

A Russia Problem, Not a Putin Problem

Thomas Graham, Kissinger Associates, August 2014

| EU | PUTIN | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY | UKRAINE |



The Ukraine crisis has put an end to 25 years of U.S.-Russia relations. The swiftness with which they collapsed, and the absence of any influential forces in either country actively working for their repair, is evidence of how much pretension and frustration had infused relations in recent years. It also suggests a deep-seated anti-American bias in the Russian elite, mirroring a Russophobia of comparable depth on the American side.

It may remain true that there is much the two countries could do together, on

WMD nonproliferation, counterterrorism, regional balances, energy security, and climate change, among other things, that would advance the interests of each country and benefit the world as a whole, particularly over the long term. But shared interests will not be enough to bring the two countries together again. For the problem in relations is grounded in each country's sense of itself and its role in the world—in the American belief that it should be the global leader and in Russia's conviction that it should be a major independent actor. That reality creates major obstacles to cooperation even on shared interests.

Under these circumstances, there can be no new reset in relations.

Under these circumstances, there can be no new reset in relations. Seeking to repair them by returning to an earlier set of assumptions about them is a dead end. Those assumptions no longer hold. Rather, relations need to be rethought in light of the realities in both countries, including the huge divide in worldviews.

The first step in rethinking relations on the American side will require that we ask some fundamental questions, such as:

How important is Putin?

Putin is the dominant figure in Russia today, and he makes the final decisions on foreign policy. But we need to remember that he operates in a political context and does not have a free hand, as he must balance the competing factions around him to maintain his own position. Moreover, he is a product of the Russian elite, and he gives voice to its consensus on Russia's role in the world, which has deep roots in history and strategic tradition. His departure might lead to a change in style, but it will have little impact on the substance of Russian foreign policy. In short, we have a Russia problem, not a Putin problem.

How does the Russian elite think about world affairs?

Russian strategic thinking falls within the broad outlines of the realist school: Sovereign states are the central actors in world affairs; competition among states is inevitable; power, especially the hard variety, is the coin of the realm; and the goal of foreign policy is to create the optimal geopolitical balance for advancing one's interests. In such a world, only the great powers have the wherewithal to pursue genuinely independent policies; they are the few countries that determine the substance and structure of world affairs. Russian pride dictates that Russia must do all it can to sustain itself as a great power. The first task is guaranteeing Russian security.

In short, we have a Russia problem, not a Putin problem.

What are the essential requirements of Russian security?

First, modern Russia has seen its security as dependent on creating strategic depth, as it emerged on the almost featureless great Eurasian plain. To that end, it has pushed its frontiers outward until it met the resistance of well-organized and powerful states. Over centuries, this dialectic of expansion and resistance came to define Russia's geopolitical zone of interest as the heart of Eurasia, which encompasses all of the former Soviet space (and most of the former Russian imperial space minus Finland and Poland). Today's Russia believes that Russian primacy in—not necessarily control of—this region is vital to its own security. Ukraine is critical in this regard, since it creates strategic depth against potential aggression from the West; in particular, it precludes Ukraine from becoming a member of NATO and bringing that organization's infrastructure within a few hundred miles of Moscow.

Second, the choice that faces countries in this region is not Russian domination

or genuine independence; it is a choice among great powers vying for influence over them. Russians tirelessly point out that today's Ukraine is composed of disparate territories that were only united under Soviet rule. In their minds, much the same could be said of all the other former Soviet states, which assumed their current form in the Soviet period and most of which had no substantial history of independent statehood before the breakup of the Soviet Union. Such states can never be fully sovereign. If they are not in Russia's orbit, they will inevitably fall into that of another great power. As a matter of its own security, Moscow will always seek to limit the presence of other powers in the former Soviet space.

Third, Russian territorial ambitions beyond its traditional geopolitical zone have been quite limited historically. In this regard, the Soviet period stands out as an anomaly, born of the unique conditions of the mid to late twentieth century: the power vacuum in the center of Europe created by the total collapse of Nazi Germany and the subsequent bitter ideological divide and revolutionary upheaval that produced a global competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. Those conditions no longer prevail, and Russia has reverted to its historical policy of creating a suitable balance of power on the European continent that takes into account the interests of the other great European powers.

Is an ideological divide emerging?

Since he returned to the Kremlin in May 2012, Putin has advocated a form of Russian nationalism that sets itself against the West. But his anti-Westernism does not mark an absolute rejection of the West and its values; it does not mark a return to the existential Cold-War struggle between two political systems with diametrically opposed views of human character and the relationship between state and society. Rather, Putin has positioned himself as the defender of traditional Western values against their postmodern, and he would argue decadent, interpretation in much of the West today. In his mind, he is not

seeking to export Russia's values, as the Soviet Union did, but rather to rally other societies that also oppose the West's interpretation of certain values to create an international system that is more representative of the differences within a shared value system.

Despite much overblown rhetoric in Washington, Russia in fact poses a limited challenge to the United States. The appropriate response is not to return to the Cold War. But neither is it to speak of a return to cooperation if Russia realizes the errors of its ways and begins to conduct itself in a way the West finds more compatible. Rather, we need to abandon hopes of transforming Russia and acknowledge that it is one of many major powers in the world today. In dealing with Russia, we need to think in terms of competition and accommodation, that is, of great power diplomacy, refashioned to take account of the differences between today's world and the last period of great power diplomacy in the nineteenth century. We might also remind ourselves, that period was one of relative peace and security, of prosperity and progress.

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23 comments

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John Brown · I give courses at GU. at Georgetown University

An impressive article. But perhaps I have read too much Gogol -- what strikes me about the current Russia/Ukraine/U.S./E.U. situation is its total absurdity -- an absurdity that perhaps is not totally explicable via Mr. Graham's admirably logical, analytical mind. What is really going on "behind" the so-called "geopolitical calculations" of Russia (ok, not Putin)? My favorite Russian expression has long been not "vse pod kontrolem," but "pozhar idet no planu." Perhaps the irrationality of the current situation in Russian-Ukraine relations should be taken under greater consideration when trying to understand it, if only to put unpredictability into the equation.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 5 · August 22 at 9:29am



Hanna Silver · New York, New York

There was an expression used in Poland : " the horde has moved"

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Bill Kiehl

I largely agree with jim Schumaker's comments on the original website: "As usual, a balanced and learned essay by Tom Graham. Unfortunately, it suffers from a Russo-centrism typical of old Soviet hands. In particular, it accepts the proposition that the states bordering on Russia must be either in Russia's sphere of influence or the sphere of another, and cannot be truly independent. None of the states of Eastern and Central Europe, including Ukraine, will ever agree with this proposition, and the only way Russia will be able to assert its validity is by force. I do agree that we have a Russia problem, but we have a Putin problem too. We will not be able to deal successfully with Russia until Putin leaves the scene."

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 22 at 10:37am



Hanna Silver · New York, New York

Russia's sphere of influence falls wherever Russia intends it to fall. Typically for a large military also far from it's own borders

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 22 at 10:46am

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Willi Meyers · Minnesota

Maybe it is too much to dream, but I would like to think that Ukraine, if it ever gets itself stabilized and its political system matures, could be a bridge between Russia and the "West" since it has substantial ties with both.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [3](#) · August 23 at 1:12pm



Rinat Sergeev · Data Scientist at Harvard University

Excellent article.

One of the few that thinks of "what to do" instead of "whom to accuse".

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [2](#) · August 22 at 9:03am



Dmitry Vasilyev · MIT

There is a saying "your head is responsible for what your [insert a body part] doing". Putin is ultimately responsible for everything happening in Russia, and there is no need to push blame to anyone else. Although he wouldn't ever do it, Putin should put a placard similar to Truman's "the buck stops here" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buck_passing) on his desk.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#) · August 22 at 1:46pm



John M. Morgan · Owner-operator at Raven Rocks Press

Same for President Obama.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 25 at 5:41am



Rinat Sergeev · Data Scientist at Harvard University

Dmitry Vasilyev "Putin is ultimately responsible for everything happening in Russia" Interesting thought. Somehow, discards the remaining "143 million minus one" Russians. It also fits very well into a popular ultra-liberal conspiracy that the only people who live in Russia are Putin and "hundred brave who withstands him" (c). No, I

disagree. I here are other motives and other Russians with positions, even despite your Putin-centrism.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 25 at 11:13am



Bui Tyril · Top Commenter

In many ways a well crafted piece that offers a range of insights of relevance for understanding Russian foreign policy. Meanwhile, unfortunately, the article falls short of taking into account the elephant in the room -- that is, the impact of U.S. foreign policy. From that perspective, Russia is reacting rather than acting in relation to the situation in Ukraine. Crucially, the February coup in Kiev represented a perceived, and in all probability a very real, threat to Russia's Crimean naval base as well as presenting the possibility of NATO missiles on the border with Russia, offering "first-strike capacity" to hawks of nuclear insanity. Conceding that, all the while losing the gateway to the Black Sea was, from a security point of view, clearly beyond acceptable for Russia. With Iraq, Syria and other hot spots falling victim to U.S. interventionism for regime change, Putin doubtlessly could read the writing on the wall -- indeed, what should be expected?

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Shirley Ruedy

An excellent article. The appointment of Ambassador Tefft is a good sign that our diplomatic relations with Russia can become more pragmatic.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · August 22 at 10:03am



Alex Stukanov · Tomsk State University

I believe it's an excellent account, one of the better balanced and, shall we say, less biased, than the ocean of others.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · August 22 at 12:23am



William Waren · Senior Analyst at Friends of the Earth U.S.

No question about the risk to world peace resulting from U.S. Russophobia and the USA's cult of exceptionalism. The United States is not the biblical "City upon a Hill" — ask the folks in Ferguson, Missouri and in Palestine

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 3 · August 23 at 12:53pm



Cassandra Cavanaugh

This problem has almost nothing to do with America's view of itself, and everything to do with Russia's willingness to toss aside the postwar international legal order to pursue its own advantage. The false evenhandedness serves to obfuscate. If anything, on the other side, it stems from Russia's (correct) view of a Europe too lulled into complacency to defend that postwar order. Graham's take on the Russian domestic political landscape similarly gets it half right, overplaying the resonance/sincerity of Putin's "values" campaign--yes, elites may be similarly resentful of America's stature or hypocrisy, but only a tiny handful around the top are keen on this kamikaze mission against the West, but the others are too cowed to do anything. So the focus now is on stealing the last гроши before the end of times. For Putin, only the top lieutenants matter.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 23 at 3:28am



James Schumaker · Top Commenter

As usual, a balanced and learned essay by Tom Graham. Unfortunately, it suffers from a Russo-centrism typical of old Soviet hands. In particular, it accepts the proposition that the states bordering on Russia must be either in Russia's sphere of influence or the sphere of another, and cannot be truly independent. None of the states of Eastern and Central Europe, including Ukraine, will ever agree with this proposition, and the only way Russia will be able to assert its validity is by force. I do agree that we have a Russia problem, but we have a Putin problem too. We will not be able to deal successfully with Russia until Putin leaves the scene.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 22 at 9:08am



Jerry Olek · Greenbelt, Maryland

I agree we have a Putin problem and a Russian problem...The Graham analysis disregards the central tenet of our relationship with the USSR/Russia over the last century....Leaders in both countries are instrumental in shaping the relationship...the great man theory prevails....nothing gets done/resolved without the leaders at the very top finding a way to work together...not always easy (e.g., Stalin, Khrushchev, Yeltsin) but doable as history has proven....we cannot wait until Putin passes from the scene... lastly beware of the neocons on our side who still want Russia to fail....

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 23 at 4:26am



Rinat Sergeev · Data Scientist at Harvard University

James, the problem is that none of the mentioned states can allow themselves to be "truly independent". In ideal world, the independent nation does not need to state every minute that "we are independent", as it should be obvious. Whereas in reality, the idea of "independence" became a national witch-hunt paranoia in many of those states, where any agreement, action or contract with Russia is being considered through a prism of "independence".

Just, to get a feeling of that, imagine a neighboring state of USA that gets a paranoiac idea to get "out of sphere of influence of USA" and does everything to implement it in actions. Can you? Or, yes, you can. It is Cuba. And it does not serve as a bridge between USA and anything else at all.

As about "dealing with Putin" I believe, if you want a rational, mutually benefiting deal - then you cannot ask for a better partner.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · August 25 at 11:41am



Russ Jacob Kern · Works at Retired Again

Do not rationalize Putin's actions as "beyond his control". He is a criminal and must be held accountable. A fish stinks from the head!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 23 at 1:05pm



Semenov Tyan Shanskiy Kirill · Works at University of Liège

Nice to hear from the haughty rulers of the world. Thanks for the interesting analysis. The corollary is however quite funny. "...But neither is it to speak of a return to cooperation if Russia realizes the errors of its ways and begins to conduct itself in a way the West finds more compatible." Why not stand a bit and think of your own errors and change slightly your own attitudes? Introspection may be of some use also for the West, or at least, may lead to better understanding of the reasons of the events.

After the fall of the Berlin wall we had a hope for a better peaceful world with less hostility and with more equitable cooperation. But, instead, the vae victis principle was extensively applied in Western relations with Russia. You felt quite comfortable when chaos was settled in the former Soviet republics and enjoye... [See More](#)

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Eleonora Fejes · ELTE

The one and only comment making any sense at all!!!!!!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 23 at 10:57pm



Alexej Dischenko · 37



Very good.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · August 22 at 2:18am

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