

Then and Now: Eight Lingering Questions on U.S.-Russia-Ukraine

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

In April 2014, we posed a list of eight questions on the Ukraine crisis, in the *Moscow Times*. With an ongoing civil war in Ukraine some 15 months after the Maidan rebellion and overthrow of Ukraine's elected president, it seems appropriate and timely to refresh and update with eight new questions reflective of the ongoing crisis, and for the relentless downward spiral in U.S.- Russia relations that we have seen as a consequence.

1. Amidst the skepticism over chances for success of the recently concluded second Minsk Agreement, why do we focus exclusively on reported Russian backsliding from the first Minsk Protocol of September 2014? There are at least six points contained in the protocol in which the Poroshenko government failed to deliver, including: decentralization of power to Eastern oblasts; an amnesty law; a "continued inclusive national dialogue"; steps to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in the Eastern war zone; local elections to be held in the East; and a program of economic recovery and reconstruction for the devastated Donbass region.
2. How for that matter can we embrace the Poroshenko government as either a beacon of democracy or as a force for national unity? Consider the 15-month history of conduct from Kiev to the East since the Maidan rebellion:
 - Western Ukrainian governors were appointed in Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk, thus inflaming the pro-Russia majority.
 - Just two Eastern Ukrainian representatives were included in the 19 new government ministries.

- Representatives of ultra-right forces found high-ranking government posts, including the Svoboda movement, which was denounced in a 2012 European Parliament resolution as “xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic.”
- The Poroshenko regime continues to wage war on its own people with relentless attacks on the eastern cities, with 50,000 new troops, including distinctly dubious “irregular” forces, and with millions of refugees and displaced persons in the East.

3. Why do we fail to understand that threats do not work with Putin’s Russia? Much is made in the United States and the West of the claim that our actions are directed not against the people of Russia, but against the Putin regime. But reports from Russia since the implementation of sweeping Western sanctions suggest that even among those who are not by any means reflexively pro-Putin there is a continued groundswell of opinion that the United States and the European Union have gone too far, both in meddling in the Ukraine crisis and in seeking to “punish” Russia. For example, Mikhail Gorbachev—no friend of the current president, but the architect of the end of the Cold War with Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush—blames U.S. “triumphalism” for the current crisis in Ukraine and in bilateral relations.
4. Does anyone in the Obama administration understand history—which serves to remind us that the very idea of “Rus,” Russian identity, was born in Kiev, centuries before Moscow’s founding? Ukraine will never be just another country to Russia, or, for that matter, to the 30 percent of those of Russian origin who live in Ukraine (a statistic to be borne in mind when we read in Western media and official propaganda of “[all] Ukraine’s” longing for Western embrace). There is simply no country with a relationship to the United States remotely, 3/21/14- approaching the historical, cultural, and ethnic bonds of Ukraine to Russia. Another, darker symbolic significance lies in the historical fact that both Napoleon and Hitler invaded Russia through Ukraine. Moreover, in criticizing Russia for including Ukraine in a “sphere of influence/interest,” we should think of our own historical imperative in the form of the 200-year-old Monroe Doctrine, whereby we reserve the right to resist and repel any foreign adventurism on the entire American continent (a right we have invoked—in Cuba, in Central America). A violent and prolonged civil war is being waged in Russia’s immediate neighborhood, and there is a distinct possibility that the U.S. Congress will vote to provide advanced weaponry to one side in the dispute. What would our response be if the situation

were reversed, with Russian arms flowing into a conflict on the North American continent?

5. Why, given this deep historical bond, is there the collective neuralgia in the United States and the West over proposals that would have avoided the zero-sum choice forcing Ukraine into an “Us or Them” cul de sac of being a bedfellow of either Russia or NATO? Why is the “Ukraine [and Georgia] in NATO” intent still on the table? Are we really ready to invoke Chapter 5 of the NATO charter in the case of a Ukraine within NATO? As Harvard’s Stephen Walt has recently observed: “Ukraine did not begin with a bold Russian move, or even a series of illegitimate Russian demands; it began when the United States and the EU tried to move Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit and into the West’s sphere of influence.” What was the purpose of the “association agreement” talks, launched by the EU with Ukraine in 2013, if not to anger Russia?
6. Why do we allow the Ukraine tail to wag the dog of essential cooperation between the United States and Russia—now all but lost—on matters of critical mutual interest? These include critical nuclear arms treaties, on which there is significant backsliding, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF); the Islamic State of Iraq the Levant (ISIL) and the threat of Islamic terrorism from North Africa to Yemen; Afghanistan and illegal narcotics trade; Iran and the P5 + 1 negotiations; cyber terrorism; and Syria.
7. What has happened to eradicate any semblance of a coherent “policy” toward Russia? The current U.S. approach (we cannot dignify it with “policy”) consists of just two ingredients: hectoring Russia for its actions in its neighborhood and for its internal human rights record; and unabashed Schadenfreude at Russia’s economic setbacks. Each was included in President Obama’s State of the Union speech in January, in what was no more than a passing jibe. He described Russia as “isolated” (Russia is in fact building links with others who may bristle at what they see as U.S. hegemony—most notably but not exclusively China.) Obama also described Russia’s economy as being “in tatters” (Russia, in common with all oil-producing economies, faces severe consequences of price erosion, but Russia has, unlike the disastrous ‘90s, built up reserves as a bulwark to cover external debt needs, according to no less a source than Moody’s).
8. Why do we resort, rather like middle-school bullies, to a relentless stream of ad hominem attacks on President Putin? In U.S. media and policy circles, he is usually depicted both visually and verbally as a ludicrous caricature, a one-dimensional

parody of the elected leader of Russia who, whether we like it or not, and due in no small part to our actions, still enjoys levels of popular support that a U.S. President could only dream of. As Henry Kissinger has sagely observed, “demonization of Putin is not a policy; it is an alibi for the absence of one.”

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