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# Driven by Domestic Politics

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

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Over the last 14 years, there have been two main narratives about Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. The first sees Putin as a classic product of the Soviet KGB, motivated by a Cold War vision of global competition, a resentment at the loss of his country's great power status, and a desire to expand Russia's borders and its influence around the world. The second narrative sees Putin as a fairly typical leader of a country with weak institutions. In this view, he is a cautious opportunist, preoccupied with staying in power and securing the economic and social interests of a group of associates, quite rational and pragmatic and open to compromise with Western powers over issues of mutual interest.

Unfortunately, neither of these images is very useful for understanding Putin's behavior today. Until the start of 2014, I found the second generally convincing and the first overblown and misleading, overemphasizing elements of emotion and psychology where a reasonable conception of self-interest was sufficient. However, it is extremely difficult to account for the occupation and annexation of Crimea and Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine in these terms. These actions create—especially in the medium run—serious threats to the stability of Putin's

regime as well as significant economic costs both to Russia and to Russia's governing elite. The benefits, on the other side of the ledger, appear small and temporary.

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As for the first image, it does not work either because Russia's actions in Ukraine have severely set back the goal of expanding Russia's influence in its neighborhood and in the world. As a result of Western sanctions—but even more because of the radical uncertainty now created in the minds of investors—Russia's economy is deteriorating faster than before. In just a few months, the Kremlin's actions have: energized NATO to boost defenses around Russia's borders; failed to avert (and maybe sped up) EU partnership agreements with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia; and blackened Russia's image around the world (figures from the Pew Research Center show that unfavorable views of Russia increased in the last year in 27 out of 36 countries surveyed). The Eurasian Union, never terribly promising, will now have trouble expanding much beyond Belarus and Kazakhstan, each of which will covertly stall. Although both countries import a lot from Russia, both export more to the EU. Perhaps Armenia can also be persuaded. Some imagine that Russia can teach Europe a lesson by pivoting to China. But the cost of such a pivot seems to be capitulation. After 10 years of patient negotiation, the Kremlin chose to sign a gas deal with Beijing at the worst possible time on the worst possible terms. Even if overruns and kickbacks are unusually restrained, Russia will be working for decades to fuel the Chinese economy on terms that will, at best, be barely profitable.

A slower, less obvious strategy of pursuing influence in Ukraine and elsewhere

would have been far more effective. Why did Putin embark on a course that seems counterproductive, whatever his ultimate objectives? This remains a puzzle to most Russia watchers. We do know that he made the decision fast and—thanks to his press secretary who boasted of Putin’s independence of mind—without consulting anyone.

Putin’s objectives towards Ukraine and other post-Soviet states are unclear. On the one hand, it would be natural for him to favor the creation of pro-Moscow regimes in countries bordering Russia. On the other hand, Russia’s role in Ukraine makes this more difficult to achieve. Russia’s neighbors will now be watching the Kremlin with intense suspicion and doing all they can to protect against interference by Russia—whether by enhancing their relations with the West or beefing up internal counterintelligence.

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Perhaps the most plausible explanation of Russia’s actions in Ukraine has to do not with foreign policy but with domestic politics. The annexation of Crimea resulted in a very large jump in Putin’s approval rating to 86 percent according to the Levada Center polls. In the past, Putin’s ratings have been strongly aligned with performance of the economy. In the last couple of years, the outlook for Russia’s economy has deteriorated. At the end of 2013, before the Crimean events, Putin’s ratings hit their lowest level since 2000—61 percent. It is possible that strategists in the Kremlin decided, given the difficulties of reigniting Russian growth, a new approach was needed, one that would base Putin’s popularity on Russian nationalism. The problem with this strategy is that in the past the rallies that accompanied moments of international tension and nationalist enthusiasm have quickly dissipated. A spike in Putin’s rating in late 1999 as he ordered troops into Chechnya had fallen back substantially by the

middle of 2000. The euphoria over Russia's incursion into Georgia in 2008 lasted only a few months. So far, Putin's post-Crimea surge has held for several months. But public opinion experts, such as Lev Gudkov of the Levada Center, expect his rating to fall.

Whatever Putin's real objective, it will be hard for him to back away from his support of Russian-speaking rebels in eastern Ukraine given the intensity of the propaganda broadcast during the crisis by state-controlled television. Given the portrayal of the anti-Kiev guerrillas as valiant freedom fighters and the Ukrainians as fascist war criminals, Russian viewers would consider a failure by the Kremlin to support the rebels as a betrayal. More moderate, reasoned coverage—even if deceptive and manipulative—would have left the Kremlin more freedom of maneuver. Again, it is difficult to see recent policy and its execution as effective.

Formulating U.S. policy towards Russia at this point is complicated by the unusually high level of uncertainty about both Putin's objectives and his broader state of mind. Clearly, Putin will find it difficult to change direction. For Putin—or any future Russian leader—to give back Crimea to Ukraine is close to inconceivable. So it is hard to see how relations can be normalized any time soon. As always, the West must keep multiple avenues open for communication and negotiations to prevent costly misunderstandings arising in what promises to remain a tense relationship.

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