

Policy Watch: Russia's Estonia ties

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Russia's response to Estonia's removal of a Soviet World War II war memorial from the center of the Estonian capital of Tallinn to an out-of-the-way military cemetery is outrageous, out of proportion and deeply disturbing. It comes as Estonian government and commercial Web sites have been under devastating cyber-attacks to the point where many became partially or completely inoperable, with some attacks being traced to Russian government computers.

Moscow, of course, denies any responsibility for Estonia's problems. It is highly improbable, though, that anyone else would have launched these cyber-attacks against Estonia in the wake of the Soviet World War II memorial being moved. Nor does Moscow seem particularly sorry that Estonia is experiencing these attacks. It certainly isn't doing anything to help Estonia stop them. They probably would stop, though, if the Soviet war memorial were moved back to its original location in the center of Tallinn.

The contretemps over the war memorial stems from diametrically opposed Russian and Estonian views of history. Russians see themselves as having liberated Estonia from Nazi occupation at the end of World War II, and so Estonians should be eternally grateful to them for this.

Estonians, though, remember that their country (as well as Latvia and Lithuania) were assigned to the Soviet sphere of influence in the infamous 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact, and that Soviet forces invaded the Baltics and forcibly incorporated them into the U.S.S.R. in 1940. The German invasion of the U.S.S.R. in 1941 led to Soviet forces retreating from the Baltics, but they came back at the end of the war in 1945. The Baltics did not regain their independence until 1991 when the Soviet Union was disintegrating.

Given Baltic sensitivities, Moscow stands to gain tremendous good will in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania if it would just apologize for the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact and subsequent Soviet invasion. Doing this, of course, is not something that Moscow can even conceive of. But if not that, Moscow could at least acknowledge that Russians and Balts view the events of 1939-45 differently, and that Moscow therefore needs to work toward reconciliation with these small states. Unfortunately, Moscow does not even recognize the need for this.

Further, while moving the Soviet war memorial may have indeed wounded Russian sensitivities and pride, Estonia did not inflict any material injury on Russia by doing this. Russia, though, has inflicted a great deal of such injury on Estonia. These cyber-attacks, and other actions, all appear designed to convey the message that if any small neighboring state does anything that Moscow does not like, it will suffer for it. In other words, Russia wants to be feared.

What Moscow does not seem to realize, though, is that this approach, in addition to damaging a small nation like Estonia, is probably even more damaging to Russia itself. What does Moscow think the consequences of its being feared are likely to be? Does it think that Estonia and other governments will now conclude that it is dangerous to antagonize Russia, and therefore they should avoid doing so? Or are they likely to conclude that it is dangerous to antagonize Russia, and therefore they must ally all the more closely with the United States and other NATO members to defend themselves against Russia?

If Moscow hoped that its cyber-attacks would result in Estonia begging Russian forgiveness for moving the statue, its plan has backfired. Instead, NATO and the European Union have begun to rally behind Estonia -- something that Moscow certainly did not want to see happen.

Although NATO does not see itself as a threat to Russia, Moscow does see it as such. It is understandable, then, that Moscow wants to undermine NATO's effectiveness and cohesion. Threatening behavior toward one of its smaller members, though, does not serve to undermine NATO but to strengthen it. If Moscow really wanted to undermine NATO, it would be as nice as possible toward its Baltic and Eastern European members. To the extent that they lose their fear of Russia, NATO membership -- and all its burdensome requirements -- would become less relevant for them.

This sort of calculation, however, appears completely beyond the capacity of the Kremlin's current occupants.

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