

Remembering VJ Day: Russia, the U.S. and Asia

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Seventy years ago today, on Sept. 2, 1945, representatives from the Allied forces stood in solemn ceremony on the deck of the majestic USS Missouri, moored in Tokyo Bay, to accept Japan's surrender after a long, bitter war in Asia and the Pacific. The Japanese, stiff and formal, rendered courtesies and in a matter of minutes World War II was signed away into history. How could the world recover from a remorseless conflict in which an estimated 60 million souls had perished, of which more than 25 million were Soviet?

Among the Allies present stood Lieutenant General Kuzma Derevyanko and two other members of the Soviet military. Derevyanko represented the Soviet Union on General Douglas MacArthur's staff during the final months of the war.

Ukrainian-born General Derevyanko was very active during this period. He reported back to Soviet leader Josef Stalin just how opposed General MacArthur and U.S. President Harry Truman were to any Soviet plan to invade and occupy the Japanese home island of Hokkaido. After a direct Truman communication to Stalin saying as much, the Soviets canceled

the invasion operation — one of the key early decisions made in the emerging Cold War.

Additionally, Derevyanko carried instructions from Moscow to push for the establishment of foreign occupation zones in Japan, much like Germany. The Soviet zone would be Hokkaido. This met with quite the frosty reception from MacArthur who curtly told the Soviet general that he would not accept, nor tolerate, a divided Japan.

After the surrender ceremony, Derevyanko traveled to stricken Hiroshima and Nagasaki to glean the most information possible about the atomic bombs for the extremely interested Soviet leadership. Determining the nature and composition of these frightful weapons was of the highest priority for Stalin and a key driver toward the impending Cold War.

The Cold War story is well documented. Mainland China fell to Mao's Communists with the nationalists pushed back to their island bastion of Taiwan. But the United States and United Nations, staging from a democratizing Japan that had renounced militarism, firmly checked at great cost Soviet and Chinese-supported North Korean aggression.

Cracks subsequently appeared in the Communist facade. Due to major ideological and historical differences the Soviets and Chinese were not able to keep a common front, and had a major rift in 1960 culminating in major border clashes along the Ussuri River in 1969.

After decades of military buildups, brinksmanship and proxy conflicts, the Cold War ended with a mostly peaceful break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. The entire world was lucky to survive the 45-year nuclear standoff. Despite this promising opening, for a host of reasons real opportunities were lost in the subsequent two decades to build stronger regional stability in the Asia-Pacific in which the U.S. and Russia could more actively participate.

The current state of affairs in Ukraine after Russia's annexation of Crimea and proxy aggression in eastern Ukraine, but also policy differences over Syria and a myriad of other issues, also hijacked any prospect of a normal U.S.-Russian Pacific relationship. This is unfortunate because I believe that beyond the political hyperbole, U.S.-Russian ties in Northeast Asia have far more in common than not, especially when examining the fractious relationships between most of the nations in the region.

There is nowhere else in the world where there is such a concentration of population-dense, superheated and resource-deficient economies that could inadvertently erupt into bloody conflict from an emotionally charged incident and accident. There is a nascent arms race under way in Northeast Asia with China in the lead that could turn this already-tense region highly volatile, especially if linked to brinksmanship over islands and territories that are perceived to be resource rich.

In comparison, Russia and the United States are resource rich. They also share no potentially contentious land border. The postures of both nations in this complex region are primarily defensive with an eye toward keeping their strategic position secure.

Yet, there is no regional security mechanism in Northeast Asia to keep eastern sea lanes open and to stop distrustful, resentful neighbors from going at each other's throats. The U.S. with its overstretched navy and some regional partners fulfills that crisis management function.

Colossal effort and resources are expended to deter credible regional threats.

Although challenging, it would be integral to larger peace if Russia were to reject its visceral desire to see American influence wane in the northern Pacific. Russia really should not want the U.S. to recede from this part of the world. What would replace it? Whatever would fill such a security vacuum would likely not be of long-term benefit to resource-rich and seriously underpopulated Russia, especially in the Far East and Siberia.

The whole Pacific, including Russia and China, benefits from these U.S.-led and financed operations that have repeatedly proven crucial in a region where there is no inclusive security organization.

For these reasons I believe there is an urgent need for the U.S. and Russia to lead a regional dialogue to revisit the tangled web of history, sensitivities and threat perceptions that still dominate. Remembering this 70th anniversary could be a good catalyst for that. This is especially important during a period of such poor relations between the U.S. and Russia, but also between most of the nations in the Northern Pacific.

For instance, what would it take for the Japanese and the Russians to settle, once and for all, the Kuril Islands dispute that stymies normalized relations between these two nations? Resolving this would give Russia better access to prosperous Japan.

Any positive Russian diplomatic breakthrough with Japan should not be seen as threatening to China. Neither should want stressed but capable Japan to reject its beleaguered pacifist constitution and militarize. In a perfect world a rapprochement between Russia and Japan should be beneficial for Chinese and Russian relations.

Redoubled efforts to find common ground in North Asia should not be seen as reneging, or softening, core positions on other issues or locations. For instance, U.S. support to allies and partners in the region is non-negotiable. However, cooperating in this strategic area where our interests align could possibly soften some of the sharp-edged and potentially very dangerous happenings in other parts of the world.

General Derevyanko became an unwitting early victim of the atomic age and nascent Cold War. He died in 1954 at the age of 50 of complications due to then poorly understood radiation poisoning. In one of those ironic twists of war and peace, the former Soviet general was posthumously awarded the Ukrainian Hero star in 2007. Seven years later, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and conflict broke out between in eastern Ukraine between government troops and Russian-backed separatists in the east.

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