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Russia and NATO Should Be Allies, Not Enemies

By Nicolai N. Petro

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At the NATO conference in Wales earlier this month, leaders of the alliance found themselves torn between two crises: the civil war in Ukraine and threats posed by the Islamic State. The agreement on a permanent cease-fire in Ukraine signed in Minsk on Sept. 19, however, reveals how vital it is for both Ukraine and Russia to be part of Europe's security architecture.

The Ukrainian civil war results, in large part, from the ill-fated decision to exclude Russia from the European alliance system. This decision effectively set up a separate track for dealing with Russia, creating an "us" versus "them" situation. Viewing Russia as an inalienable part of Europe is arguably the key emotional and cognitive shift missing from the post-Cold War generation in Europe.

To justify NATO's existence in the absence of its former rival — the Soviet Union — Western leaders took an adversarial stance toward the Russian Federation, though Russia had willingly collaborated with NATO in ending the Cold War and had done so with explicit assurances that NATO would not expand into the former Eastern Bloc.

Regrettably, instead of forging a new pan-European security framework to anchor Russia to Europe, NATO was repurposed on the unlikely pretext that a military alliance excluding Russia and justifying its continued existence as a bulwark against threats from Russia would inevitably not be perceived as directed against Russia.

Though it seems extremely unlikely, given the current crisis, NATO could rectify this error by offering both Russia and Ukraine the prospect of full membership of the alliance, but only if they both join. The advantages for Ukraine may appear obvious, but there are also significant benefits for Russia.

With formal membership prospects for both countries, NATO would be obliged to help dampen revanchist sentiment within Ukraine, while at the same time allaying Russian security concerns. The end result would be a European collective security arrangement that, for the first time, truly encompasses all of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals.

Just as importantly, NATO needs Russian help to overcome the horrors of Islamist extremism in Syria and Iraq. Because of its influence in Syria, and the threats of Islamist extremism within Russian territory, Russia is a natural partner in the campaign to eliminate the Islamic State.

While American leaders have been traveling the globe in search of support in Syria and Iraq, they have overlooked a key ally.

A sound and sustainable purpose for NATO is the defense of Western values of human rights, judicial due-process, freedom, democracy, self-determination, education and gender equality. This purpose would be revalidated if Russia joined the alliance and, as Putin reiterated at his Valdai speech in September 2013, would be supported by a Russia that sees itself as sharing these Western values.

While there are differences between Western and Russian views regarding the interpretation of some of these core values, both the West and Russia will more effectively promote their respective views to one another as true partners.

A new NATO that embraces Russia as a full member and re-envisions itself as defending and promoting the core Western values that Russia shares is a far more viable organization than that which is based upon an obsolete posture of hostility toward Russia. Just as the threat of the Islamic State is motivating new alliances in the Middle East, so it is time for the realignment of NATO. With this one bold move, the world can avert several imminent catastrophes.

Nicolai Petro is a professor of political science at the University of Rhode Island and recently returned from a year-long Fulbright Fellowship in Ukraine. Robert Bruce Ware is a professor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville who has consulted for the State Department on the Caucasus.

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