No one should casually label the current confrontation between Russia and the West a “new Cold War.” After all, the current crisis hardly matches the depth and scale of the contest that dominated the international system in the second half of the twentieth century. And accepting the premise that Russia and the West are locked in such a conflict could lead policymakers to pursue the wrong, even dangerous strategies. Using such a label is thus a serious matter.

Yet it is important to call things by their names, and the collapse in relations between Russia and the West does indeed deserve to be called a new Cold War. The hard reality is that whatever the outcome of the crisis in Ukraine, Russia’s relations with the United States and Europe won’t return to business as usual, as they did after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.

The Obama administration enjoyed some success in lifting the U.S.-Russian relationship from its 2008 nadir, as the two sides forged the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), agreed on tougher sanctions against Iran, cooperated on supply routes for NATO’s war in Afghanistan, and worked together on President Barack Obama’s plan to secure nuclear materials around the world. Relations never really moved to the next phase, as further progress was waylaid by frictions over missile defense, NATO’s war in Libya, the civil war in Syria, and a host of repressive measures
that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime directed at its own citizens. But even those obstacles never completely dashed the hope that Moscow and Washington might find common ground on a number of critical issues.

That hope is now gone. The crisis in Ukraine has pushed the two sides over a cliff and into a new relationship, one not softened by the ambiguity that defined the last decade of the post–Cold War period, when each party viewed the other as neither friend nor foe. Russia and the West are now adversaries.

Although this new Cold War will be fundamentally different from the original, it will still be immensely damaging. Unlike the original, the new one won’t encompass the entire global system. The world is no longer bipolar, and significant regions and key players, such as China and India, will avoid being drawn in. In addition, the new conflict will not pit one “ism” against another, nor will it likely unfold under the permanent threat of nuclear Armageddon. Yet the new Cold War will affect nearly every important dimension of the international system, and Putin’s emphasis on Russia’s alienation from contemporary Western cultural values will add to the estrangement. Finally, were a security crisis in the center of Europe to escalate, the danger of nuclear war could quickly return.

For both Moscow and Washington, then, the top priority must be to contain the conflict, ensuring that it ends up being as short and as shallow as possible. To achieve that goal, both sides must carefully study the lessons of the original Cold War. During that conflict, the two sides, despite their bitter rivalry, were eventually able to develop a variety of mechanisms for reducing tensions and containing risks. By the 1970s, U.S. and Russian leaders had come to see managing the contest and focusing on areas of cooperation, especially nuclear arms control, as their principal tasks. Without discounting the fundamental differences that set them at odds, leaders on both sides embraced the wisdom of engaging, rather than isolating, the other. Toward the end of the original Cold War, the earnest, albeit fumbling, efforts of U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev to understand what drove each other greatly influenced the final outcome. Today, as leaders in Moscow and Washington move in the other direction, they might pause and reflect on how the wisest among their predecessors approached the original Cold War.
THE BIG CHILL
For all the differences between the two periods, the new Cold War will share many of its predecessor’s features. First, Russian and Western leaders have already begun framing the standoff in unforgiving terms—much as their predecessors did at the start of the first Cold War, most famously with Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin’s February 1946 preelection speech and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s Iron Curtain speech a month later. This past March, for example, Putin defended Russia’s annexation of Crimea by saying that Washington and its European allies were guided by “the rule of the gun” rather than international law and were convinced that their “exceptionalism” allowed them to unlawfully use force against sovereign states, “building coalitions based on the principle, ‘If you are not with us, you are against us.’” In May, Alexander Vershbow, the deputy secretary-general of NATO, asserted that Russia should now be considered “more of an adversary than a partner.”

Second, as in the early phases of the original Cold War, each side sees the conflict as a result solely of the actions—or even the nature—of the other. Neither pays attention to the complicated interactions that brought relations to their present low. This preoccupation with pinning fault on the other side recalls attitudes during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when each side viewed the other as inherently alien. Only after surviving the perils of the Berlin crisis of 1958–61 and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 did the Americans and the Soviets step back and consider where their interests converged. Over the next ten years, they negotiated three major arms control agreements: the Limited Test Ban Treaty, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I).

Third, as during much of the original Cold War, neither side now expects much from the relationship. Isolated moments of cooperation might emerge when the two sides’ interests on specific issues happen to coincide. But neither believes it feasible to pursue cooperation across a broad front with the aim of changing the nature of the relationship overall. Nor does either camp seem willing to take the first step in that direction.

Fourth, to punish Moscow and to signal the price it will pay for further aggression, Washington has resorted to a series of Cold War-style reprisals. Beginning in March, it put military-to-military activities with Russia on hold and ended missile defense negotiations. The
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Obama administration has also banned the export to Russia of civilian technology with potential military applications, suspended cooperation with Russia on civilian nuclear energy projects, cut off NASA’s contacts with its Russian counterpart, and denied Russian specialists access to the laboratories of the U.S. Department of Energy. Many of these measures will likely remain in place after the Ukraine crisis ends. And even those that are lifted will leave a corrosive residue.

Fifth, and most serious, just as the confrontation over security in the heart of Europe constituted the epicenter of the original Cold War, renewed uncertainty over central and eastern Europe’s stability will drive this one as well. Beginning in the 1990s, NATO’s expansion into much of eastern Europe, including the Baltic states, moved Europe’s political-military border to the edges of the former Soviet Union. NATO enlargement also transformed Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine into the new “lands in between,” successors to Poland and the parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that the great powers fought over, with tragic results, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, as Moscow fortifies its Western Military District, a key military command, and NATO refocuses on Russia, the military standoff over continental Europe, which took two decades to dismantle, will swiftly be reconstituted on Europe’s eastern edge.
Robert Legvold

**RED ZONE**

Some might assume that the new Cold War, although undesirable, won’t matter nearly as much as the last one did, especially since modern Russia presents a mere shadow of the threat once posed by the Soviet Union. It is true, of course, that the United States enjoys massive material advantages over its adversary: its economy is around eight times as large as Russia’s, and its military budget is seven times as large. Moreover, the magnitude of the other challenges Washington faces, from turbulence in the Middle East to rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific, might make a collapse of Russia’s relations with the United States and most of Europe seem relatively unimportant.

But to doubt the likelihood or significance of a prolonged confrontation would be deeply misguided. In truth, if Russia and the United States approach each other in starkly adversarial terms, the conflict will badly warp the foreign policies of both countries, damage virtually every important dimension of international politics, and divert attention and resources from the major security challenges of the new century.

Consider Washington’s position in the Asia-Pacific, toward which it has for several years now intended to rebalance its diplomatic and military resources. Recent events in Ukraine have already caused Tokyo to fear that Washington’s new focus on Europe will diminish its commitment to Asia—and, more specifically, its commitment to helping Japan ward off a rising China. Japanese leaders even worry that Obama’s relatively mild response to Moscow’s annexation of Crimea foreshadows how Washington would react if Beijing seized the disputed Senkaku Islands (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands), in the East China Sea. Moreover, a belligerent Russia will have every incentive to hinder, rather than help, the United States’ efforts to manage the delicate task of deterring Chinese aggression while widening the sphere of U.S.-Chinese cooperation. Similarly, at a time when Washington needs Russian cooperation to address new sources of global disorder, Moscow will instead step aside, impairing U.S. efforts to deal with terrorism, climate change, nuclear proliferation, and cyberwarfare.

Whatever the outcome of the Ukraine crisis, Russia and the West won’t return to business as usual.
The pressure to reorient U.S. defense planning to meet what many members of the U.S. Congress and many of Washington's eastern European allies see as a revived Russian military threat will complicate the Pentagon's effort to save money by modernizing and downsizing. The U.S. military, which is currently focused on counterterrorism and securing access to the seas surrounding China, will now have to beef up its capabilities to fight a ground war in Europe.

The new Cold War with the United States and Europe will hurt Russia even more, especially because Moscow is much more dependent on the West than vice versa, in at least one critical respect. To diversify its resource-dependent economy and modernize its aging, Soviet-era infrastructure, Russia has counted on an inflow of Western capital and technology. To the degree that this option is lost, Moscow will be forced to become vastly more dependent either on its relationship with Beijing—in which it is a distinctly junior partner—or on scattered partnerships with countries that do not offer anything resembling the resources of the United States and Europe.

Only four years ago, after the global financial crisis had laid bare the weakness of the Russian economy, then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev argued that the country sorely needed "special alliances for modernization" with the United States and the countries of the EU. But now, as the crisis in Russia's relations with those countries deepens, Russia is already feeling the crunch, as capital is fleeing the country, its credit markets are shrinking, and its economy will soon enter a recession.

Such economic hardship may prompt Russian leaders to preemptively clamp down on domestic dissent even harder than they already have to avert potential social unrest at home, which would mean a level of repression that could backfire and at some point produce the very kind of widespread opposition the Kremlin fears. Meanwhile, Russia's poisoned relations with the United States and its European allies might well lead such Russian partners as Armenia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—all of which are crucial to Russia's plans for a Eurasian economic union and a stronger Collective Security Treaty Organization—to subtly distance themselves from Moscow for fear of tainting their own relationships with the Western powers.

The new confrontation with the West will also force Russia to stretch its military resources thin. That will leave Moscow poorly equipped to handle a host of other security challenges, such as violence
in the northern Caucasus and instability in Central Asia, the latter of which is compounded by the unpredictable futures facing Afghanistan and Pakistan. Russia must also defend its vast border with China and prepare for a potential conflict between North and South Korea.

PRESSURE POINTS
The collapse of Russia’s relations with the West will not only distort U.S., European, and Russian foreign policy but also inflict serious harm on a broad array of international issues. What still remains of the arms control regime that took Russia and the United States years to build will now largely come undone. The new Cold War has eliminated any chance that Moscow and Washington will resolve their differences over missile defense, a Russian precondition for further strategic arms control agreements. Instead, the two sides will likely start developing new and potentially destabilizing technologies, including advanced precision-guided conventional weapons and cyberwarfare tools.

Meanwhile, the European component of the U.S. missile defense program will now likely take on a specifically anti-Russian character, particularly because the Obama administration reportedly believes that Russia has violated the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. And it is unlikely that Moscow and Washington will be able to agree on how to place limits on the deployment of major weapons systems in Europe. The new Cold War has also dashed any hopes of strengthening other basic agreements, such as the 1992 Treaty on Open Skies, which regulates unarmed aerial surveillance flights.

Geostrategic calculations will now also assume a far more dominant role in U.S.-Russian energy relations. Each side will attempt to use the oil and gas trade to gain leverage over the other and minimize its own vulnerability. In the Arctic, the chances for U.S.-Russian cooperation in developing that region’s vast hydrocarbon reserves will surely shrink. More broadly, the new Cold War will set back international efforts to deal with the impact of climate change on the Arctic—an issue on which U.S.-Russian relations have been surprisingly cooperative.

One of the most successful but underappreciated aspects of recent U.S.-Russian relations has been the progress made by the 20 working groups of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, which was established in 2009 to facilitate high-level cooperation on a range
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of policies, from prison reform and military education to civilian emergencies and counterterrorism. It seems unlikely that such cooperation will continue, much less improve, during the new Cold War. Moscow and Washington will also struggle to align their positions on key matters of global governance, including the much-needed reforms of the UN, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Washington is now focused on excluding Russia where possible (from the G-8, for example) and circumscribing Russia’s role elsewhere. Meanwhile, Moscow will work harder than before to supplant U.S. and European influence in these institutions.

Finally, should one or more of the long-simmering conflicts in the post-Soviet region again explode, the chances that Russia and the United States would act together to contain the violence seem close to zero. Instead, were Nagorno-Karabakh, in Azerbaijan, or Transnistria, in Moldova, to blow up, Moscow and Washington would both be far more likely to focus on counteracting what they each saw as the malevolent role of the other.

DAMAGE CONTROL
The immediate crisis in Ukraine, even if momentarily muffled, has scarcely ended. The presidential election in May could not settle the crisis of legitimacy facing Ukraine’s leadership, which lacks the trust of the eastern part of the country. Nor will the modest aid packages currently being cobbled together by the International Monetary Fund and other Western donors resolve the deep structural problems eating away at Ukraine’s economy, namely unconstrained corruption and the power exerted by a small number of oligarchic clans. In short, the country has a long slog ahead, filled with political and economic uncertainty.

Yet Ukraine forms only part of a larger and more ominous picture. Europe’s stability, which only recently seemed assured, now appears more tenuous. A new fault line has opened up in the heart of the continent, and instability anywhere within it—not only in Ukraine but in Belarus or Moldova as well—will likely lead to an escalating confrontation between the East and the West. Leaders in Moscow and Washington need to face up to this reality and to the price they will pay if they blind themselves to the larger consequences of the new Cold War. Understating both the risks and the costs will only lead to
underestimating how much effort will be required to surmount them. The overarching goal of both Moscow and Washington must therefore be to make the new Cold War as quick and as shallow as possible.

This goal can be achieved only if leaders on both sides embrace damage control as their first-order objective. So far, they have not. Rather than understanding the Ukraine crisis in this larger perspective, Russian and Western leaders seem fixated on prevailing in the crisis itself. For Russia, that means toughing it out: taking the pain the West means to inflict through sanctions and forcing Washington and U.S. allies to accept what Russian leaders see as their country’s legitimate interests in Ukraine and beyond. For the United States and Europe, winning in Ukraine means stymieing Russia’s aggressive behavior and forcing Moscow back onto a more cooperative path. (In some Western circles, winning also entails weakening Putin enough to hasten the end of his regime.)

Committing to limiting the damage done by the new Cold War does not mean that the West should tolerate Russian attempts to control events in Europe’s new lands in between by abetting political instability or using military force. If the United States and its European allies cannot find a way to thwart this Russian temptation—through credible military threats, if necessary—the new Cold War will only deepen. At the same time, a policy to deal with conflicts over Europe’s unsettled center needs to be guided by a larger goal. Everything that Western leaders do to induce Russian restraint must be paired with a compelling vision of an alternative path that, if taken, would lead in a more constructive direction. Both halves of this approach need to be clear and concrete: the redlines must be self-evident and backed by the threat of credible military force, and the opportunities for cooperation must be specific and significant.

**ANGER MANAGEMENT**

Minimizing the damage done by the new Cold War will require managing it with the intention of gradually overcoming it. To this end, leaders in Moscow, Washington, and European capitals should heed three lessons from the original Cold War.

First, they need to recognize that during the Cold War, mistrust often distorted each side’s perceptions of the other’s intentions. As one among many examples, consider Washington’s incorrect belief that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was an attempt to gain
control over the oil in the Persian Gulf—a misperception rooted in the deep-seated mistrust of Soviet territorial ambitions that U.S. leaders had harbored ever since Stalin seized much of eastern Europe after World War II and then sought to expand Soviet influence in such places as Iran and Korea.

Ever since the first Cold War ended, misperceptions have continued to plague relations between the two sides, constantly disrupting Moscow’s and Washington’s efforts to build a new partnership and allowing a potentially functional relationship to devolve into an adversarial one. NATO enlargement and U.S. plans for a European missile defense system fed a preexisting Russian disposition to believe such moves were directed against Moscow. And Russia’s heavy-handed treatment of its neighbors—particularly Ukraine—created a Western perception that Moscow wants not merely influence but also control over old Soviet territory.

Peeling away such mistrust won’t be easy. It will require great effort on the part of U.S. and Russian officials and a willingness to take real risks. Leaders on both sides know that their domestic political opponents will characterize any attempts to overcome hostility as weakness. They also worry that any overtures will look feckless if they are not immediately reciprocated—or, worse, that such efforts will look like appeasement if the other side responds with further aggression.

Still, it is each side’s distorted notions of the other’s aims that represent the largest barriers to cooperation. The way to begin unraveling this tangle is for the two sides to talk directly to each other, quietly, at the highest levels, and without preconditions. They must meet with an understanding that every issue is on the table, including the most contentious ones. Such dialogue, of course, is the most difficult precisely when it is also the most necessary, but neither government need abandon its current positions before it starts talking. Probing the sources of each side’s deeper concerns, however, is only the first step. Next, talk must lead to action. Each side should specify a modest step or series of steps that, if taken, would convince it to begin rethinking its assumptions about the other.

The two sides should also stop blaming the other side and instead step back and consider what in their own behavior has contributed to

Moscow and Washington must focus on making the new Cold War as short and as shallow as possible.
the derailment. The original Cold War’s second lesson is that it was the interaction between the two sides, rather than the actions of only one side, that created the spiral in tensions. In the Ukraine crisis, at least, there is enough blame to go around. The EU was tone-deaf in dismissing legitimate Russian concerns over the failed association agreement with Ukraine. During the unrest in Kiev in February, the United States too quickly abandoned an agreement reached by diplomats on all sides that offered a potential way out of the crisis, promising new presidential elections and constitutional reform. And throughout, Russia has been all too ready to exploit Ukraine’s instability to further its objectives.

The original Cold War’s third lesson might be the most important. Events, and not predetermined plans and policies, usually determined U.S. and Soviet behavior. In the current crisis over Ukraine and in others to follow, the United States and its European allies should therefore focus on influencing Russian choices by shaping events rather than by trying to change the way the Kremlin sees things. In practical terms, this means that Washington, alongside the EU, should commit to giving Ukraine the economic assistance it desperately needs (provided that real steps are taken to fix its corrupt political system), insist that Ukrainian leaders establish a government that can regain legitimacy in the eastern part of the country, and strive to create an environment in which Ukraine can cooperate with Europe and Russia without having to choose between the two. If U.S. policy moves in this direction, Russian choices are likely to be more constructive.

At the moment, emotions are running high in Moscow, Washington, and the capitals of Europe, and the confrontation over Ukraine seems to have taken on a momentum of its own. If somehow the Ukraine crisis fades, the intensity of the new Cold War will weaken, but not end. If the crisis in Ukraine deepens (or a crisis elsewhere arises), so will the new Cold War. In other words, Ukraine is central to the direction the confrontation will take, but not everything depends on what happens there. Just like the original Cold War, the new Cold War will play out on many stages, and it will not even begin to be resolved until both sides recognize the high costs of the course they are on and decide to tackle the difficult steps leading to a different path.