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AMERICAN DEMOCRACY is malfunctioning to the detriment of our foreign-policy decision making. The hysterical and one-sided U.S. media coverage of the August war between Russia and Georgia is just the most recent example. Watching the way the American political class sometimes discusses international affairs, it is hard not to wonder to what extent we are capable of responsible judgments, or for that matter, even rational dialogue. In this particular case it could lead to the further disintegration of U.S.-Russia ties; in the longer term, our foreign-policy malfunctions could have far more catastrophic consequences.

The suggestion that Russia started the war is simply a distortion of reality. As even ardent-Georgia-supporter Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, “following repeated violations of the ceasefire in South Ossetia, including the shelling of Georgian villages, the Georgian government launched a major military operation into Tskhinvali and other areas of the separatist region.” Tbilisi, which rejected several Russian proposals to sign a non-use-of-force pledge, may not have started the fighting, but did escalate it to an entirely new level.

None of this is to whitewash Russian conduct. Moscow was not an impartial mediator and clearly supported both separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. And Russia took the war to Georgia proper. Also, controversial Russian conduct at home and abroad inevitably provided the prism through which many in the West looked at the war over South Ossetia.

Still, at the end of the day, this was a local conflict, with legitimate and illegitimate grievances on all sides—driven by leftover problems from the Soviet collapse. The war has not and will not affect fundamental American national interests so long as this incident does not become a model for future Russian behavior.

After all, if preventing Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence was truly important to the Bush administration, it should not have championed Kosovo’s independence despite Serbia’s objections and without a UN Security Council mandate. Moscow repeatedly warned that Kosovo’s independence would establish a precedent for the Georgian enclaves.

Moreover, at this point, there are no grounds to believe that Russia will repeat what it did in Abkhazia and South Ossetia anywhere else on its periphery. Russian soldiers are not currently

stationed in any other geographically contiguous regions. Nevertheless, it is necessary and appropriate for the United States to reassure Russia's neighbors that America and its allies will resist any encroachment of their sovereignty, to tell Moscow that trying to oust the government in Tbilisi would be a deal-breaker in cooperating with the West, and to provide aid to rebuild Georgia and to help its government avoid collapsing under Russian pressure.

The Bush administration went much further than that, however, with strong support from a bipartisan majority in Congress. All condemned Russia's behavior and accepted Georgia's, and many compared the situation to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 or, as some McCain advisers suggested, even the Nazi annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938. Treating Georgia as if it were an innocent victim, the administration launched a renewed and intense effort to get NATO support for a Membership Action Plan for Georgia in advance of a December 2008 meeting, despite the objections of key European allies and the risk of a protracted conflict with Russia in the Caucasus and beyond.

No one expects a new cold war. Russia is neither a superpower nor a match for America militarily or economically. Nor does Moscow have a Soviet-style alliance of dependencies like the Warsaw Pact, despite half-hearted efforts to build a loose network of anti-American governments with Iran, Syria, Cuba and Venezuela. Moreover, Russia and its elite are much more integrated into the Western-dominated world economy than was ever conceivable in the Soviet Union's time. Whatever else one may say about Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, President Dmitri Medvedev and their associates, they are calculating and pragmatic leaders. They want to restore Russia's greatness and enhance its influence, especially in its neighborhood, but not at the cost of self-isolation, economic disaster or an all-out arms race with the United States. Allowing our political class to distort the facts, a costly and unnecessary breakdown in the U.S.-Russia relationship can happen. In a most unrealistic fashion, Secretary Rice has regularly argued that America's relations with Russia could proceed on two separate tracks. On one track, the United States is free to promote its interests and values over Russian objections, expanding NATO to include Russia's neighbors, moving NATO bases closer and closer to Russian borders, withdrawing from the ABM Treaty, establishing new antimissile bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, and lobbying for energy pipelines from Central Asia that bypass Russia. On the other track, Washington expects Russia to act as a junior partner, supporting American positions on nonproliferation, counterterrorism and a host of other international issues.

Notwithstanding Secretary Rice's view, there is a growing body of evidence that Russia's cooperation cannot be separated from the overall U.S.-Russia relationship. While they do not publicly establish any direct linkages, Russian officials have said quite explicitly in private conversations that they could be more helpful in many areas, even in supporting the U.S. invasion of Iraq, if they thought that Washington was a true partner. For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov recently told me that:

“Russia will always be opposed to Iran getting nuclear weapons. But how we discuss it with our American partners, in which forum, with which specific outcomes, of course is influenced by our general ability to work together, starting with the willingness of our American partners to sit down and discuss issues of mutual interest.”

Unfortunately, while American and Russian interests on many matters are similar, they are not identical. For the American part, no administration can accept President Medvedev’s suggestion that Russia has “privileged interests” on its periphery. Nor can Moscow dictate who joins NATO. On the other hand, Russia has interests and leverage in other parts of the world the United States cares about. Moscow has had a businesslike relationship with Iran for decades. It does not view the Iranian nuclear program as a direct threat. A nonnuclear Iran is a U.S. priority, however. And as we saw with the breakdown of U.S.-Iran relations during the most recent UN Security Council meeting, without Moscow’s cooperation, all we end up with is hollow victories at best. There was no new movement on Iran’s enrichment program.

Disagreements on Iran in the Security Council could also begin to affect other work there. Secretary Rice was right to observe that Russia and the United States “share an interest in preventing the Security Council from reverting to the gridlocked institution it was during the cold war,” but it is clear that Washington and Moscow have different views of what the body can and should do. The United States wants the Security Council to be a voice of the “international community,” representing essentially U.S. and European perspectives. Russia, on the other hand, clearly prefers it to represent a multipolar world in which Russia is an important player. If America and Russia become adversaries, these differences may be irreconcilable.

But a stalemate in the United Nations is far from the most troublesome development that could occur if Russia becomes a genuine adversary. Moscow could exercise less self-restraint in military cooperation with Iran, including selling it sophisticated air defenses and cruise missiles, and even providing commando training that could benefit Hezbollah and Hamas. Considering our new emphasis on winning the war in Afghanistan, it would be devastating if Russia not only stopped ongoing cooperation, but put pressure on Central Asian countries to do away with remaining American bases and even discreetly encouraged Afghanistan’s Tajik and Uzbek commanders to undermine the central government in Kabul. In Latin America, Russia could energetically pursue an offer to help Venezuela build nuclear reactors. Russia’s military, already receiving a 26 percent increase in funding to \$50 billion a year, could get more; enough to develop limited global power projection for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia could also work to increase its energy leverage even further, especially through coordination with other natural-gas producers, including Iran, to raise prices and limit the alternatives available to America’s European allies.

Realistically, even with its enormous energy reserves, and the arms and influence they buy, Russia does not yet have the power or the inclination to lead a global anti-American coalition. But it can help to shape the evolution of the international system in ways that would damage the United States. No one quite knows what the world order will look like five or ten years from now, to say nothing of twenty or twenty-five years in the future. But as the financial crisis has

reminded us, there is little we can take for granted in the complex world of the twenty-first century. American domination of international politics and economics is real, but it is not necessarily universal or permanent, and turning Russia into a hostile force could tip the balance in unpredictable and destructive ways.

Finally, with a number of governments from Tehran to Tbilisi and Caracas to Kiev eager to manipulate the U.S.-Russia tension for their own purposes, we should not disregard the remote but ominous possibility of slipping inadvertently into a real shooting war. As Europe discovered in July 1914, carelessly expanding alliances can lead to disaster.

Moscow's initial euphoria over its victory in Georgia has been tamed of late by the dramatic decline of its financial markets. Russia's political and business elite now have a better sense of the reality that their country's economic integration into the international system is a two-way street and that it depends heavily on the West's continued confidence in Moscow's direction. This in turn creates an opening on both sides for a new beginning. We won't have a beautiful friendship anytime soon, but we might be able to develop a viable path forward that advances our mutual interests and keeps our many disagreements under control. Russia will still make its own decisions and they often will not be the decisions we want to see. But in view of the alternatives, keeping the door open to a constructive relationship doesn't look so bad. If the main questions in our relations with Russia were how perfectly Moscow has developed democracy, a market economy and an independent judiciary, how effectively Russia has been fighting corruption and whether its media is free and its elections fair, the case against cooperating with Russia would be easy to make. Anti-American gloating over the U.S. financial crisis by Russian officials and many in the Russian media makes it tempting to say in response to Moscow's own serious economic problems that it could not happen to a more deserving people. The problem is that in the real world, we can't turn our relationships with other major powers into a morality play without considerable costs. Cooperation with Russia is not a reward for its good behavior — it is something required by very important and even vital U.S. interests. Of course, even with the best U.S. efforts, there is always a possibility that Moscow would say "Nyet." Yet should it happen, we will have enough time to launch a vigorous response and we will be in a better position to mobilize strong international support after we have made a genuine attempt to reach common ground.

Demonizing our rivals and adversaries is not just about replacing objective evaluation with polemical oversimplification. It is a problem that can lead to tragic mistakes and unintended outcomes detrimental to U.S. interests, as it has in Iraq. Frustration with Russia is not an excuse for hurting America.

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