If you believe many of the commentators and policy makers in Washington, President Vladimir Putin of Russia is an expansionist on the march. He's had one great success after another: First, he annexed Crimea and fueled a destabilising conflict in eastern Ukraine. Then he intervened in the Syrian civil war and rescued his client, the government of Bashar al-Assad, in its moment of need. Last month, Ashton Carter, the secretary of defense, indicated that he believed that Russia is the world's greatest threat to American national security, ahead of a nuclear-armed North Korea and the jihadists of the Islamic State.

This alarmism is counterproductive and largely wrong, writes Anatol Lieven.

Three weeks into a partial truce, Russia has begun withdrawing most of its forces from Syria after Mr. Putin claimed that the military's goals there had been achieved. In Ukraine, a cease-fire has been in place for over six months with few changes to the country's situation. These realities underline the truth: Russia's objectives are limited. The United States should recognize and accept this, and — while it may be hard for some in Washington to imagine — work with Moscow when interests overlap.

In Syria, Russia has had two linked aims: making sure that the Syrian regime survives in some form and ensuring that Russia will play a key part in whatever peace process eventually brings an end to the civil war. Washington has now been forced to accept these Russian positions.

Despite Russian air support, there was never a chance that the Assad regime would retake most of Syria from the rebels. It seems that Russia never intended for this, either. To help put the government in Damascus back in control of Idlib and Deraa, for example, Russia would have had to commit a huge, costly and dangerous infusion of forces over several years and risk provoking an even larger regional conflict. Instead, it seems Moscow just wanted to ensure that its ally in Damascus was not defeated by the rebels, many of whom are radical jihadists. The partial Russian military withdrawal at a time when the war has entered a tenuous cease-fire demonstrates the limits of Russia's aims and Mr. Putin's desire to work with — not against — the United States to achieve a settlement.

Russia's military intervention in Syria has drawn criticism from international observers since many of its airstrikes seemed to target anti-Assad rebels rather than the Islamic State itself. But Seymour Hersh has reported, and my own sources have confirmed, that some figures in the

Western military and intelligence communities see Russia's strategy of fighting jihadism in Syria and keeping parts of the Assad government in power as the best course of action for now. These people are not serving Russian interests, but they have recognised that destroying the existing Syrian state could lead to handing the country over to terrorists.

But if there is tacit American support for some of Mr. Putin's objectives in Syria, perhaps Russia still poses a real threat in Eastern Europe. Not necessarily. In reality, the Russian government has had only very limited success in Ukraine. In 2013, a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy was the plan to create a Eurasian Economic Union, a post-Soviet economic bloc with Moscow at its centre. Ukraine was supposed to be an essential member. To achieve this goal, Russia was prepared to give Kiev vastly more aid than what the European Union was prepared to offer in support of its vague "Association Agreement."

In 2014, the Maidan revolutionaries killed that dream for the foreseeable future. The Eurasian Economic Union today is but a shadow of Mr. Putin's grand hopes. What has Russia received as compensation? Crimea, which in effect it already controlled, and a small, devastated part of eastern Ukraine. Moscow has made the point that Russia will have to be consulted concerning Ukraine's future, but Russia's economic role alone would have made that essential in any case.

Russia has supported rebels in parts of eastern Ukraine, but has not, as the rebels wanted, given them the backing to conquer larger parts of Russian-speaking eastern and southern Ukraine. (This wouldn't have been difficult considering the terrible state of the Ukrainian military.) Russia's restraint in Ukraine shows that there is no serious reason to fear that Mr. Putin is ready to create a new, worse international crisis by attacking the Baltic states or Poland. The Ukrainian crisis is about Ukraine. That is not to say that Russian moves there have been legal or moral. They have, however, been more cautious and pragmatic than the West has recognised.

In the end, Russia and the West have landed with a much poorer, more chaotic and more divided version of what they had before 2014: an impoverished, shambolic Ukraine caught permanently between East and West and acting as a source of tension between them. That is not a success for the West — or for Russia.

American leaders have repeatedly demonstrated that they have no intention of fighting Russia in order to defend Ukraine. This makes sense, not only because of the appalling dangers of such a conflict but also because Ukraine is not a crucial American interest and American forces

are heavily committed to facing real threats elsewhere in the world. But if the United States does not intend to fight, does it not make more sense to try to cooperate with Russia? On Syria, the United States and Russia have congruent aims. Mr. Putin has signaled clearly that his country wants to cooperate. It's time for Washington to respond accordingly.

Anatol Lieven is a professor at Georgetown University in Qatar and the author of numerous books, including "Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry."

First published in The New York Times Opinion sectionÂÂ