

Commentary

The Russia Problem

The E.U. must recognize its strengths (and Russia's weaknesses) as it pushes Moscow to be more responsible

Josef Joffe

RUSSIA HAS A EUROPEAN STRATEGY, BUT Europe does not have one for Russia—unless you want to call “Let’s not rile the Bear” a strategy. Nor is “Let’s annoy him a little bit” the epitome of statecraft. The latest example is Georgia. In the wake of the Russian invasion this summer, the European Union froze talks about a new economic partnership. But on Nov. 14, that killer sanction was lifted after just 10 weeks when the E.U. and Russia embraced at a summit in Nice.

It does not take a Putinologist to figure out the three basics of Russian strategy: court Western Europe, intimidate Eastern Europe, and split both off from the U.S. “Divide and conquer” is a classic of Russian policy, and the courtship always centers on Germany, the strategic fulcrum of the continent.

The payoffs haven’t been bad. During the August crisis in the Caucasus, Chancellor Angela Merkel sounded as if she might welcome Georgia and the Ukraine into NATO soon. No more; it is back to a pretty clear *nein* for a very long time. To Moscow, Berlin now offers “as close and reliable a partnership as possible.”

So much for the courtship. The intimidation of Europe’s East—the Baltics, Poland, Ukraine, the Czech Republic—is also doing fine. Ukraine and the Baltics, after all, were once part of the Soviet Union, and the others were satrapies until the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. Never mind that all of them, with the exception of Ukraine, are now firmly embedded in E.U. and NATO; for Russia they are either the “near abroad” or what the tsars used to call Russia’s “sphere of influence.”

To make the point, the Kremlin has been turning its gas pipelines on and off. That got the attention of Ukraine, Belarus and the Czechs. To cow Poland it slapped an embargo on meat imports, pitting the angry Poles against their not-so-supportive Western neighbors. The most recent gambit is the threat to install short-range missiles in Kaliningrad or Belarus—as if those 10 American antiballistic missiles slated for deployment in Poland were

aimed straight at the Kremlin’s men’s room. Of course, they are not. They are intended as a hedge against an Iranian nuclear threat. And the Russians know that by dint of their range and position, these two handfuls of rockets could not even put a dent in their vast offensive potential.

Yet this puny shield makes a wonderful propaganda weapon that turns Germany and others against the U.S. and the East Europeans. Remember that the rule is “Don’t rile the Bear,” and so whenever the Bear growls, he is sure to find a receptive audience west of Warsaw and Prague. You would have thought Russia’s march through Georgia and its quasi-annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would have instilled a healthy sense of ursophobia in Berlin and points west. You might also think that Russian pressure tactics against the newer members of the E.U. and NATO would sharpen doubts about Moscow’s pledges to be a “good citizen.”

In fact, the short freeze in the aftermath of Georgia was the exception that proves the rule—which reads: “When in doubt, seek to please.” Call it instinct, call it reflex—the fact is that Europe (minus those Easterners who remember the terrible old days under the Soviet knout) will seek to avoid confrontation. The Russians know it, and the Obama Administration will learn this soon enough.

To live peacefully in the “common house” of Eurasia, especially after two hot world wars and one cold one, is of course a perfectly rational desire. But a desire is not a strategy, and that is where Europe sells itself short. The E.U. has a population around three times larger than Russia’s. Its GDP dwarfs Russia’s by a factor of 12. And the 27 members of the E.U. heavily outspend Moscow on defense.

On the other side, Russia remains true to the quip of former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt about the Soviet

Union: "An Upper Volta with nukes." OK, today it is not just rockets. The Kremlin's power also flows (more effectively, in fact) from those pipelines that have hooked Europe on Russian oil and gas.

But for all of its fabulous riches in the ground,

Russia remains a kind of Third World country, an extraction economy whose welfare and clout fluctuate with the price of oil. Today, oil fetches less than one-half of what it did when Russia, flush with cash and cockiness, invaded Georgia. Its

stock market has crashed more heavily than any other—by more than 70%.

The E.U. is stronger than it thinks, and Russia is weaker than it pretends. Note to Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy: Use your leverage not to rile Russia, but to recruit it into the community of responsible powers. Tell President Medvedev that the new economic partnership agreement comes with a good-conduct pledge—like not invading neighbors or threatening them with missiles. ■

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In step *Europe needs to work with Russia, not march to its drum*