
Lessons Learned and Not Learned

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

The present confrontation between the United States and Russia is the outcome of a number of factors, some long-term and others stemming from a tragic and avoidable sequence of events. The U.S. response to Russia's direct support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine has been proportionate, but it is worth reviewing the history of how we got here in order to ask how the crisis could have been avoided.

Characteristic of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been a tendency to treat each popular uprising against a dictatorship as a democratic moment. Again and again this assumption has proven to be a fallacy. Moreover, even when broad protest movements are democratic, they have nearly always been unable to translate popular passion into a capacity to govern. Almost every anti-regime protest movement in the "Arab Spring" resulted in a new authoritarian regime, some more brutal than their predecessors, but with weaker capacity to govern. From the standpoint of U.S.-Russia relations, the most important case of this kind was the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in late 2004. The political leaders whom it brought to power showed themselves incapable of forming the coalitions necessary to unify West and East and

provide clean and capable government.

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Tragically, the same disconnect between the passion of the Maidan and the capacity to govern reemerged nine years later in Ukraine. Viktor Yanukovich's equivocation on the Association Agreement with the European Union aroused expectations among the pro-Western parts of society that were bitterly disappointed when he abruptly rejected it in November, provoking the waves of protest that swept Ukraine. His increasingly brutal handling of the protests worsened matters, leading to his flight in February after he had lost the support of all his former allies. The interim successor government proved to be no more capable of providing competent governance than was Yanukovich's regime, and its initial actions further alienated the eastern sections of the country.

Having suffered a serious political fiasco in Ukraine—again—Vladimir Putin then tried to save political face by executing a lightning maneuver to annex Crimea. Undoubtedly the operation was a contingency plan that Russian special forces had long since prepared, awaiting only a suitable moment to be set into motion. For their part, pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, encouraged by Crimea's annexation, launched an armed insurgency. Poorly organized Ukrainian military efforts to quell the uprising allowed the separatists to acquire additional weapons. At this point Putin embarked on a characteristically Russian dual-track policy, similar to the foreign policy dualism of the Soviet era: tacit material support for insurgents without overt endorsement of their political objectives. We can only speculate as to Putin's goals. Presumably he calculated that he could benefit from distracting and weakening the new government in Kiev, making it more susceptible to Russian interests. It is unlikely, however, that he seeks to invade and annex the eastern oblasts. Perhaps he calculated that

leaving them as “frozen” conflicts along the lines of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia would have been an acceptable outcome.

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Progressively ratcheting up the level of arms supplied to the insurgents exposed Russia to risks it had not prepared for, however. Providing sophisticated surface-to-air missile batteries to poorly trained, ill-controlled separatists, without the tracking radar and technical controls necessary to distinguish civilian from military targets, made Russia directly responsible for the extraordinary tragedy of the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner on July 17. The calamity moved mainstream European political opinion to support serious sanctions that will have substantial effects in tightening credit for Russian firms.

The conventional U.S. perspective on the Ukrainian events of fall 2013 and spring 2014 overlooks several key points and may have contributed in a small way to the sequence of tragic events that followed. It was unhelpful at best, and more probably downright harmful, for the U.S. government to align itself with a popular protest movement directed at overthrowing a legitimately elected government. It is one thing to voice official support for Ukrainian participation in the European Association Agreement. It is another entirely for U.S. diplomats to distribute tea and cookies on the central square to participants of a popular uprising to replace the government. Had Russian embassy officials done the same during the “Occupy Wall Street” protests, U.S. society and government would have reacted with fury.

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In the end though, U.S. support for the Maidan movement probably had little direct impact. But it certainly served to reinforce the view widely shared by Putin and the Russian political elite that the U.S. was once again orchestrating the overthrow of a regime as part of a larger strategy of containing Russia. It fed President Putin's taste for interpreting each development in U.S.-Russia relations as further confirmation that U.S. policy is cynical and aggressive. The conviction that Russia is surrounded by two-faced enemies has become dominant in Russian official outlooks. Each event that occurs—Edward Snowden's revelations last year about the scale of U.S. surveillance, the CIA director's secret visit to Kiev in the spring, the expansion of the United Nations-backed 2011 mission to protect civilians in Libya from Qaddafi's brutality into a campaign to overthrow Qaddafi—hardens Russian certainty about U.S. aggressiveness and Russian victimhood.

What we tend to forget is that the Russian political elite holds totally different assumptions about the relative importance of democracy and stability as political values. Consistent with its idealist political tradition, Washington continues to find bipartisan unity in its support for democracy-building overseas. With virtually every other issue, domestic and foreign, becoming the target of bitter ideological conflict, Republicans and Democrats in Washington can agree on the faith that democracy is the solution to the problem of bad government. In many parts of the world, though, the answer to predatory government is not popular elections, but the improvement of public services, provision of basic security, and a sense of national purpose.

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The Russian political elite proceeds from completely different premises, consistent with its realist tradition. Russians assume, based on their own experience, that if a bad government is brought down by insurgents, it is likely to be succeeded by a worse government. Russians reason that in a world in which the capacity to govern is scarce, any government capable of maintaining basic public order is preferable to civil war and anarchy. Russian elites regard democracy as a luxury good at best and, when deployed as a crusade by American foreign policy, as a deceptive, manipulative stratagem for overthrowing regimes friendly to Russia.

Given the gap between Russian and American elite perceptions, it would be useful if the U.S.-Russia relationship could focus on reaching agreement on basic points of information. What is actually happening on the ground in eastern Ukraine? Can we agree on establishing mechanisms for neutral third-party reporting from the region, so that we operate from a common baseline of evidence? Can we discuss how our different perceptual lenses led us to see the sequence of events in Ukraine in fall 2013 so differently? Or, for that matter, how we view events in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan? Eventually, it would be ideal if the U.S. could overcome its reflexive faith that democratic elections can solve every problem of poor governance in exchange for Russia's abandonment of its neo-imperial reflex.

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