
The Shock of Unintended Consequences

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| PUTIN | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY |

The dominant U.S. narratives about Russia and Vladimir Putin—mainly accusatory but, in some instances sympathetic—display a surprising degree of uniformity, conviction, self-righteousness, and intolerance for ambiguity. Typically, they assert, rather than explain, and offer policy prescriptions that leave little room for modification based on new information inconsistent with prevailing assumptions. Although such rigidity in mindsets is not a novel phenomenon in U.S.-Russian/Soviet relations—and one can point to an even more uniform set of Russian perspectives of U.S. behavior—the tired and predictable debate about Russian and U.S. intentions is unusually polarized. Perhaps most disturbing is the shallowness of the public debate and the degree to which relatively few senior policymakers or analysts appear to be deeply engaged on the issue. It is almost as if the sources of U.S. and Russian conduct are so transparent that they require little further study. Indeed, there is little evidence that policymakers in either country are having second thoughts about the wisdom of their behavior or are prepared to invest the political capital that would be required to alter the current dynamic in search of a modicum of

cooperation. Instead, both sides exude an exaggerated and very dangerous belief in their ability to manage crisis escalation.

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In light of this sorry state of affairs, what, if anything can be done in the short term? The realistic answer probably is “not much,” especially given the stultifying domestic political conditions in both countries. President Obama is under siege on so many fronts, his Russia policy enjoys what could almost be called bipartisan support in comparison to his attempts to deal with the Middle East and most domestic issues. Much to the chagrin of Western critics of President Putin’s authoritarian inclinations, his primary domestic threats come from the right—not from the democrats—and it is hard to imagine what combination of Western incentives and disincentives will be sufficient to induce him to alter course.

If there is a way out of this morass, it will probably come from the shock of unintended consequences following a Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine, a catastrophic nuclear accident or terrorist incident, or the urgent need for cooperation to cope with a global pandemic, the Ebola precursor of which may be brewing in West Africa.

The outlook is only slightly more encouraging for the midterm. In order for U.S.-Russia relations to improve, the leadership in both countries will need to reject the view that the status quo is acceptable, accept the fact that divergent threat perceptions are not the same as illegitimate perceptions, avoid demonizing the adversary, and identify areas for collaboration that can withstand the corrosive effects of domestic politics. Such issues may be few and far between, but cooperation in the removal of chemical weapons from Syria suggests that they

exist. Over time it should be possible to increase their number. And while the moment may not appear propitious politically for greater U.S.-Russian dialogue, it is hard to imagine a time when exchanges of U.S. and Russian scientists, military personnel, educators, and students are more needed to erode false stereotypes, nurture common values, and promote shared aspirations.

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This is an excellent analysis. But I hope that the prospects for dialogue are not totally lost. They will require much less resort to public argumentation and more to private discussions of those issues where we not only need to cooperate but must cooperate if we are to deal successfully with them. Broadly speaking, that is how, a generation ago, we reversed the momentum of Cold War confrontation, which moved from a rhetorical height in 1983 to a cooperative end of the Cold War in December, 1987. (Details in my book, [Reagan and Gorbachev](#).)

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Oh come off your Ivy Towers scholars! Obama is a disciple of the American born Lower Nobility, who hates Russia with all his might and pushed NATO. That endless land and bounty of natural resources are all givens. Is this human nature or evil gone amuck? America is what our Founders feared that Foreign Wars would be fought on our soil or at best, with our humanity. Blame game cannot be on Clinton, "W" nor Obama, for since Reagan, things have changed, or is that too invisible to figure? Seems like the Presidents are controlled, the policy of Republicans are carried through by Democrats, NO? So our politicians debate homosexuality and abortion, of which, neither belong in our government except we should learn human behaviour is the highest form of ART and go from there. This is a mere cook book and gardeners mentality. but does the cat have the academic tongue or they just are not in the know? Pray tell me!

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a gap across the pont that began a bitter relationship from the

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