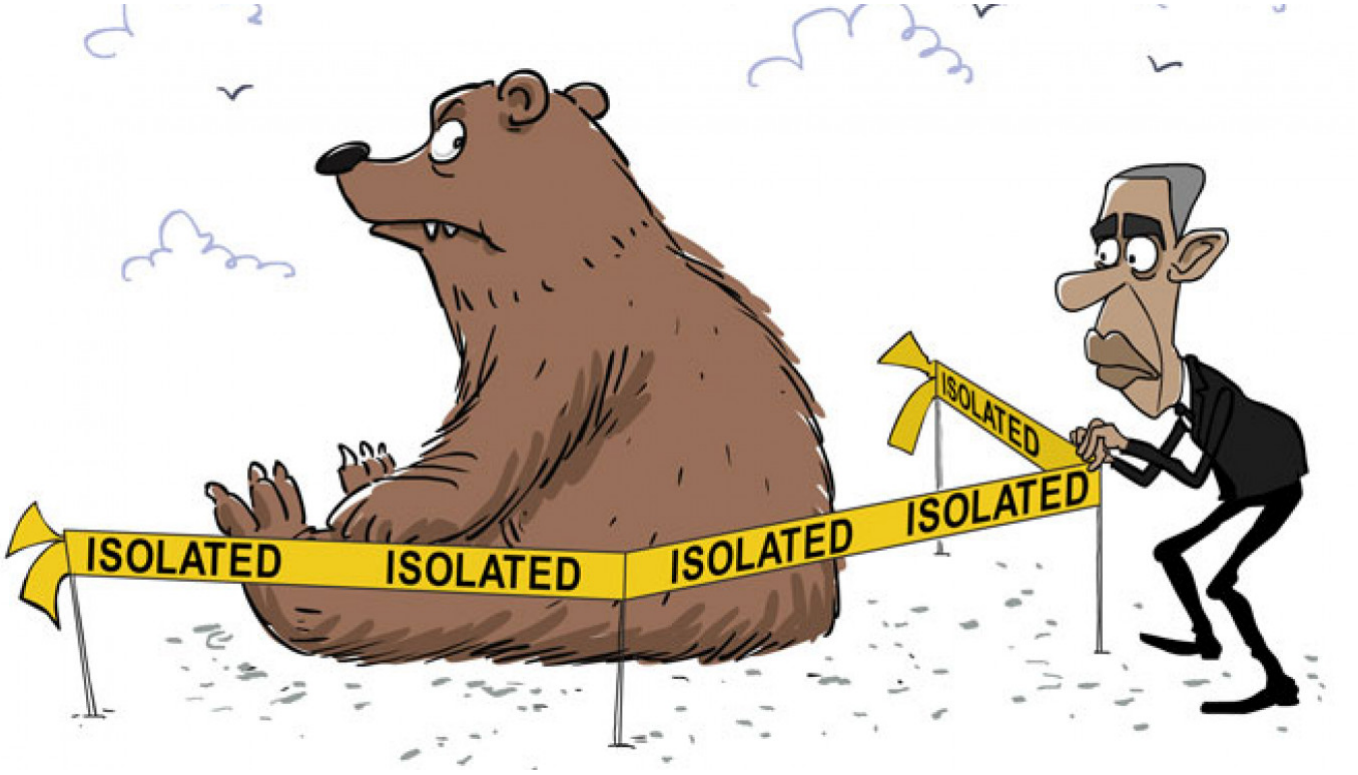
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For Better or Worse, Russia Is Not Isolated

By Mark Adomanis

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During the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the U.S. State Department has frequently invoked Russia's "isolation" from the "international community." To listen to the press releases coming out of Washington, Russia's actions in Crimea have made it an outcast, a rogue state that is no longer welcome among the community of "responsible nations."

Among the Washington establishment's foreign policy community a rough consensus exists which holds that Russia, which has never had a surfeit of friends or allies, is rapidly losing whatever support it once enjoyed.

Russia's relations with the West, and particularly with the U.S., have clearly undergone a dramatic deterioration over the past six months. Russia has recently been subjected to a previously unimaginable litany of trade sanctions, asset freezes, and visa bans, the kind of treatment that is usually meted out to countries like Iran or Sudan.

Even leaders whose natural instincts are toward conciliation and negotiation, people like U.S.

President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, are under enormous political pressure to "get tough" with Putin.

So-called "sectoral" sanctions are still highly unlikely to be introduced: these sanctions would likely cause too much harm to a Western Europe that is still on shaky economic ground. The fact that they are even being seriously discussed at all, however, underlines the extent to which things have changed. Policies that are considered moderate would have been considered extraordinarily hawkish as recently as 2012.

The above, however, only covers one side of the story. The upcoming BRICS summit in Fortaleza and Brasilia is a particularly clear example that the world is changing that the West, while still influential, powerful, and wealthy, is no longer capable of speaking for "the international community."

In contrast to the West, where Russia's annexation of Crimea was greeted with near-universal outrage among all major political parties and interest groups, Brazil, India, China and South Africa have collectively reacted to Russia's recent actions with a shrug. You could spend all day searching the far corners of the Internet trying to find outraged denunciations of Russian behavior originating in Brasilia, New Delhi, Beijing, or Johannesburg, but you will not find much.

The BRICS might not have been openly supportive of Russian activity in Ukraine, but their stance could scarcely be more different from the West's. While the West wants to punish, isolate, and contain Russia, the BRICS vocally and openly support cooperation with it in an ever-greater number of fields. The BRICS are even going so far as to create a development bank that would function as an of analogue to the IMF or World Bank.

It is true that the BRICs are currently going through some economic troubles, and it is highly unlikely that they will experience a repeat of the stratospheric growth rates of the early 2000s. But the BRICS grew so rapidly for so long that, to a large extent, they have already changed the economic landscape. They are not omnipotent, but they cannot be ignored.

The simple truth is that, far from being "isolated," Russia continues to enjoy good relations with most of the world and particularly those parts of the world that are demographically and economically dynamic. So why, despite this, do so many people spend so much time talking about the country's isolation?

Well, unfortunately Western commentary on Russia often conflates what should happen with what is happening. So, because people think that Russia should "pay a price" for its actions in Ukraine, there is a widespread tendency to assume that it is, in fact, paying a price. Unfortunately, the world cares very little for such notions of fairness. Disregarding the debate about what should happen to Russia, it is obvious that the country has not been transformed into a plus-sized version of North Korea.

Why is it important to understand this? Because policy can only be successful if it is premised on an accurate understanding of reality. Russian history is, unfortunately replete with examples demonstrating that policy formed on false assumptions, such as "the state is capable of effectively setting prices" almost always ends up being really horrible and ineffective policy.

A Western Russia policy that is, even partially, constructed on the assumption that Russia has been kicked out of the "international community" simply will not work. Russia hasn't been kicked out of the international community, and it won't be. Depending on your point of view that might seem extremely unfair or entirely justified, but it's just the way that things are.

The above absolutely does not mean that the West is helpless and needs to accept whatever Russia ends up doing. The EU is still Russia's largest trading partner by far, and even with the aftereffects of the financial crisis the West remains wealthier, more powerful, and more influential than any other group of countries. The gap between the West and everyone else, however, is much smaller than it was and gets smaller with each passing day. In order to have an effective Russia policy the West needs to better learn the limits of its own influence and better understand that many other countries simply do not see the world in the same way.

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