

Ukraine Deal Could Buy U.S. Time to Formulate Effective Russia Policy

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The diverging strategic aims of the main actors in the Ukraine conflict means that an enduring settlement will prove elusive even if the current ceasefire endures. Russia wants to keep Ukraine weak and divided, while the Ukrainian government—backed by the United States—wants to rule a reunified country, to include Russian-occupied Crimea. For their part, many Europeans appear content with almost any settlement that ends the fighting and the sanctions that they have imposed on Russia.

There is not a primarily military solution to the challenges posed by Russia's interference in Ukraine, given Russia's reliance on a hybrid combination of non-military tools for exerting influence in other countries and the imperative of avoiding a war between Russia and the West. Russia could conquer Ukraine militarily, but instead has chosen to keep Ukraine unstable to prevent its consolidation under Western control.

The U.S. should make keeping Ukraine strong and independent of Russia an enduring priority, since Moscow's disruptive power-projection potential in Europe would be limited by the resulting geographic barrier and the constrained access to Ukrainian resources. The West has tolerated the frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus and Transnistria since the territories are small and distant, but

Ukraine is huge, densely populated, and located in the heart of Europe. Since substantial economic and good governance assistance to Kiev is needed to strengthen Ukraine's economic and security structures, the European Union is Washington's and NATO's natural partner in this effort. NATO-EU ties should be strengthened in both the military and non-military dimensions.

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However, any U.S. policy toward Russia will necessarily have a military component. Putting more NATO troops in the alliance's more vulnerable eastern members bordering Russia is a way of bolstering the alliance's credibility and discouraging Russian military actions against NATO members. It offers a good compromise between being provocative and looking weak, which invites further Russian probing. However, Washington and its European allies should consider carefully the wisdom of offering NATO membership or other security guarantees now to nonmember countries that are vulnerable to Russian pressure and Russia's local military primacy. NATO's strongest asset is its credibility—failing to uphold an Article 5 guarantee could rupture the alliance and undermine its many benefits for Europe, America and even Russia.

With regard to sanctions against Russia, the U.S. should follow the EU example and include sunset provisions so that they automatically expire by a certain date unless renewed, as requiring an affirmative congressional vote or even executive branch decision to repeal sanctions is problematic. Sanctions tend to be “sticky”—that is, they are easy to enact but hard to revoke, as demonstrated by the difficulty the U.S. had in removing the Cold War-era Jackson-Vanik sanctions on the former Soviet Union. Short-term sanctions can signal U.S. disapproval of Russian actions in ways that are more visible than diplomatic demarches but less risky than military measures. But they inflict collateral casualties, in this case on ordinary Russian and their neighboring republics, and encourage retaliation on other issues. Putin has seemed indifferent to the sanctions since they helped his popularity, rallying people behind him and giving

him someone to blame, and he may have expected the West to eventually abandon them, as they did after the Georgia War. Moreover, sustaining long-term sanctions reduces Russia's integration with the West, which is bad for Russia and European stability.

U.S. officials must not be so focused on augmenting NATO's military posture and managing economic sanctions on Russia that they neglect the need for an integrated, proactive, long-term strategy to manage a resurgent Russia, which should include promoting European energy diversification away from Russia and increasing LNG and gas reverse-flow infrastructure, which could take years. In partnership with allies, the U.S. should pursue a more active diplomacy of engagement in Russia's periphery aimed at resolving frozen conflicts, addressing public corruption and shoring up democracy defects and other vulnerabilities that Russian policy skillfully exploits. It is imperative to provide more resources to U.S. public diplomacy and democracy promotion efforts in the former Soviet Union; these will still not match Russia's powerful soft power machine, but will enjoy the multiplying effect of defending better values and the truth.

Within Russia, bilateral exchange programs and Russia-U.S. commercial deals can engage and educate the next generation of Russian public and private sector leaders, who could take more than a decade to gain power. U.S. investment in Russia raises Russian business and management practices for transparency and ethics as well as efficiency. But Russian officials are trying to leverage the sanctions to rely more on domestic producers, to make Russia less vulnerable to future cutoffs. Where import substitution through domestic production fails, capital and goods from China and some other countries (Israel, Brazil, Gulf states) are rapidly replacing the cut-off Western sources. The West will take a while to regain even some of these economic ties.

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Furthermore, the U.S. needs to think more creatively about how to give Russia a greater stake in the European security order, without sacrificing the Helsinki Principles, the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and security assurances for post-Soviet countries in Russia's periphery. Wide-ranging Russian-Ukrainian interactions are inevitable given the deep ties between the two countries; curtailing them entirely will undermine Ukraine's economic development and social stability.

Beyond Russia and Ukraine, the U.S. needs to develop a coherent policy toward Russian-led multilateral organizations, such as the Common Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), all of which reinforce Moscow's bilateral engagement with these groups' members. The cost to the U.S. of ignoring these institutions will grow as Russia strengthens their capabilities and develops ties with nonmember observer states, like Iran.

Finally, bilateral contacts between U.S. and Russian diplomats and policymakers, as well as unofficial Track II dialogues, must be maintained despite official differences. At present, both the quality and the quantity of such engagements have withered. In some cases, we will need to avoid sanctioning Russian officials in order to keep talking with them. Engagement by itself is unlikely to overcome all differences, but it can help counter regrettable misconceptions in the Kremlin about the United States.

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