crimean War, Russia temporarily woke up to its own interests and concentrated on internal recovery. But

in the early 20th century, Tsar Nicholas II entered a military alliance with France and Britain and then led Russia into the unnecessary war against Germany.

Even the Bolsheviks, with their radically different principles of world order, eventually accepted the importance of multilateral institutions and sought to contribute to preventing the rise of a hegemonic power. They joined the League of Nations and championed a collective security system in Europe to prevent the rise of fascism. Soviet Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov worked hard to establish a strong anti-Hitler coalition.

The Soviet attempt at collective security failed because of Josef Stalin's mistrust of Western allies, but the West's contribution was important as well. Although the danger of Adolf Hitler's regime was incomparably more serious than that of Wilhelm's Germany, France and Britain remained noncommittal at best. They began to understand the danger of not establishing a coalition with the Soviet Union only after Hitler's invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938.

When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his foreign policy revolution, he was also thinking in terms of global peace and development rather than national interests. Unlike Nicholas II, Gorbachev did not lead the country into a devastating war and deserves credit for negotiating the end of the Cold War. But like Russia's last tsar, Gorbachev made multiple concessions to the West without getting enough in return. Like Nicholas II, Gorbachev failed to attend to the country's interests and carry out a coherent program of internal recovery.

President Vladimir Putin, who is frequently viewed in the West as a ruthless protector of the country's national interests, began his presidency by pledging multiple resources for shielding the West against terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11. If the United States and Europe had reciprocated, such a policy would also have been in Russia's interests. But the United States soon abandoned the war on terrorism by invading Iraq and launching the global strategy of regime change in "rogue states." Russia had to listen to lectures about its "authoritarianism," which got in the way of the joint battle with the West against global terrorism.

Each time, the West took Russia's assistance as helpful, but it never considered reshaping its interests and objectives by accepting those of Russia. Such thinking is also reflected in the contemporary Western policy, which seeks Russia's help on Afghanistan, Iran and Syria. In return, it does not reveal any plans for a common security agenda. Western security planning in Eurasia or the Middle East makes little room for Russia, which is viewed as a spoiler and a troublemaker, not as a genuine partner.

In the era of the world's growing uncertainty and the West's unprecedented decline, these negative perceptions of Russia are especially puzzling. One might imagine that today would be the time to develop a long-term vision of solving economic, political and security problems jointly with Russia, a pre-eminent Eurasian power. The list of pressing issues of regional instability, terrorism, weapons proliferation and financial instability keeps growing every day.

The West shouldn't operate as if it has all the answers and should draw lessons from its own failures. The West should also trust others and think about how to solve the world's problems together.

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