
A Long History of Mistrust

Sergei Konoplyov, Harvard University, August 2014

| NATO | PUTIN | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY |

The dominant narratives about Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, are correct within the context of global, mainstream thinking on U.S. foreign policy. However there are several factors that U.S. policymakers sometimes pay scant attention to, or simply choose to ignore, for political or other reasons. First off, all the United States must recognize it is not dealing directly with the Russian Federation, but with a leader who harbors deep distrust of the United States and its foreign policy objectives, and who has the power to act quickly when provoked. Putin relishes a standoff with the United States because he can (and always does) blame the West for all the ills that befall Russians today.

It's an old page from the Russian political playbook— divide and conquer by promoting a special relationship between Moscow, Paris, and Berlin, and try to weaken the transatlantic link whenever possible. A key part of the policy is a firm and consistent position on Ukraine.

On the American side, what is lacking from U.S. policy is a clear goal—what the United States wants to achieve in the short term: to stop Russian assistance to pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine; help Ukraine get Crimea back; or stimulate discomfort in Russian society.

Recently there has been a grand shift in U.S. foreign policy towards Asia. It is unclear whether the current situation in Ukraine, and the potential for military confrontation with Russia, would drive American policymakers to adjust course and pay more attention to Eurasia. Western sanctions against Russia are working, and the results are obvious. Any hesitation or diversion from the hard line taken by the White House would be interpreted by Putin as yet another “weak Obama” situation, which should be avoided.

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Rather, there should be more U.S. pressure on its allies to continue enforcing sanctions. France, for example, should be encouraged to cancel projects like the Mistral warship deal with Russia, no matter what financial consequences it might bring. The strengthening of the transatlantic link and coordination of the U.S. and European sanctions would show Putin the seriousness behind Western intentions. Western leaders must also address the question of whether or not the United States is ready to start a war with Russia if Putin invades Ukraine—it’s not just a remote possibility anymore.

Putin’s basic objectives have never changed—his policies have simply become more aggressive. His message to the West has always been that Russia would never allow Ukraine and Georgia to be part of any Western security alliances. After the NATO Bucharest summit, Putin was certain that he had won this point. After the war with Georgia he was sure the West would understand that he would stop at nothing to protect Russia’s “near abroad.”

The end of the Orange Revolution, the promise of newly elected President Viktor Yanukovich to stay away from NATO, and the granting of practically eternal residence in Crimea for the Russian Black Sea Fleet made Putin believe Russian interests were secured in Ukraine. The weak and nonconsolidated reaction from the West and “business as usual with Russia” attitude following the annexation of Crimea assured Putin he could use armed force and break

international law without paying any consequences. Putin also had the confidence to work on a Custom Union and Common Economic Space for the region, the main idea being to bring former Soviet republics back into an alliance, albeit economic, controlled by Russia.

The main assumption underlying Putin's vision is that the United States, by various ways and means, is set on deceiving Russia. Foremost in that assumption is that the United States destroyed the USSR and constantly seeks to diminish Russia's global and regional role, all the while attempting to gain access to Russian oil and gas. Part of this thinking assumes the United States is trying to isolate Russia by surrounding it with NATO countries, building antimissile defense systems across Europe, and containing Russia by military means if necessary. The United States, in Putin's worldview, is doing this because it knows Russia is the only country that can completely destroy the United States with its nuclear weapons.

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One of the popular myths that the Kremlin believes and disseminates is that Gorbachev was promised NATO would never go eastward to take into the alliance former Soviet republics. Putin sees his ratings grow in Russia every time he flexes his muscles, vowing not to allow the West to enslave the Russian people. Nationalism is on the rise to support this "strong and benign tsar" image. The Ukrainian Maidan and collapse of Yanukovich gave Putin a unique opportunity to incorporate Crimea into Russia. Despite its quick execution, the annexation of Crimea was a planned action using so-called "popular referendums" as a soft weapon, together with the use of unidentified Russian

military personnel.

Eastern Ukraine was supposed to have an identical scenario. Bringing eastern Ukraine into the fold would allow land access of Russia to Crimea. The next step, according to Putin, would be the federalization of the rest of Ukraine. If that outcome could be achieved, he would exert nearly full control of Ukraine, assuring it would never become a NATO or European Union country, all the while providing other post-Soviet republics a lesson in what would happen should they decide not to listen to the voice from the Kremlin. The presence of regional “frozen conflicts” helps Putin to deal with Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. However, new clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh show that the Ukraine crisis could be just the beginning of series of confrontations around Russia.

Putin already made his decision to invade eastern Ukraine, most likely with so-called “peacekeepers” to convert that region into a Trans-Dniester-type republic. During the Russo-Georgian crisis, then French President Nicolas Sarkozy worked as a mediator. In the current situation Putin probably would prefer a similar solution. He knows that he would lose by starting a war with Ukraine, and he still needs to look like a winning hero in Russia. So, if asked by an unbiased, respected figure he considers of his own status (like the Pope), Putin might explain to the Russian people that he is indeed “the winner” and at the same time, take the credit internationally as a wise politician who brought peace.

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The problem is, he will get away with this. it is obvious, logic and understandable that nobody will start a global nuclear war over Crimeea. However the unlogical part is that once he will accept the peace with what it remains of Ukraine, the rest of the world will continue to do business with Russia like before, like nothing had happened. And that because, when put in the balance, the money is usually heavier than the democracy. Why is France still selling weapons to Russia ? Why are American companies still work with Russian ones for resources ?

The economical sanctions should remain firm and permanent, NO MATTER THE COSTS TO THE ECONOMIES, to make a clear point that the rest of the world should not tolerate such behaviour. Russia, and any other country that plans anything similar, should understand that.

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