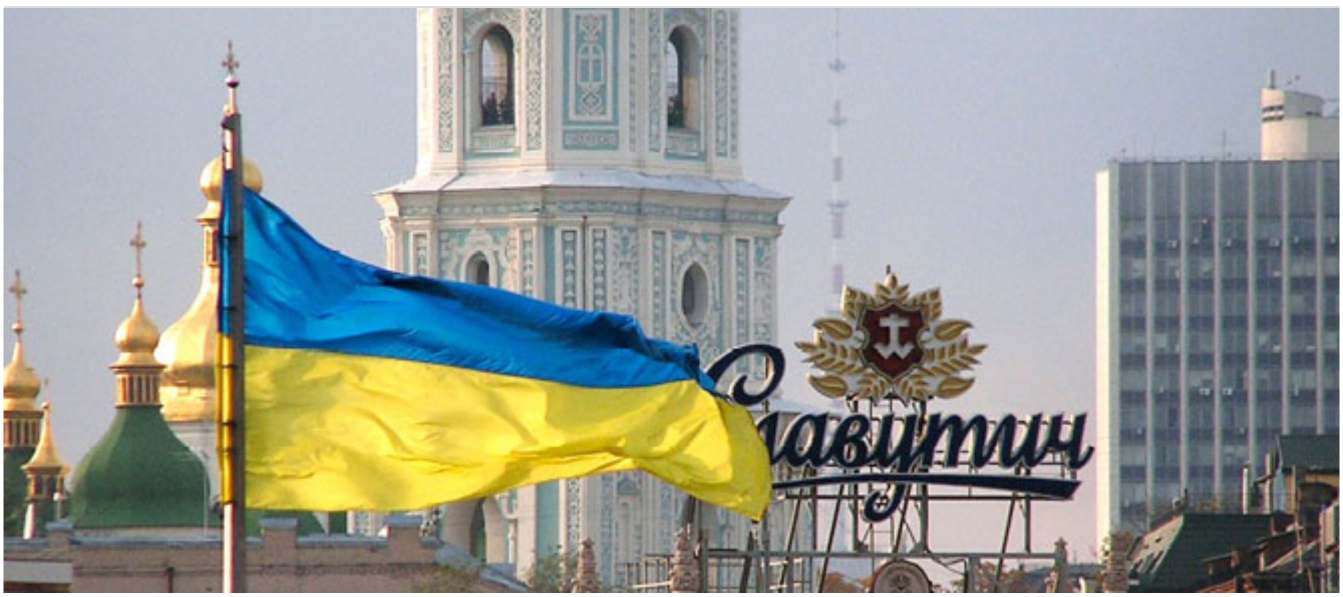
Decoding Mixed Messages

Paul J. Saunders, Center for the National Interest, August 2014

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



America's dominant narratives about Russia have been inaccurate since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These narratives have often distorted U.S. policy debates, which at times seem to take place in a virtual alternative universe. That said, faulty narratives are far from the only problem with U.S. policy toward Russia—and American policy mistakes are not the only problem in the crumbling U.S.-Russia relationship. Moscow has also developed its own illusions and made its own destructive choices, including its decisions to seize Crimea and to encourage and support rebel forces in eastern Ukraine.

Overcoming these narratives and conducting an effective policy to de-escalate the crisis in Ukraine while protecting fundamental U.S. national interests will require the Obama administration to show considerable political courage.

The prevailing U.S. narrative about Russia has moved through four broad phases over the 22 years since Russia became independent in 1992. The first phase—characterized by Boris Yeltsin's iconic image atop a tank, resisting the August 1991 coup—was one of courageous leaders bringing democracy to a population yearning for freedom. This wildly over-optimistic perception ended abruptly with Yeltsin's own use of tanks to disband the Supreme Soviet in October 1993. The war in Chechnya and Russia's notorious privatization schemes followed, establishing a new narrative of chaos and corruption, overlaid with fear of a potential communist/nationalist counterrevolution, leading to what Clinton administration officials saw as necessary and pragmatic support for a weak and corrupt Yeltsin until differences emerged over Kosovo.

> **The problem for U.S. foreign policy is that these American narratives about Russia are not totally wrong; on the contrary, they have succeeded and endured because they have incorporated elements of reality even though they are not fully accurate.**

Vladimir Putin's rise to Russia's presidency in 2000 created the third post-Soviet narrative, one of an authoritarian but weak Russia that didn't matter to America's foreign policy and could be safely ignored on most issues. Given the role nuclear weapons had played in the U.S.-Soviet relationship, this was perhaps most symbolized in the Bush administration's decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001 without particular concern over Moscow's reaction. It was also a foundational assumption underlying U.S. support for political change and for efforts to strengthen pro-Western political forces in other former Soviet countries.

The combination of rising energy prices and Putin's increasingly assertive foreign policy changed this to the current narrative—a dangerous revanchist Russia seeking to reestablish the Soviet Union. This conception of Russia became dominant from 2005 to2008, but was temporarily muddled by Dmitry Medvedev's election, his more conciliatory leadership style, and the Obama administration's reset policy. (The gap between widely accepted narratives and policy in both countries fueled domestic criticism of both Obama and Medvedev, however.) Putin's return to power consolidated the revanchist narrative and collapsed the reset. Events in Ukraine have further strengthened this narrative.

The problem for U.S. foreign policy is that these American narratives about Russia are not totally wrong; on the contrary, they have succeeded and endured because they have incorporated elements of reality even though they are not fully accurate. As a result, those who hold to these narratives can cite developments in Russia as well as some of Moscow's foreign policy behavior to support their views. The flaws in these narratives are largely due to vast oversimplification that ignores contrary information and trends. This leads to policy decisions based on incorrect assumptions and can actually reinforce the mistaken narrative when it produces negative responses from Moscow. (Russia's narratives have been vastly oversimplified too, but also reflect weaker understanding of the United States than vice versa, some apparent deliberate falsification, and its state-led media environment. And they have also produced bad policy.)

> **Competing U.S. and Russian narratives have been a special challenge in Ukraine in part because both sides have sent mixed messages.**

Unfortunately, after they take hold, established narratives change how people understand new information and, as a result, typically evolve quite slowly (in the absence of shocking and highly visible events, which can change narratives abruptly). So those seeking to avoid further escalation of the Ukraine crisis and deeper deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations must largely do so within existing narratives.

Competing U.S. and Russian narratives have been a special challenge in Ukraine in part because both sides have sent mixed messages. The dominant narratives in both countries have focused on confrontational messages and largely ignored signals that could facilitate a settlement, which each interprets as reflecting the other side's weakness rather than its aims. For example, Russian leaders seem to see a hostile United States that is personally targeting top government officials and possibly seeking to overturn the Russian regime. They interpret President Obama's renunciation of force as evidence of strong public opposition to war that will limit U.S. responses rather than as a building block in containing the crisis.

Conversely, U.S. officials and commentators focus on Putin's annexation of Crimea and his reckless rhetoric afterward; they appear to consider his failure to invade Ukraine so far as evidence of his fear of the U.S. and Western reaction and not as a sign that Moscow doesn't want to invade. This combination of worst-case assumptions about one another's intent with best-case assumptions about one another's will encourages escalation on both sides.

Notwithstanding Putin's post-annexation bluster about "Novorossiya," ("New Russia"), the regions in eastern and southern Ukraine with large shares of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, Moscow in reality appears profoundly reluctant to launch a large-scale invasion of the region to secure its independence or unification with Russia. There are probably several reasons for this, and one of them is doubtless that Russia's leaders recognize such action would fundamentally change its relations with the United States and Western countries. But it would be a mistake to assume that this is the only reason—or even the principal reason—for Russia's failure to invade so far.

> **Notwithstanding Putin's post-annexation bluster about "Novorossiya" ("New Russia"), the regions in eastern and southern Ukraine with large shares of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, Moscow in reality appears profoundly reluctant to launch a large-scale invasion of the region to secure its independence or unification with Russia.**

Three additional key factors require careful consideration. They are: (1) the possible reactions of China and other major non-Western countries to a Russian invasion; (2) the direct costs to Russia of occupying eastern Ukraine and/or establishing it as a long-term dependency; and (3) Russia's assessments of what will happen if Moscow does not act.

China, India, Brazil and other major non-Western countries have already made clear through their statements and conduct that they are wholly unwilling to participate in U.S. and Western efforts to isolate Russia economically and politically in response to Moscow's behavior up to this point. This was most recently apparent at the BRICS summit in Brazil earlier in the summer. At the same time, Western governments have been unwilling to put too much pressure on China in particular over its continued economic and political cooperation with Russia. Nevertheless, a Russian invasion of Ukraine could put these governments in a very difficult position—particularly if the U.S. Congress imposed sanctions on third-country companies dealing with Russia, something the United States has done in the past to put pressure on Iran, North Korea, and others. This would be very risky for Washington, but the possibility cannot be ignored. Beijing in particular is already urging Russia not to intervene.

Earlier in the Ukraine conflict, the possible military costs of a Russian invasion may have been a significant deterrent to the Russian armed forces, as any effort to occupy the Donetsk and Luhansk regions would have required establishing control over their capital cities, each of which had about one million or more residents prior to the conflict. With populations on this scale, if only one-tenth of one percent of the citizens in each city decided to wage urban guerrilla warfare against Russian troops, Moscow could have faced a bloody struggle. After several months of conflict, several hundred thousand people have left eastern Ukraine—some fleeing to Russia, others moving westward inside Ukraine—and this may have undermined any potential resistance.

> **China, India, Brazil and other major non-Western countries have already made clear through their statements and conduct that they are wholly unwilling to participate in U.S. and Western efforts to isolate Russia economically and politically in response to Moscow's behavior up to this point.**

As of now the Donetsk and Luhansk regions must contend with widespread destruction of infrastructure and housing, meaning that any long-term Russian responsibility for their welfare would require massive reconstruction spending. This would come on top of very substantial spending to raise living standards that were far below Russia's average before the fighting began. Moreover, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions had a combined pre-crisis population three times larger than Crimea's population—and Crimea-related costs have already become politically sensitive in Russia. (Donetsk and Luhansk were also wealthier on a per capita basis, but it is difficult to assess the impact of the fighting on their economies.) The bottom line is that there is a very big difference between the largely peaceful annexation of Crimea with its economy intact, and fighting a major war to win the privilege of investing tens of billions of dollars or more in eastern Ukraine.

Notwithstanding what an invasion and occupation would cost the Russian economy, and how it might affect Russia's relations with China and other non-Western countries, there are circumstances under which Putin might make what otherwise looks like an irrational choice to invade eastern Ukraine. Such a decision depends most heavily on the third factor: the Kremlin's assessment of the risks it faces in doing nothing.

Earlier this year, when rebel forces were continuing to expand the territory under their control, Russian leaders may well have calculated that the combination of tacitly encouraged Russian volunteer fighters and covert arms supplies would be sufficient for the rebels to prevail. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's major offensive against the rebels—including air strikes and artillery barrages—has put the rebels firmly on the defensive, however, and appears to have led Moscow to escalate its support for the separatists. In recent days this has even included what NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has called a Russian "incursion" into Ukraine, though on-the-ground reporting remains ambiguous. Separatist leaders claim to have received new soldiers and weapons, and Ukraine insists that it has destroyed Russian armored vehicles that crossed the border, but Moscow denies this.

> **The bottom line is that there is a very big difference between the largely peaceful annexation of Crimea with its economy intact, and fighting a major war to win the privilege of investing tens of billions of dollars or more in eastern Ukraine.**

The essential unknown is how far the Kremlin will go to ensure that the rebels avoid a final and conclusive defeat on the battlefield. Does Putin believe that such a defeat would threaten his continued leadership in Russia, given his extraordinary investment of his personal reputation in protecting Russian-speakers in Ukraine? Do he and others in the Russian leadership consider Russia's "humiliation" following such a defeat to be a price they are unwilling to pay? This interaction of fear and national pride seems like the most likely potential trigger for a large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Just how likely it is will remain unknowable.

This suggests that if the United States wants to avoid a Russian invasion—and its likely consequences, including a possible direct conflict with Russia, major disruptions in U.S. relations with China, and widespread devastation in Ukraine with Syria-like destruction and refugee flows—it is important to find a face-saving settlement that can win Putin's cooperation. Unfortunately, America's dominant narrative about Russia makes this extremely difficult for the Obama administration.

How could the United States compromise with Russia as it is currently understood by most Americans, including in the U.S. foreign policy establishment? Once Russia has been defined as an anti-democratic and aggressively expansionist power, this is almost impossible—particularly for a U.S. president who has been unwilling to take political risks in foreign policymaking. This leads to the most important question in predicting U.S. policy—does President Obama see the potential costs of failing to reach a deal?

Printable PDF