

# A Moral and Strategic Calamity

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



The situation in Ukraine is a moral and strategic calamity that is especially ominous because it is unfolding in small increments that command attention and induce some response, but remains short of an acknowledged crisis that might force decisive action. The metaphor of the boiling frog applies.

There is ample blame to be apportioned and fundamental revisions of attitude and behavior that will have to be achieved if longer-term disaster is to be avoided. And not all of the burden can be imposed on those who speak

Russian. Everyone implicated needs to reconsider their own contribution, and that especially includes the United States. We are strongly implicated for reasons we are not currently admitting, and changes of policy here would be necessary if there is to be an acceptable outcome. We cannot indefinitely avoid our own burden.

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The first step toward realistic and constructive engagement is to accept that the current campaign of shaming and sanctioning is not likely to succeed and is very likely to backfire. Given their domestic political popularity, those actions are immediately unavoidable, but that fact is a good part of the problem. The shaming campaign ignores legitimate grievances and attempts to impose rules of behavior that Russia can plausibly say we ourselves have cheerfully violated under roughly comparable circumstances. The imposition of sanctions defies the clear historical record regarding their effectiveness. Analytic studies of prior instances have repeatedly documented that economic sanctions have failed to achieve their stated objective.

The only generally acknowledged instance of success is the termination of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and in that case support of sanctions from an ascending internal constituency was critical to the outcome. The judgment emerging from the detailed study of past use of sanctions is that they do impose economic hardship but inspire resistance to external demands considered to be illegitimate. They also have perverse effects. They inflict harm on civilian populations that do not have direct responsibility for the actions being sanctioned or the realistic capacity to change those actions. Sanctions also create the equivalent of tariff protection for inefficient internal industries which form organized lobbies against the concessions that might lead to their

removal. Even more ominously, sanctions fuel corruption associated with inevitable efforts to work around them. It is not in the long-term interest of the United States to try to isolate the Russian economy or to degrade its productive development. It is decisively against the interest of the United States to stimulate corruption. That is already a massive problem in Ukraine and not a trivial problem in Russia.

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The more difficult but nonetheless ultimately essential step is to acknowledge our complicity in the background circumstances out of which the current conflict arises. As the Russian Federation emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union, security policy in the United States was also driven by domestic politics and the institutional inertia of Cold War policies against quite evident longer-term strategic interest. We should have subordinated the legacy policies of deterrence and associated confrontation to apply the very effective policies of reassurance practiced among the members of our alliance system.

The Russian Federation emerged with the greatest inherent need for reassurance with a large border area that is highly exposed to local conflict and is not assuredly protected by the redeployed and decimated conventional force establishment they inherited. Had we extended full alliance reassurance initially to Russia, it would have been much less contentious and much more efficient to include its former allies as well. Instead the United States extended its basic policy of deterrent confrontation against Russia and intensified its relevant military capability by extending alliance membership exclusively to the Central European countries and by developing highly advanced tactical air capability.

That evolved capability operating through the extended NATO basing structure poses a threat to Russia they could not realistically defend against. We adopted more accommodating political rhetoric and have denied hostile intent, but under circumstances of continuing mistrust and de facto confrontation that are actually more problematic to the Russian military establishment than was Cold War candor.

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In his initial years in the Russian leadership, Vladimir Putin followed a policy of political accommodation and did not react to the eastward extension of NATO or to the repudiation of bilateral strategic stabilization embedded and symbolized, as far as Russia is concerned, in the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. He is now belatedly reacting and doing it very problematically, but he has underlying reasons that cannot be ignored. We should have learned by now that localized insurgencies are the most immediate source of threat and that they are very difficult to contain. Any difficulty of imagination should yield to even cursory examination of current circumstances in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Gaza. Unmanageable insurgency in Ukraine would be far more dangerous strategically than it has so far been in those places. In particular it presents the danger of a confrontation between Russian ground force operations and NATO tactical air operations. With nuclear force operations in the immediate background, such a situation could result in a truly catastrophic failure of deterrence, which all along has depended on credible reassurance far more than political discourse has acknowledged.

In the heat of the moment, the requirements of constructive engagement are not currently visible or viable in American political dialogue. But the resulting question is how long it takes us to learn and how much grief we have to

experience before we do.

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**Jack Matlock** · Duke University

John Steinbruner's observations are cogent and persuasive. Given their past positions on a number of issues and their hopes for the future, I can understand why former Secretary of State Clinton and our current vice president might have difficulty accepting them. However, both President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry do not have the same burden. What is it in our domestic politics, or staff politics in the current administration, that keeps them from both understanding and acting on these insights?

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