The Russian Challenge to the European Union

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Abstract:
After a decade of sporadic cooperation between newly emergent Russia and the countries of the West, differences have mounted to the point where the two sides now confront one another with alternative visions of a future Europe – especially Central and Eastern Europe – and relations that mirror some of the worst days of the Soviet-Western cold war. The central issues in the dispute include Moscow’s commitment to rebuilding ‘Greater Russia,’ the European Union (EU)’s goal of surrounding itself with stable democratic states, and the fact that these goals conflict in post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The revival of the Russian economy and political system under Vladimir Putin has enabled Moscow to use various forms of coercive diplomacy, including outright military intervention, to pursue its goals. The EU’s support for democratic governance in the region is viewed in Moscow as a direct challenge to Russia’s interests and to the Russian state itself. The result has been a confrontation between the two sides, as Russia challenges the very nature of the liberal international system put into place by the EU and its U.S. allies in the post-World War II period. It is important to note that the US-Russian relationship overlaps with and contributes to the standoff in Europe.

Keywords: Russia, European Union, United States, ‘Greater Russia’, liberal international system, confrontation

A quarter century after the end of the cold war and the collapse of the USSR relations between the Russian Federation and the European Union (EU) are frozen, in large part as a result of Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine and the ensuing economic and political sanctions imposed on Russia by both the EU and the United States. But, the friction between the two sides extends much further than to issues related to Russia’s policy toward Ukraine. Over the course of the past decade Russia has increasingly challenged the existing global order to which the member states of the EU have been strongly committed for more than half a century. It has also begun to challenge