

Is Russia America's Enemy?

Written by Brad Nelson and Yohanes Sulaiman

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BRAD NELSON AND YOHANES SULAIMAN, JUL 9 2017

A number of different storylines have emerged from the 2016 US presidential election meddling and hacking. An important one surrounds the identity of the perpetrator of these acts — in this case, Russia. To some, it's particularly galling that it was Russia that influenced, if not tipped, the election in Donald Trump's favor. By helping to put Trump in the White House, a figure who desires better relations with Moscow, Russia is ostensibly now in a great position to do precisely those things. These views have been echoed by a number of prominent folks such as Senators John McCain, Chuck Schumer, Elizabeth Warren, and Ben Cardin, among others. And some of this has been reflected in mainstream American media reporting and analysis on Russia. Even Americans are moving in sync with these sentiments, as 55% view Russia as either unfriendly or an enemy, according to recent polling.

There seems to be three main forces motivating anti-Russia sentiment. First, we observe a strange longing for the cold war days. Maybe it's because it's more comforting to have an enemy that's easily identifiable on a map, rather than a stealthy transnational one. Maybe it's because the cold war era was a period in which the US was clearly an ascendant, dominant power, as opposed to today, a so-called post-American world of US retrenchment and decline. Maybe it's because of nostalgia that some have of how the US looked and operated internally during the cold war, when white male power structures reigned supreme and effectively blocked women and minorities from rising in education, skills, wealth and political power.

Second, domestic politics are also a likely factor. Trump and his staff's connections and possible criminal ties to Russia are constantly in the news, the public is acutely aware the latest happenings on the various Russiagate investigations, and many Americans are mobilized—whether via social media or protests—against the perceived collusion between Team Trump and Moscow. This is exactly the kind of set of issues opportunistic politicians—liberals and GOP Never Trumpers, in particular—can use to score political points. Hence, it's no surprise to hear tough talk on Russia from both groups, and expect them to make Russia a major campaign issue in 2018. Already, anti-Russia talk, as well as an active role in the ongoing investigations, has made political stars of Congresspersons Adam Schiff and Eric Swalwell.

Third, don't forget about the hawks. Despite the efforts of Presidents Barack Obama and Trump to criticize and sideline the proponents of American adventurism, a predictable reaction to the excesses of the Bush years, hawks are still alive and well among the Washington policy, academic, and intellectual establishment. Hawks, on both the right and left—neoconservatives and liberal internationalists—believe the US is being mocked, pushed around, and bullied by an expansionist and opportunistic Russia. They see Russia as a threat to the rules and norms of the extant global order, as evidenced most notably by Moscow's redrawing Ukraine's borders, its attempts to divide and weaken Europe, and its successful hack of the US election. These hawks want the US to push back against and punish these misdeeds. This group is all for ratcheting up the level of tensions, calling for upped sanctions, boosting NATO's capabilities, and diplomatically isolating Russia, among other things.

But is Russia really America's enemy? And why assume that it is? These are underexplored questions in current policy debates, as the media, policy, and academic circles have largely failed to broach them. And frankly, they are important questions to ask right now, before a vengeful US—either now or more likely post-Trump—begins down the path of assertive confrontation vis-à-vis Russia. Over the last fifty years, the US has had an alarming habit of embracing bellicose policies first and asking questions later. Particularly since WWII, the US has also demonstrated

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a tendency to inflate external threats, causing much global instability in the process. It's high time to break these nasty and costly habits. Toward that end, we believe a good first step is to examine Russian actions and motives. So let's briefly look at the record.

There's no doubt that Russia, under Vladimir Putin, has taken an aggressive turn, particularly over the last decade. It's engaged in militarized conflicts in Georgia and Syria, brazenly seized Crimea, and caused significant disturbances and turmoil in Eastern Ukraine. Russia seeks to weaken NATO and the EU. It's meddled, to varying degrees, in national elections in the US and France, and will likely do the same in the upcoming German elections.

Putin has made a mission to restore Russia to superpower status. A part of this includes a flexing of Russia's military and technological muscles. This includes strengthening Russia's hand in its near abroad—through force and coercion, sure, but also via institution building, like the Eurasian Union, a pet project of Putin's. Another part of this includes competing with China and especially the US for influence globally, particularly in areas of the world important to Russia, such as Europe and the Middle East.

These moves are consistent with Russia's long held national security interests, which have called for Russia to dominate the Eurasian land mass and to ward off local or near threats. They are also in line with how Russians see themselves in the world, with their own nationalist political identities. Put simply, just as Americans traditionally see their country as "exceptional," so do Russians. They see Russia as a great, powerful nation that richly deserves to be recognized as a superpower by other nations, especially other powerful nations, like the US. Anything less than that is a direct affront—which is why Barack Obama's dismissal of Russia as a "regional power" went over so badly in Moscow and across the country. Furthermore, keep in mind that Putin's assertive, if not downright bellicose, foreign policy is good domestic politics, as it plays on nationalist sentiments, and he knows that.

But does all this necessarily mean that Russia is an enemy of the US? We don't think so. It simply indicates that Russia is a rival or challenger to the US for global power and influence. Sure, Russia isn't America's friend, but that does not axiomatically mean that Russia is Washington's foe. Instead, it's more appropriate to see Putin's Russia as a competitor—albeit an intense and shrewd one—to the US. What Russia is doing is simply playing—and, to this point, playing well—the game of great power politics. Consistent with the logic of realist scholarship, it's pushing and pressing its interests as forward as possible, in a mostly clever and cost-acceptable manner. Yes, Russia has been willing to take risks, as its adventures in Ukraine and Syria suggest. But there's no evidence to indicate that Putin is ready and willing to face the prospect of suffering high costs in blood and treasure. Concretely, there are evident limits on what Russia is willing to do and expend to defend its client in Syria and to continue its troublemaking in Ukraine. And there's no sign that Russia seeks a hot war or even significantly destabilized relations with the US, or conflict with Europe/NATO.

While Russia is looking to undermine US power globally, and it has done so in a number of ways, it's not seeking to dethrone the US from the ranks of the globe's superpowers. Yes, Russia aspires to great power status, and would prefer to be the world's hegemon. Yet, at the same time, it wants—needs—the US to remain a vital, strong player in the world. Why? Because if America's power is considerably sapped, then it will no longer be able or willing to keep its friends and allies in line and out of mischief. And this includes America's friends in Europe. As a result, an enervated and insular US creates national security concerns and issues for Russia—probably more and bigger ones than if US was the sole superpower. Sounds strange perhaps, but it's very likely true.

Not everything Russia does or says is automatically antithetical to American national interests. Indeed, there are even some overlapping interests between the two powers. For instance, the US and Russia have broad overlapping interests on issues like stability in the Middle East and Asia, global terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and world financial stability. Though this isn't always the case, the real puzzle in Russia-American relations is often less about mutually preferred outcomes and more about how to achieve those outcomes. We should also keep in mind that Russia is not nearly the same insular power it was during its heyday during the cold war, when trade and diplomacy was almost exclusively conducted within the Soviet bloc. Russia is fully integrated into the existing world order, participating in an array of global organizations and bodies. Today's Russia knows that it must work and play well with others internationally most of the time. Doing things that would cause extreme isolation to Moscow would be catastrophic to

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Russia nowadays, precisely because it participates in and benefits from an interdependent world. In terms of world military spending, economic power, and other hard power indicators, Russia's material capabilities are relatively restrained. Russia just doesn't have the power to create the kind of chaos and destruction in the world that many hysterics complain and worry about.

In sum, Russia is clearly culpable in a variety of egregious events. And, the US ought to respond when Russia harms American national security and economic interests—though with prudence and caution. It is consequential to place Russian behavior in a wider context and be wary of the prevailing hyperbole about Russia, Putin and US-Russian relations more broadly. Doing so allows us to properly view Russia as a rival, a challenger and a competitor, to the US for power and influence, not an enemy. It does the US, as well as the international community, no good if discussion and debate about US-Russian relations aren't grounded in sound logic and empirical evidence. For if we can't properly view and assess Moscow, then it's awfully difficult to create and implement an effective policy on Russia.

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