

U.S.-Russia Cycle of One-Upmanship Could Prove Catastrophic

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The Ukraine crisis has sparked a resurgence of one-upmanship in U.S.-Russian relations, unparalleled since the height of the Cold War, that — if left unchecked — could take a truly catastrophic turn.

After the Maidan movement brought an end to Viktor Yanukovich's reign in Kiev, Russia accused the West of having fostered a coup, aimed at least in part at dealing a geopolitical blow to Moscow.

In the name of defending its interests and, above all, the rights of Russian-speakers, Moscow responded to the perceived threat by annexing Crimea.

Western leaders, in turn, claim that Russia had deliberately meddled in Ukraine's internal and sovereign affairs in order to hinder its path toward Western-style democratization, and then went on to accuse Moscow of backing pro-Russian insurgents in Ukraine's turbulent

east.

The West imposed sanctions in an attempt to impact Russia's policy on Ukraine, to which Moscow responded with tit-for-tat food import bans.

Russia moved troops to the Ukrainian border, and some — whether intentionally or by mistake, depending who you ask — even crossed the border, to which NATO responded with military exercises in western Ukraine. It is entirely possible that NATO and Russian troops were simultaneously engaged in military activities in Ukraine at some point.

Among the Ukraine crisis's more devastating consequences is the fact that it has sparked an escalation logic, inspiring East and West to take turns outmaneuvering one other. Left unchecked, this outfoxing process could ultimately spiral to nuclear levels.

It is the same iron logic of whataboutism — or the appeal to hypocrisy — that has driven Russia's relations with the West since the Cold War era: As NATO gradually expanded into the post-Soviet space, Russia responded with internal consolidation and the strengthening of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Moscow-led military alliance with Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Ukraine crisis only intensified Russia's tendency toward reciprocal military mobilization.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov mentioned in an interview with RT and VGTRK media corporation on Sunday that Russia is planning to modernize its nuclear arsenal, though he did not peg the statement to Russia's tumultuous diplomatic relations.

"I don't think we are on the verge of a new arms race," Lavrov said. "It's just that the time has come for us to modernize our nuclear and conventional arsenals."

Today, a fragile cease-fire agreement is keeping a shaky hold on the battle fields of eastern Ukraine, giving the East and West the opportunity on a global scale to stop the escalation.

If they fail to do so, the crisis will continue to perpetuate and could take a nuclear turn sooner than expected.

Both Russia and the U.S. have recently traded accusations of mutual violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the last Cold War agreement still in force.

In his interview with state-run Rossiiskaya Gazeta last week, the head of the presidential administration Sergei Ivanov noted ominously that "in exceptional cases each side can withdraw from the treaty."

Delivering a speech in Yalta last August, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he and his aides are "thinking" about the feasibility and relevance of the INF Treaty.

Russian military and diplomatic officials have warned on several occasions that Russia could pull out of the INF treaty in the case of Ukraine or Georgia joining NATO.

Given those circumstances, Russia theoretically could deploy Iskander-M ballistic missile systems to the Kaliningrad region, a Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea coast between Poland

and Lithuania. Russia's new R-500 cruise missiles, which boast a 2,000-kilometer operating range, could reach any country in Europe.

The U.S., in turn, could hypothetically deploy to Poland and Romania elements of its Aegis missile defense system, which Russian officials have alleged can be loaded with nuclear-powered cruise missiles.

The East and West could once again find themselves aiming their most noxious weapons at each other, completing the devolution back to the Cold War.

By perpetually striving to outshine the other side, the East and West are engaging in a cycle of doomed logic, the only way forward being to increase the stakes and further escalate the situation. At some point it must stop, or it will spill over into more proxy conflicts and eventually into a full-scale war.

The INF treaty has eliminated an entire class of weapons and moved the nuclear threat away from Europe. But its main achievement was that it forced the sides to trust each other more through confidence-building measures.

Today mutual trust has been shattered and talk of revoking the nuclear security infrastructure is emblematic of that loss.

Petty differences could take a devastating turn if both sides don't work hard and act with goodwill in order to avert this outcome.

While each side blames the other for having opened Pandora's box, both realize there is no way back to square one.

Rather than stepping back, the adversaries must trudge forward. A new beginning is crucial. East and West must learn to trust each other once again through the forging of a new fundamental deal.

U.S. diplomat George Kennan — the architect of the Soviet containment policy — foresaw the enduring cycle of doom in East-West relations back in 1998, when he lamented to The New York Times that his decades of work had been for nought.

The relationship between Russia and the U.S. "has been my life, and it pains me to see it so screwed up in the end," the diplomat said at the time.

The world cannot afford to gamble on another Cuban missile crisis. The cycle needs to end now.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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