

[Comment] EU and US should co-operate with Russia

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The United States is set to re-think its role and leadership in the world. Europe shows signs of being newly assertive and more self-confident. And Russia may have to acknowledge its vulnerabilities and the limits of adventurism. These three developments mean right now, the EU and the US have a unique opportunity to craft a new policy toward Russia.



Europe shows signs of being newly assertive and more self-confident (Photo: Kremlin.ru)

Comment article

To take advantage of this opening, the Obama Administration should present a united front with Europe, because division within the West invites Russia to assert itself. It must also find ways to address Russia's perception of the last twenty years as a continual humiliation. Above all, in shaping its policies, it should draw on the lesson of the EU itself: The recipe for this part of Europe in the 21st Century is inclusion.

We propose four facets to this approach, the first of which is the need to build an inclusive security architecture. Russia is concerned about its southern border and has resorted to 19th Century sphere-of-influence rhetoric and tactics. Such a formulation must be opposed resolutely.

However, current institutional arrangements such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe , the Commonwealth of Independent States, or NATO are unacceptable to one side or the other. The best alternative is to reshape security relations between US, EU and Russia along a political and security architecture which can accommodate the interests of all three actors in the direction of a security community that fully involves Russia as an equal partner and builds enduring trust. The OSCE can, with political will and imagination, serve as the springboard for new ideas.

Nevertheless, a stable security architecture in the region cannot be built without the insight and participation of the countries in the region. Turkey's latest proposal for a Caucasus Stability and Co-operation Platform could be useful as a basis for bringing together the necessary voices in the Caucasus. The success of another local initiative, the Southeast European Co-operation Process, could provide additional inspiration for a stability pact of a wider geographical scope.

The next move is to put more Europe in the east.

The enlargement of the European Union has been the most successful peace project in history: a powerful magnet for government reform, political stability and security. An expansion of the EU may be too difficult today, but the EU must strengthen what is offered to the states to its east, starting with easier travel to Europe, greater free trade perspectives, and more substantive political and financial assistance.

More Europe in the east should not lead to new divisions. The EU and Russia must conclude soon the new EU-Russia agreement, which will replace the current Partnership and Co-operation Agreement. More Europe in Russia - with greater interaction and joint perspectives - should be actively pursued with Russia too.

Europe also needs to diversify its energy routes and at the same time share the benefits of doing so.

Europe's energy dependence on Russia weakens its political latitude. The West wants routes outside Russia, but it is unclear how to get there. Russia counters with less expensive routes across its territory, but it is unclear if it is a reliable supplier. The aggressive geopolitics of some hawks in the Kremlin must be opposed, but their domestic rivals also need to be enticed. Diversification of supplies and routes must remain a priority in both the US and Europe, but this does not need to be a zero-sum game.

It should be possible to develop diverse routes, including routes that avoid Russian territory, but that allow all the players, including Russia, to invest and receive benefits. It may be possible to engage Russian companies in the ownership structure of non-Russian pipeline and transportation infrastructure. With a minority stake, they would have an interest in seeing the routes run efficiently, but not the ability to disrupt operations. It may not work, but it is worth trying. And there are new encouraging signs. A recent EU proposal provides the first indication of European preparedness to guarantee gas purchase. Huge new gas reserves were confirmed this fall in Turkmenistan. And more comprehensive security and even financial help from the US and the EU would likely reassure investors that their massive capital inflows will be protected.

Lastly, it is vital to build institutions that foster collaboration.

President Sarkozy has proposed a "Joint Economic Community" between the EU and Russia. If the US were to be invited, it could prove the first step towards a genuine strategic partnership between the EU, the US and Russia. The Black Sea region has great potential for a politics of inclusion as well. This includes EU and NATO members,

Russia, Ukraine and the Caucasus. The EU's Black Sea Synergy is a good but hesitant start. It must become more political and build common institutions.

Once again, this can succeed only with the states in the region playing leading roles. The Black Sea Economic Co-operation process, the only inclusive local initiative in the region, has great potential too. However, in order to deliver, it needs to graduate from economic co-operation to joint political projects. It also needs the active support of the EU and the US.

The paramount objective for both the EU and the US remains to form co-operative systems across Europe and Eurasia that can share global political responsibilities.

Should the collision course with Russia continue, perhaps over Ukraine, history is likely to remember this as a moment of spectacular lack of imagination.

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