

Brussels and Beijing

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

The Putin administration has made it clear that it is prepared to risk much to defend what it sees as Russia's equities in Ukraine. Ukraine is vital to Moscow as an economic partner and as a buffer against the U.S.-led Euro-Atlantic community. Given that Ukraine juts into the heart of the Russian Federation, accepting the "loss" of Russian influence in Ukraine is not an option. The Kremlin is prepared to accept economic penalties and to turn to less than optimal replacements for U.S. and European products. Western policymakers need to understand that the position and geopolitical orientation of Ukraine is an existential issue for Russian policymakers.

In turn, the Obama administration, the U.S. government, and the American people more broadly need to be able to answer a series of questions about their desired end states vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine.

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The first is whether there is a willingness to pay the price for bringing Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic community—both in terms of what will be needed to rehabilitate the Ukrainian economy, especially after the destruction that is being wrought in the east, and with the consequences of driving Russia more closely into China’s willing embrace. Given that U.S. policy for the last four decades has been predicated on encouraging some degree of distance between Moscow and Beijing, does a closer Russia-China entente create new and unanticipated problems for the U.S.? A related question is whether or not Ukraine’s closer association with the West is vital for European security and the future of the European project.

The second is whether any effort to improve U.S.-Russia relations is now dependent on regime change in Moscow itself; in other words, whether as long as Vladimir Putin remains in charge in the Kremlin, the best that can be hoped for is the avoidance of crises. Two presidential administrations started off with the assumption that common ground for a productive partnership could be found with Putin and that potential disagreements could be managed. Both times that assumption has not been corroborated by subsequent events. Does this mean that, for the foreseeable future, we are done with “resets” and new approaches—and the best that can be hoped for are frostily correct relations?

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