

Has Russia Gone Rogue?

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Chairman McCain, Senator Reed, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to join your discussion today on Russian policy in Europe and the Middle East, especially actions taken by Russian military units in Syria in the last few days. These Russian steps are not only unprecedented in the post-Cold War era, they have few antecedents in the Cold War itself. They call for careful analysis and an equally careful policy response.

Members of this committee surely remember how General Joe Dunford, the new JCS Chairman, described Russian policy in his confirmation testimony. “Alarming,” he called it, and I completely agree. I don’t, however, agree with the other thing General Dunford said. He described Russia as an “existential threat” to the United States.

Let me explain why I disagree.

First, in using this language we mislead ourselves. No matter how alarmed we are by Russia’s current behavior, we use the term “existential threat” only because of its large strategic nuclear arsenal. Its many nuclear weapons are a potential threat whether our relations with Russia are good or bad, whether Russian behavior is reckless or wise. Russia has acted recklessly of late, but that has not really increased the “existential threat” General Dunford spoke of.

Second, this language also misleads the Russians. It feeds a public mood in Russia that borders on national hysteria. These days senior Russian officials often say things about the United States that are bizarre and incomprehensible. Unfortunately, hearing that we see Russia as an “existential threat”—pretty extreme language, after all—tells many Russians that our countries are on a collision course to war. Worse, it is understood by some to mean that America’s leaders are preparing for this future conflict. I urge the members of this Committee to take a different approach—to challenge responsible Russians to see how strange their country’s policy looks to the outside world, not to make ourselves seem equally strange.

Now, a few words about Russian policy itself. As I have said, it is both alarming and strange. We need to appreciate just how alarming it is, but we should not think it comes out of nowhere.

First, Russian actions in the Middle East reflect the doubling (and more) of their defense budget in the past 10 years. This program of modernization is still unfolding; the biggest procurement projects are ahead. As Russia’s capabilities have increased, so has its anti-Western rhetoric. The official military doctrine adopted late last year identifies both NATO and the United States as threats to Russia.

Second, Russian actions reflect the new nationalism of Russian public opinion. The seizure of Crimea and continuing attempts to fragment eastern Ukraine have given this nationalist mood an angrier, more embattled tone. Russian decision-makers surely feel they can count on popular support for more assertive displays of national power, but they cannot be any surer of this than we can. There are in fact reasons to believe that Russian leaders worry about operations that might bring casualties down the road. (How else to explain the steadfast lying about the presence of Russian military personnel in Ukraine or the claim that in Syria only “volunteers” will take part in ground operations?)

Third, Russia’s actions are a response, as President Obama has noted, to the weakness of the Assad regime in Syria, Russia’s oldest (and now only) real ally in the region. As President Putin has made clear in Ukraine, he is prepared to make a significant military commitment to save embattled clients, no matter how shaky and illegitimate their position. But Putin acts this way in part because he thinks circumstances allow it. In Syria, several years of policy confusion by the United States and Europe have encouraged him. Had the United States imposed a no-fly zone in Syria three years ago, there would be no Russian intervention today.

Fourth, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter may well be right that Russian policy is “doomed to fail.” But even in the course of failing it may do a great deal of damage, both in Syria and beyond. It should therefore be a goal of the United States and its allies to limit Russia’s intervention. Continued confusion—including calls for Russia to focus its actions on defeating ISIS—will not achieve this aim.

Fifth, anyone responsible for the national security of the United States—and I certainly include the members of this Committee—should worry about where Russia’s reckless behavior will lead next. We should not by any means conclude that we face an endless, never-cresting wave of activism. If anything, what Putin is doing now in Syria probably reduces the risk of near-term military provocations in Europe, especially against our NATO allies. (If I were a Baltic defense minister, I’d be sleeping slightly better these days.) But we have to remember that most of us have been wrong in anticipating Russian actions of the past

couple of years. Just when we thought Putin had finally realized that he had acted foolishly, he acted even more foolishly. Today the ingredients of some future confrontation may already be coming together. After what we've seen of Russian behavior, we can't afford to be unprepared.

Mr. Chairman, let me close as I began—by urging realism about the problems Russian policy creates without making those problems worse than they have to be. Many Russians understand that President Putin is damaging his own country's security as well as others. They should hear from us—and from you. They should understand that the United States will protect itself, its allies, and its interests. They should also understand that there can be a place for them in this effort if they want it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to our discussion.