
PROXY WARS AND PROVOCATIONS: RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE US ARE CHILLING

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On Monday in the heart of Moscow, for a fleeting instant, the bleak stand-off between the US and Russia will be put aside. That day is the 71st anniversary of the meeting on the Elbe River, and to mark the occasion a sculpture will be unveiled in the Old Arbat district, barely a kilometre from the Kremlin, depicting the historic link-up between Soviet and American troops on the bombed out bridge at Torgau on April 25 1945.

At that point, Nazi Germany was cut in two. Inside a week Hitler was dead and a few days later World War II in Europe officially ended. More to the point, the Elbe signified a rare moment when the two countries were allies, united in a common cause. But for all the symbolic importance that attends Mondays event, and whatever dignitaries are present, it will be low key □ and small wonder. No ceremony can banish reality.

We may not be exactly reliving the Cold War. Unlike the immediate post-war decades, no ideological conflict exists to underpin it. Communism has virtually vanished from the face of the earth, and Russia practices its own bastardised version of capitalism. But todays climate of tension, mutual suspicion and mutual incomprehension feels scarcely less chilly.

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America doesnt get why the Russians believe that Ukraine is part of, and must remain within, their sphere of influence, why they felt justified in seizing Crimea, and provoking a low-grade conflict in largely Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine that holds the entire country in suspended animation. Ditto its behaviour a few years ago in Georgia, another former Soviet republic that sought to realign itself with the West.

Russia for its part remains perennially insecure, perennially unable to understand that what it sees as an entirely reasonable desire to protect its western borders is perceived by the West □ and particularly by the countries, that share that border □ as unprovoked and unnecessary aggression. It cannot quite grasp that the 28-nation Nato alliance of 2016 is not a re-incarnation of the Third Reich, secretly planning to use its forward positions in the old Soviet domains of eastern Europe as

a springboard for overrunning the motherland.

Other elements of the original Cold War are also resurfacing. Unwilling to take each other on directly, they do battle in proxy wars, most obviously in Syria. Russia is beefing up its armed forces, especially its attack submarines, where the US and Nato have long held an advantage. Ancient Cold War concerns are suddenly alive again, such as control of the maritime channels between Greenland, Iceland and Britain (GUK in Nato terminology) through which Soviet submarines must pass to reach the open North Atlantic.

All the while, the provocations continue. For Russia, the very presence of Nato so close to its borders is a provocation, and not without reason. After all, during the Cold War proper the alliance was hundreds of miles away, with East Germany, Poland as well as the satellite Soviet Republics of Belarus and the Baltics states standing in-between. Today Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania belong to the alliance. Nato is on the very doorstep of Russia proper.

So Russia stages provocations of its own – most blatantly on April 13 when the US destroyer Donald Cook, while on a routine patrol in international waters in the Baltic, was buzzed by a Russian jet that flew within 30 feet of it. Washington's response was to tut-tut about gross unprofessionalism on the part of the Russians, and how Moscow was pushing the envelope. But more concrete counter steps are on the way.

In testimony to the Senate last week, Army General Curtis Scaparrotti, the incoming Supreme Commander of Nato and of US forces in Europe, declared that President Putin was seeking not just to push Nato back, but to destroy it. Currently, the US rotates a couple of combat brigades in and out of Eastern Europe. Washington has already boosted its European military budget by \$4bn. Now Scaparrotti wants a brigade, equivalent to 5,000 men, permanently stationed there, a tripwire to re-assure nervous allies and guarantee a US response to any direct Russian aggression.

As for incidents like the Donald Cook, Scaparrotti advocated giving the Russians a taste of their own medicine. In the meantime, Nato will show it means business when it holds military exercises in Poland this summer, involving 25,000 men, which will of course only fuel Russian paranoia. Anyone remember Natos Able Archer exercise of November 1983, a particularly fraught moment in the Cold War, when the Kremlin put its forces on maximum alert, fearing the exercise was camouflage for a full-scale attack on the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons and all?

Nuclear weapons of course remain the bottom line in any confrontation between Russia and the US, and the greatest reason to hope this Cold War 2.0 will not turn hot. More likely, say the wargamers, Moscow will continue the strategy it honed in Ukraine, needling and seeking to destabilise weak neighbours like the Baltics with asymmetric warfare, but stopping short of frontal

attack. One mistake however □ a provocation, a retaliation, a sailor killed or an aircraft shot down □ and the brinkmanship could have incalculable consequences.

All of which is a very long way from the Elbe. That moment on April 25 1945 in reality is far less golden than it seemed then. Europe was about to be split into two ideological, economic and military blocs, and Washington and Moscow already realised that each would be the others main post-war enemy. The Soviet spies in the West were long since at work.

But somehow the candle of collaboration past still flickers. Every so often a so-called Elbe Group, made up of retired senior US and Russian generals, convenes in a third country to discuss problems in the relationship. The group has no official standing, but is a precious backchannel that allows participants to understand each others point of view.

Its not a perfect arrangement, and probably wont change the world any more than the unveiling of a commemorative sculpture in central Moscow. But right now, its the best we can hope for.

Kaynak/Source: