

Sanctions Won't Work

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

Current Western policy toward Russia, as it pertains to the Ukraine crisis, rests on several premises, each of them flawed. The first is that President Putin's progressive political isolation will force him to retreat and to settle the Ukraine crisis on the terms of the West and the Ukrainian government. The second is that Putin will be forced to change course by Western economic sanctions, and that the punishment they inflict will hurt Russia but not necessarily Europe, or if they do, then not as much. Or that Russia will cry "uncle" first. The third is that the Ukrainian army will soon quash the insurgency by force of arms—that Kiev's troops are on a roll and that the roll will continue, culminating in a triumph.

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There is no evidence whatever at this point to support the first two premises, and the third deserves scrutiny.

Economic punishment, far from inducing Putin to back off, has led him to slap sanctions of his own on the European Union. Thus sanctions have become a two-way street, something that should have been apparent at the outset. This matters because Europe's economies are still ailing and because Europe does far more trade with Russia (nearly half a trillion dollars a year compared to our \$50 billion) than the United States. How long before the EU becomes far less enthusiastic about squeezing Putin?

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As for isolation abroad, Putin has unquestionably paid a price, especially in the West, after the downing of MH17 on July 17th.

But this isolation has not been accompanied by a loss of popularity at home, which matters to Putin more. Besides, so significant is Ukraine to Russia—and in multiple ways—that Putin may be prepared to pay a bigger price for defending Russian interests as he sees them than is the West. There is thus an asymmetry of interests between the West and Russia and of the willingness to pay a price when it comes to Ukraine. There always has been—and there always will be.

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As for a military solution, while that can't be ruled out, it will prove an even more bloody and destructive process than it has been already: 1,500 dead, tens of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons, and not a little

economic hardship, making political reconciliation in Ukraine much harder. Without such reconciliation, Ukraine risks continued instability. All of this of course assumes that Russia will necessarily allow the insurgents' defeat and not intervene militarily.

There is, then, no sanctions-cum-war solution at hand.

What's required, and always has been, is a political package that combines a monitored ceasefire, no-weapons or -troops zones on a swath of either side of the Russia-Ukraine border, and mediated talks, all of which must lead to an agreement on Ukraine's territorial integrity and neutrality, and its economic stabilization. Russia has been seen as the problem in each of these areas so far, and indeed it bears much responsibility for this crisis. At the same time, the crisis will not end, and indeed may get worse, unless we rethink our current strategy and try and figure out how to make Russia part of the solution in all of these areas, without its being able to define all aspects of that solution.

Alas, given the current political mood in Washington, and in much of the press, any idea that falls short of ratcheting up pressure on Russia so as to cause it more pain brings on charges of appeasement. So we are a long way from a context in which such ideas will gain acceptance. The question is how much worse things will have to get before a solution is found. That's the pity of it all.

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