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Russia — A Rogue, But Not a Pariah (Yet)

Escalation in Syria all but assures the prolongation of sanctions.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) speaks with U.S. President Barack Obama in Hangzhou, China, Sept. 5, 2016. **Alexei Druzhinin / AP**

In a world where pariah status is earned rather than conferred, Russia ⊠would be a plausible contender. One would assume as much when both the ⊠U.S. and British ambassadors to the UN accuse it of barbarism. But for ⊠the most part, the West remains divided between those who regard ⊠selective partnership with Russia as a necessary evil and those who view⊠ it as an existential imperative. That division is likely to persist ⊠despite the breakdown of the latest cease-fire in Syria and Russia's ⊠palpable role in it.⊠

There is no doubt that the ground has shifted inside the Obama ⊠administration. Until the recent outrage in Aleppo, U.S. Secretary of ⊠State John Kerry's policy toward Russia was marked by a principled ⊠refusal to learn from experience. The credo he proclaimed in Moscow in ⊠2013 — that 'by working together,' the U.S. and Russia 'can find a way ⊠to accomplish

great things' — has survived every attempt by Russia to discredit it.

Coming on the heels of Russia's excoriation of the United States for its accidental bombing of Syrian forces, the destruction of the UN aid convoy on Sept. 19 poisoned every ounce of trust built up by the ceasefire accord concluded scarcely one week before. Moscow's perfidy has been at least as galling as its brutality in Aleppo. Yet, as long as the administration believes it is doomed to a Hobson's choice between the errors of Bush's intervention in Iraq and endless diplomacy, it is difficult to envisage a change of course that would alter realities in Syria or diminish Russia's 'indispensability' to conflict resolution.

Such indispensability is the leitmotif of those who argue that any 'pragmatic' Western government will be obliged, in Putin's words, to 'work with Russia' whether it likes Russia or not. Russia, an emphatically modern state that elevates national (and regime) interest above all other things, has proved singularly adept at manipulating the conscience of a post-modern West distrustful of 'certainty' and lacking confidence in itself. Why is Russia's bombing of Aleppo any more heinous than the U.S. bombing of Fallujah? How is Russia's intervention in Crimea any different from NATO's intervention in Kosovo?

In much of the Western politicum, these analogies have a ring of truth or at least are not entirely false. That Al-Nusra and its successors exploit cease-fires every bit as much as Assad and Putin is true enough. But such truths only divert attention from the latter's relentless efforts to physically eliminate any alternative that might stand between the present regime in Syria and millenarian Islamists. Paradoxically, alongside the neuralgias of post-modernism, the West is experiencing a revival of realpolitik. Silently or vocally, many of its adherents regard Assad as the lesser of two evils in Syria and believe that only his victory will 'restore stability'. Nearly all of them regard Russia as the ally of necessity against greater evils, and blame NATO enlargement and democracy promotion for its aggrieved and aberrant behavior. They disparage their governments' refusal to accept faits accomplis, like Crimea's annexation and believe they should no longer indulge Ukraine's refusal to be 'coerced into friendship' by its neighbor.

Realpolitik in business is now aligned with Realpolitik in strategy. Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, confidently asserted on Aug. 23 that "our common pursuit [with Russia] is to revive our mutual trade again," seemingly oblivious of the implications for other small powers who regard Western sanctions as a buttress to their security. In this sentiment, Fico is echoed by more powerful players.

On June 9, the French Senate declared that relations with Russia, 'confiantes et solides' are 'indispensable,' and the sentiment is strongly echoed within Sigmar Gabriel's SPD, not to say the Kremlin. Should Nicolas Sarkozy return to the presidency next April, the resolution of the Senate could well become the policy of France. And, in this matrix, Brexit offers no relief at all.

At this week's Conservative Party Conference, Prime Minister Theresa May enjoined the country to 'look beyond the continent of Europe.' While British support for sanctions is bound to continue, its influence on the matter, not to say the EU's Eastern Partnership, will no longer be felt. Russia has much to gain from these trends and little to lose. Nevertheless,

its MH17 moment in Syria is unlikely to be of negligible ⊠importance. Although it will not earn Russia pariah status, let alone a ⊠pariah's treatment, it is likely to prolong the West's grudging unity ⊠on sanctions and reinforce the consensus inside NATO to contain Russia ⊠in deed if not in name.⊠

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

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