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Diplomatic Retaliation: Can We End This Cycle of Mutual Punishment? (Op-ed)

Very little good comes from tit-for-tat retaliation

By James F. Schumaker

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Beck Diefenbach / Reuters

On March 29, Russia's Foreign Ministry announced its latest move amid an escalating diplomatic spat. It said it was expelling 150 Western diplomats, including 60 Americans, in retaliation for the expulsion of 150 Russians from nearly two dozen countries.

The move came in response to the nerve agent attack on former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Britain, an assassination attempt believed to have been ordered by Moscow. Russia also announced that the U.S. Consulate General in St. Petersburg would have to close.

The consulate has been living on borrowed time since Aug. 31 last year, when the United States

ordered the closure of the Russian Consulate General in San Francisco. The two diplomatic installations have been linked inextricably since they opened together in the early 1970s, and usually, what has happened to one consulate has, sooner or later, happened to the other.

Perhaps the only puzzling aspect of the closure is that it took so long for the Russians to act, which they only did after the United States ordered the closure of another, smaller, Russian consulate in Seattle.

The question now is: What's next? Is this cycle of retaliation now over, or does it require further moves, and an accelerating downward spiral in the relationship?

It is possible that for some Western countries the cycle is indeed over.

But it is likely that the British and the Russians are far from done, given the fact that Britain's sovereignty has been repeatedly violated by Russian operatives who, over the past two decades, are suspected of carrying out numerous assassinations on British soil.

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For the Americans and the Russians, the situation is, if anything, even worse.

It is clear that U.S. President Donald Trump is not providing leadership in confronting Russia over its misdeeds in the United States, specifically, its efforts to intervene on his behalf in the 2016 presidential election. In addition, the American foreign policy apparatus has been systematically undermined during the first year of the Trump administration, leaving the United States bereft of many of the experts who, in the past, would be called on to get relations with Russia out of the ditch.

This problem was pointed out recently in a letter to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that was signed by over 200 former ambassadors.

This has left the field to the U.S. counterintelligence community, which is only too glad to diminish the Russian "target" in the United States. On the Russian side, there is perhaps even less of a desire to put relations back on track.

The Kremlin's increasingly aggressive foreign policy, which includes meddling in elections worldwide, an upsurge in hostile intelligence activities, intervention in Ukraine and efforts to stake a position in the Middle East at America's expense, is all based on its view that the United States — as in Soviet times — is the "main enemy."

There seems to be strong popular support for this view in Russia, and, needless to say, the Kremlin is doing nothing to discourage this opinion.

If this downward course is to continue, however, there may be a shift in strategy on the part of the United States and others. This is because very little good comes from a cycle of tit-for-tat retaliation.

Expulsions and closures are largely symbolic moves that hurt the ability of the countries involved to do the necessary work of their diplomatic installations, but ultimately this cycle winds up in a standoff. It is an exercise in mutual punishment. Eventually, when matters calm down, both sides just build up their numbers again, as happened after the last round of mass expulsions in 1986. Then we're back to square one.

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If Russia continues its aggressive policies, it is possible that asymmetric moves will become more likely, a strategy that will punish Russia in ways that are difficult to counter. Moreover, these moves may not begin with the United States, given the current rudderless nature of its foreign policy.

Russia's Achilles heel is its economic weakness, in particular the dependence of its ruling class on Western financial institutions to launder and safely store money.

Cracking down on the activities of offshore banks worldwide, heavy restrictions on Russia's ability to move money overseas and temporarily banning Russian use of the SWIFT system until it can be audited and made transparent are three possible ways to encourage the Kremlin to change its international behavior.

Another possible economic measure would be to limit Russian sales of oil and gas to western Europe by finding alternate sources of supply. Providing increased military and intelligence assistance to allies would also help, rather than a futile insistence that they pay their so-called "debts."

For any of these strategies to work, however, American leadership will be needed, and the ability of the current administration to perform this task is very much in doubt.

The bottom line: Stay tuned for more unwelcome developments in the West's relationship with Russia. Faced with weakness and vacillation, the Kremlin will, as usual, be opportunistic and aggressive in its approach to its global "partners." The United States will be forced to respond.

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