

Ambassador

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"It's worse than a crime, it is a mistake." – Talleyrand

Russia still unable to deal with its neighbors

As the Swedish historian Kristian Gerner has argued, Russia has two long-standing approaches to neighboring countries – Kazan and Manchu.

Under the first model, Russia absorbs, overwhelms or keeps bullying its neighbor as it did in 1552 when Ivan the Terrible conquered Kazan. Under the second, it recognizes the neighbor as equal and/or too big to take on as it did in the 1689 Nerchinsk Treaty, its first border treaty with China. There is nothing in between.

It is not difficult to sort Russia's present neighbors into their appropriate categories. Without exaggerating, Russia has problems with all of its neighbors with one notable exception – Finland. And this again is solely a Finnish achievement.

The contrast with modern Germany is striking. Having emerged from total catastrophe and abandoned a mythical imperial vocation as heir to the Holy Roman Empire, Germany ultimately found its place in the West and embraced its values. In *The Long Road to the West* (2007), German historian Heinrich August Winkler gives an impressive account of the process that profoundly changed Germany and Europe. Although German culture was undeniably "Western," the society never embraced human rights values or liberal economic values.

While the Yeltsin years are often deliberately dismissed as chaotic, the comparison with Russia of today is interesting. Despite enormous economic hardships, the first post-Soviet decade was a time of unprecedented freedom and pluralism, with the most candid political slogan of those early years echoing a broadly felt sentiment was that Russia should join the "civilized world."

Germany has nine neighbors. No European country has more. Moreover, it is fair to say Germany's success extends beyond the economic sphere. Its moral foundation is characterized by its ability to respect its neighbors. "Don't forget Luxembourg" was Helmut Kohl's famous advice to his cabinet.

As Russia has demonstrated on several occasions in its handling of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, it has no compunction about using beggar-thy-neighbor policies to achieve its goals.

President Kekkonen of Finland notably used this argument in reverse to turn the tables on Khrushchev and Brezhnev. He convinced them that Finland's economy would suffer and the country's political stability would be jeopardized if the Soviet Union prevented Finland's integration into postwar Western European economic arrangements such as EFTA and the EEC. Joining the EU in 1995, therefore, was a homecoming.

This ability to manage an asymmetric power relationship lies at the heart of the unfortunate Cold War term "Finlandization." It attained wide use without appreciating that, despite escaping occupation during and after World War Two, Finland's continued survival depended on dealing with Stalin's heirs. It seems even more out of place in the current context.

Russia's seizure of Crimea has invoked Cold War terminology such as "Hamburg grab" and its Nordic version "Finnmarken grab." Obviously, the Red Army with its 20 armored divisions in East Germany could at will occupy the border city of Hamburg at any time during the Cold War. The Red Army had of course the power to advance into Northern Norway. But the question then as now has always been: "What happens next?"

Crimea is lost for Ukraine, so what next?

Any Russian incursion further into Ukraine, which now seems unlikely, would unleash the apocalypse of a post-Soviet civil war. Instead we have an ongoing low-intensity civil war in the east and southeast of Ukraine. Militias using gangster methods enjoy active and tacit support from Moscow. The unruly character of these War Lord formations belies an ominous lack of control. The fire in Odessa that killed almost fifty people is only one example of inadvertent consequences when forces like these are unleashed.

Russia has already wrecked its relations with Europe and the US, and its economy is bound to suffer. It is difficult to perceive a return to business-as-usual in the foreseeable future. The NATO debate that has arisen in Finland and Sweden is only one of the unintended consequences. We are witnessing the end of yet another historic attempt to modernize Russia.

As we have observed in recent weeks, Russia's pivot to China is now fact. It does nothing, however, to diminish Russia's need to reform its economy or its society. The role of a junior partner to the Middle Kingdom has never been an enviable one.

Ukraine is a variation of Russia, historically, culturally and politically. It is clear that Moscow will not accept anything less than a Kiev it does control. Moreover, Russia finds the thought of being challenged by a variation of itself repugnant. A Slavic-Orthodox power choosing a culturally and politically different path of development is not just unpalatable, it is intolerable.

Russia's inability to deal with its neighbors is its predicament. The maxim of defining security by total control of its perimeter and attempting to secure a *droit de regard* over the policies of its neighbors is no solution to modern Europe's problems. It provides neither security nor stability. It merely assures continued enmity.

No reference to Serbia and Kosovo is complete without noting that Serbia is well on its way to becoming an EU member. Russia, by contrast, offers even less and less an economic alternative – even for Ukraine. Russia's soft power attractiveness, never strong to begin with, has all but evaporated.

Kiev's best defense is for Ukrainians to get its act together and to demonstrate to Russia that their insistence on Ukraine not integrating economically with Europe will foster dysfunction and chaos that Russia itself can ill afford. It must be reminded that not all refugees will head west to Poland and points beyond. +++