

The United States, NATO, and Russia

Will Cold War II begin because of bananas? The Obama administration has made it clear, "Yes, we have no bananas, we have no bananas today." Nevertheless, the distinguished Russian champion figure skater and now politician, Irina Rodnina, who lit the Olympic flame at Sochi in February 2014, disagreed. Earlier, on September 2013 she had tweeted a racist picture of President Barack Obama, his mouth full of food, with a hand in the foreground waving a banana at him.

The banana warfare continued. In the Russian city of Perm a number of posters appeared addressing the US President as "Banan-Obama." On them were images of bananas labeled "Ukraine," and the message "don't choke." At a festival in Moscow in 2015 a playful competition featured four participants in blackface alongside a Obama impersonator chasing a banana.

Ben Rhodes, the spin doctor at the White House, has not yet misled us about the eating habits of President Obama. However, we do know the next US President has to contemplate Putin's political and military appetites, and plan accordingly. Will the next President agree with President George W. Bush who in June 2001 thought, after a "good talk" with the Russian leader that he had a good sense of Russian President Vladimir Putin's soul.

The next US President must also have a good sense of Putin's body as well as of his soul. Russian leaders do tend to last. Vladimir Lenin, born in 1870 died in January 1924, is now officially 146 years old. His body is embalmed and well preserved with his red moustache and rests in a specially constructed mausoleum in Red Square in Moscow.

Putin may not live the 146 years of Lenin but he has been in power in one position or other for 16 years, acting in authoritarian fashion and limiting real dissent in Russia. He does not espouse the dogmatic Communist ideology of Lenin but his guiding principles are clear: to restore the importance and power of the Russian state, to use the Russian Orthodox Church as the basis of values, to reject any Western interference in Russian affairs.

Putin projects the image of a strong and physically vital individual, whether bare chested or wearing clothes, whether riding a horse or practicing judo. Corruption and theft may exist within the Russian system, but Putin still appears popular, a patriot in control of a country aiming to be a superpower.

Putin has not "led from behind" in international affairs. He has acted, in Syria, in Georgia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. Putin blocked UN proposed action against the Assad regime in Syria and helped Assad militarily, but he also helped in the removal of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013. Russian military jets have carried out more sorties in a day against ISIS than the US led coalition did in a month, as well as against the anti-Assad rebels.

The Russian navy has launched ballistic missiles from the Caspian Sea 900 miles away. Russia since 1971 has controlled the Tartus naval port in Syria. Converted into a permanent Russia base in 2008, it is now of strategic importance for Russia as is the electronic intelligence center in Latakia and the anti-aircraft systems installed in Crimea and Kaliningrad.

Putin with a relatively weak hand had played a daring poker game. He misled the West by asserting that Russia was providing Syria with only primarily defensive weapons to repel anti-regime rebels, and it did supply these including S-300 anti-aircraft batteries, air defense systems. But it also supplied fighter jets MiG-29Ms that can attack ground forces,

and has commercial interests in Syria, especially arms contracts.

It is of course Russia's annexation of Crimea and its help for the separatists in Eastern Ukraine that led some in the west to believe that Russia was engaged in a plan of expansion. In a new novel *2017: War with Russia*, General Sir Richard Shirreff, former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander of NATO in Europe, 2011-2014, suggests that a Russian attack on Eastern European nations, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, all NATO members, is a possibility. The West therefore should act to avert "potential catastrophe." This is a chilling prospect because Russia has used nuclear thinking and capability in every aspect of their defense capability.

Certainly there are problems. Noticeably, the Russian Black Sea fleet based in Sevastopol has been strengthened since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, to include submarines, missile corvettes and patrol boats. The Russian military presence in the Baltic Sea with ships carrying long range cruise missiles that can reach Rome or Cairo suggest it may have become a Russian lake. In April 2016 on one occasion, two Russian planes flew close to a American destroyer in the Baltic and on another day a Russian airplane came close to an American fighter jet in the Baltic Sea.

Russia has not abided by the Minsk Protocol of September 5, 2014 intended to ensure bilateral ceasefire in Ukraine , nor has Russia withdrawn illegal armed groups and military equipment and fighters from Ukraine. The sanctions imposed on Russia may only be lifted if and when the Protocol agreements are fully implemented.

Russia cannot be a superpower as was the Soviet Union, but it has a role in international politics. Yet, that role does not suggest launching an attack on the West. At the same time it does not suggest Russian withdrawal from Crimea or part of Ukraine.

This double reality seems to have been understood at the meeting in Brussels of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) at the level of Foreign Ministers on May 20, 2016. The alliance has agreed on a "dual track" approach towards Russia: maintaining and even reinforcing NATO defenses against a possible Russian threat, but keeping lines of communication to Russia open for political dialogue.

The reinforcement part is familiar. NATO is building a defensive Eastern European missile defense shield in Redzikowo, Poland, being serviced by troops, radar, and a launching pad. Its present rapid reaction force of 13,000 will be increased to 30,000 troops.

NATO was expanded in 2009 when Albania and Croatia became members.

It was surprising that on May 19, 2016, NATO invited the Baltic country of Montenegro, with a population of 680,000 and about the size of Connecticut, to participate in all NATO meetings as an observer. The question is immediate, is any further expansion of NATO helpful? Moreover, NATO is planning to deploy 4 combat battalions, each of about 1,000 troops in Eastern Europe, as a deterrent.

In response, Russia is deploying 3 military divisions along its western and southern borders, an activity that Secretary of Defense Ash Carter called "nuclear sabre rattling."

What is refreshing is the NATO foreign minister's decision to revive the NATO-Russia Council that was created on May 28, 2002 as a mechanism for consultation and cooperation between the two sides, especially a dialogue on security issues. In April 2014, because of the situation in Ukraine, practical cooperation between the two sides was suspended. It may be restored in an expected meeting of the two sides before the NATO meeting on July 1, 2016.

Normalization of relations between NATO and Russia must be

pursued. The two sides must cooperate, not simply on security issues in Eastern Europe, but on the more important problem of defeating Islamist terrorism. The next US President must ensure that this is the case and that it becomes a major priority.