

One Way to Get Russia Right

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The year is 2020 and the unthinkable has happened: The United States, Russia and several of their neighbors have announced a union called Polario, based on their proximity to the North Pole. Economic, security and shared threats have forced the hands of the two leaders of this new union and former Cold War rivals. Their alliance in a union appears to be the only way to solve their problems.

Farfetched? In the 1940s, nobody would have predicted a union comprising of Germany, Britain and France. But now, of course, we have the European Union.

How will the two former enemies embrace?

At the Cold War's end, the United States and Western Europe treated Russia as "a defeated nation analogous to post-World War II Germany and Japan," as New York University professor Stephen Cohen wrote in a 2008 article published in the International Herald Tribune.

The United States also aspired to spread its capitalist system to the former Soviet sphere and expanded NATO to Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic countries. The United States saw its policy as "a benign attempt to stabilize the region, enhance its prosperity and security, and integrate it into the global system," George Friedman wrote in Stratfor.

But Russia, lacking easily definable and defensible borders, cannot simply welcome this "generous help" from the West. Having been invaded and occupied by the Mongols, Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany, Russia needs nonthreatening buffer states. Russia feels it must make a power comeback, but when it pushes back, it poses a threat to regional and global security in U.S. and European eyes.

Cohen, in his 2008 article "Wrong on Russia," recommends that the U.S. change its policy toward Russia by ending NATO expansion to Ukraine and beyond and treating Russia in accordance with its power and national interests.

This is sound advice because Russia is too big to stuff into the EU, both militarily and economically. Doing so would upset Germany, France, Britain and the former Soviet-bloc countries, like Poland. Melting of the North Pole ice sheets opens the door to Polario: Transportation, oil and minerals are accessible. Canada, Norway and Russia are already competing for control there.

Those who focus on the differences overlook the similarities unique to Russia and the United States. Both have superpower mentalities and large weapons arsenals. The United States and the Soviet Union were born in revolutions against European empires and based on humanitarian political ideals. Both countries have mainly European roots and expanded by taking over the lands of indigenous peoples in the 19th century.

They are huge in size, comparable in population and similar in temperate zone location, climate and topography. Both are multiethnic, dominated by a main group culturally, economically, and politically. What's more, they have the two largest Jewish populations outside Israel.

Polario can help solve some of the most pressing problems facing the world:

- Iran. Russia knows that today Iran's nuclear intentions are aimed at Israel and the West, but tomorrow it might switch its nuclear aim north, toward Russia. For Iran's hardliners, Russia is an "infidel" enemy, just like other non-Muslim societies. Polario would unite the United States and Russia in a common front against Iran's nuclear ambitions.
- The EU's East-West split. Western Europe, unwilling to antagonize Russia, cannot support Eastern Europe's expectation of backing against Russia. Membership in Polario would lessen Russia's pressure on Eastern Europe.
- Russia's near abroad. Ukraine and Georgia hoped to escape Russia's dominance by joining NATO and the EU. Membership in Polario would alleviate their fear of Russia and Russia's fear that their westward shift could threaten its defensibility.

Polario is highly probable and offers a way to embed Russia in a security structure that would harmonize the conflicting needs of Russia and the West.

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