Beyond Sanctions: What’s the West’s Strategy on Russia?

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SUMMARY The escalating sanctions have served as a warning shot to Moscow. But sanctions can only become meaningful if they are part of a wider strategy.

Western sanctions against Russia appear to have a fairly narrow, tangible goal: to punish Moscow for supporting pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. But to what end? Sanctions need to reinforce a wider strategy designed to change Moscow’s behavior so that it starts respecting the sovereignty of all post-Soviet states.

Ukraine is just the latest example in a long series of attempts by Russia to control its neighborhood and to reduce the sovereignty of countries that were controlled by Moscow in Soviet times. The conflict did not start in Ukraine, and it will not end there. The tensions that have erupted in Ukraine will subside only if Russia finally understands that it can have a prosperous future as a nation-state alongside others when it respects the rules of the post–World War II and post–Cold War international system.

Changing Russia’s Behavior

The West’s larger strategic goal must be to change Russian behavior in the post-Soviet space, including Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and elsewhere. Russia needs to accept that principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty apply to all members of the United Nations, not only the powerful ones.

In the society of states designed by the UN charter in 1945, sovereignty depends on the mutual recognition of states as equals. This is also one of the principles of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which the Soviet Union signed and now binds Russia as its successor state. In a wider sense, Russia must accept that the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 is definitive, and that there is no way back to the times of empire.

One way to send this message to Russia is to impose sanctions: if you break the rules, you will be punished. But the aim of sanctions should not be to isolate Russia permanently or to make it a pariah state.

Ultimately, the West wants to alter Russia’s external behavior to give its neighbors the space to build their own nations without being permanently under pressure from Moscow. Beyond sanctions, the West can highlight the importance of state sovereignty by offering support to those neighbors—to make them strong, resilient, and capable of defending themselves against Russian revisionism. And this is exactly what the EU is attempting to do with its European Neighborhood Policy.

While the West is increasingly ready to disrupt commercial and other interaction with Russia through sanctions,
it should clearly demonstrate that its objective is not to make this disruption permanent or to initiate a Cold War-like freeze in relations. On the contrary, the current clash should ultimately be about reengagement, but reengagement that is based on a new definition of relations. The message should be clear that to the extent Russia starts to respect the full sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors, the West will reengage and be ready to deepen and broaden ties.

In the first half of 2014, the West’s internal confusion over how to deal with a more aggressive Russia allowed the Kremlin to perceive the West as divided, confused, and weak. It is important now not just to raise the pressure on Moscow by toughening sanctions but also to send an unambiguous message to the Kremlin about the West’s goals.

The West’s larger aim should be to overcome the current tensions by moving toward a new framework for relations with Russia. Such an agreement must take into account Moscow’s goals and the West’s priorities—and what the United States and Europe are willing to compromise on.

Russia’s Foreign Policy Goals

Moscow has three major foreign policy goals. Its first aim is to make sure the material foundation of its regime is safe. That means assuming as much control as possible over the production and distribution of oil and gas, ideally by owning the entire infrastructure—pipelines, storage facilities, local utility companies, and so on.

Russia’s second goal is to retain control over the post-Soviet neighborhood. The Kremlin sees the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a low point in Russian history, a consequence of the country’s weakness. Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to reverse this perceived failure by rebuilding a kind of “Soviet Union lite” in the form of a Eurasian union. Initial steps have been taken, and Belarus and Kazakhstan are already on board.

Based on Russia’s “energy empire” and a Eurasian bloc under Moscow’s leadership, Putin’s third goal is to rebuild his country as a global power that can see eye to eye with the United States. That would give Moscow a similar role to the one it played during the Cold War.

But in contrast to the days of the Soviet Union, modern-day Russia’s relationship with the West can be described as at least half-cooperative, and not fully competitive. The Kremlin understands that Russia cannot create its own world, given its massive dependency on the outside world as a buyer of commodities and a provider of high-tech goods. Autarky is not an option. But what Russia certainly wants is to have a bigger say in the global order and the ability to act largely unchecked by others.

Reassessing Western Objectives

The West’s goals toward Russia are much more modest today than they were in the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For years, the West’s strategy was to support Russia in its supposed transformation toward liberal democracy, which would have turned Moscow into a responsible stakeholder in the international system. That approach led the West to focus on Russia much more than on the other post-Soviet states. As a side effect, the West granted Moscow a relatively free hand in its neighborhood.

Now, the West must recognize the failure of that policy (which was largely designed by Germany). Instead of moving toward liberalism, Russia has become more autocratic internally and much more aggressive toward its neighbors.

The West has no choice but to accept that it cannot change Russia’s character, at least not for the time being. The United States and Europe should therefore change their strategy and place their primary focus not on Russia, but on the post-Soviet countries that are interested in Western support as they try to build stable, liberal democracies.

With the Ukraine crisis as a catalyst, this is actually starting to happen. The West’s main objective now is to support Europe’s eastern neighborhood against Russia’s attempts to subordinate it. Ending the conflict in Ukraine has become more important than ties with Russia, as the West cannot accept that basic principles of
the international system are being undermined in Europe.

Scope for Compromise?

How, then, can the two sides agree to a deal? The West can afford to compromise on Russia’s first and third goals: energy dominance and global status. Russia can remain the key provider for European energy, in accordance with the EU’s market rules. Moscow can be allowed back into the G8 club of industrialized nations, and the West can end all efforts to isolate Russia and weaken its global role.

But in return, Russia would need to pay a considerable price: to accept its neighbors’ full sovereignty and to start to work with the West to solve the many “frozen” conflicts in the region, in which Moscow is deeply involved.

The chances of achieving such a compromise certainly do not look good at the moment. But ultimately, Russian foreign policy is about regime stability. The Kremlin depends on a constant flow of income from commodities that it can redistribute, thereby positioning itself at the center of economic and political life. Russia today is much more dependent on oil and gas than the Soviet Union once was. And the country craves international recognition as a major player.

On both fronts, Russia needs some kind of agreement with the West. A permanent conflict with Europe and the United States and escalating sanctions would undermine the regime, as it would lose the ability to deliver on the “social contract” it relies on.

Sending the Right Message

The biggest challenge to such a strategy may lie with the West. Only if there is a clear, united Western front will Moscow understand that the EU and the United States are ready for a standoff that the Kremlin simply cannot win.

The more credible the West is, the more likely it is that Moscow will opt for an agreement. As long as the West sends mixed messages, its ability to influence Russia’s behavior is low. Uniting behind sanctions is a big achievement—it’s an important demonstration of Western resolve that considerably raises the West’s credibility and therefore the chances of achieving its goals.

Given Russia’s dependency on the West, lack of real friends and allies, and absence of attraction beyond its borders, Moscow certainly cannot win a new Cold War. Indeed, Europe and the United States have much better cards than Russia in the conflict that Moscow has forced upon them. The balance of power is overwhelmingly in the West’s favor.

The escalating sanctions have served as a warning shot to Moscow. But sanctions can only become meaningful if they are part of a wider strategy. Western leaders should use this momentum, agree on a strategy, and communicate their expectations clearly to the Kremlin.

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