

Russia Is Slamming Door After Door on the West

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Moscow's announcement this week that Russia would withdraw from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) hardly came as a surprise. It was just one more bridge between Russia and the rest of the world that Kremlin leaders have decided to burn — this time, officially.

In truth, this is not the most important bridge Russia has burned. In fact, Russia first violated the CFE during the first Chechen War, when it used forces exceeding those allowed by the treaty to suppress the separatist movement on its territory. After the treaty was adapted in 1999 to take the post-Cold War geopolitical situation into account, Russia ratified the new version of the treaty, but not a single NATO member did.

In fact, both Russia and the West are to blame for the fact that their mutual relations still contain normative foundations that have partially lost relevance. And while those relations swung from mutual affection to mutual distrust over the 25 years of post-Soviet history, that normative foundation was gradually growing obsolete.

Perhaps if politicians on both sides had taken a more practical approach to formulating those norms, they would not have reached the current impasse. However, history has no place for "ifs" or "might have beens" and is often defined by a series of emotional peaks and valleys.

In this case, they include the willingness to cooperate following the terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001, Putin's open frustration with the West in his speech in Munich in 2007, the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, the attempt to reach an agreement with NATO at the Lisbon Summit in 2010, and finally, Crimea and the war in Ukraine in 2014.

Russia's decisions to annex Crimea and support separatists in eastern Ukraine were more than just burning bridges: They were a deliberate attempt to slam the door on the Western world.

Some in Russia might think that this country actually kicked the door wide open and that all the weaker peoples and states out there are now awaiting their fate in terror. But no, the door probably did close — and more on Russia than on the outside world.

Although Russia's relations with the West have had their ups and downs from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s, there were not marked by an overall positive trend.

And it is also safe to say that Russia had even more opportunities to establish mutually beneficial institutional ties with the West in the early 2000s following Vladimir Putin's first presidential win and his raft of proposals for cooperation in the fight against international terrorism than existed in the late 1980s under former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and former U.S. President George H.W. Bush.

Russia is clearly not the only one to blame for the fact that the West aggressively incorporated Central and Eastern European states in the 1990s and 2000s, following the logic that "you should take everything you can now so that it won't get used against you tomorrow."

Now, in analyzing all that led up to the annexation of Crimea and all that has happened since, it is clear that Russia took lessons not only from former Soviet leader Josef Stalin and Catherine the Great, but also from modern leaders in Brussels and Washington.

Every human interaction, whether successful or not, is always the product of all its participants. If Russia slammed the door shut in 2014, then it did so for a reason.

That has also created a certain inertia that could slam closed other doors that still remain open. Halting that process is more than just difficult — it requires extraordinary powers of mind and will.

Unfortunately, there is nothing to suggest that the very Western leaders who contributed to Russia's decision to slam the door shut are now capable of reversing that process. Instead, after the door bangs closed and the plaster of European security crumbles to the floor, they are more likely to turn to each other and say, "You see? That is exactly what we warned could happen."

The Russian leadership will also find it difficult to overcome this inertia. Seeing that the West shows no real signs of regret over the failure of strategic cooperation, Russia — regardless of who becomes the next Kremlin leader — will continue slamming every remaining door

until no more remain.

And at this point it makes sense for Russia to ask itself what it has to look forward to after it slams the door with such relish?

As one of the global power centers in a bipolar world, the Soviet Union could not afford the luxury of international isolation after World War II — a time and a status that many of today's Russian leaders look back on with nostalgia.

But the world has changed during the 25 years of post-Soviet history. It is impossible to revive that bipolar world, and simply withdrawing from the CFE, the NATO-Russia Council or the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe only increases Russia's isolation without increasing its power or influence.

And because Russia's leaders undoubtedly understand this, it means that they continue slamming those doors primarily to see how the West will respond.

Apparently, there is no ideal resolution to this problem, and so Russia continues looking for new doors to slam shut. Theoretically, it might choose to withdraw from the UN Security Council, but if it does that, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin won't have the pleasure of lecturing U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power.

If Russia wants the world to view it as a superpower, it is going about it in the wrong way. A superpower needs to have something to offer besides a sense of offended dignity, something that would justify closing all those doors behind it. For example, it should have an idea or seem capable of transforming the country into an alternative center of power in the world, something that could change its isolation into the beginnings of a new system of intergovernmental ties, alliances and mutually beneficial relationships.

Even Hitler's Germany deliberately went into isolation with fully developed plans for an alternative project, however horrible it seemed from the outside and however terrible were its consequences.

Unfortunately, Russia's withdrawal into isolation more resembles the behavior of an offended teenager who shuts himself in his room in the expectation that his father will come along soon after, pat him on the head and discuss their plans for a weekend together.

The unpleasant surprise is that today's world has no father. Beyond the doors that Moscow is slamming with such pleasure are only more teenagers, albeit youth who are better educated and better adapted to a rapidly changing world in which closed doors have no useful place.

Russia will eventually have to go out and find a way to get along with them — that is, unless it plans to grow old and die in a basement somewhere, self-exiled to the sidelines of history. And the longer Russia delays that step, the more difficulty it will have unlocking and reopening those doors, and clearing the wreckage.

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