

Foreign Affairs: Russia, Trump, and a New Détente

By Robert David English

In his first press conference as president of the United States, Donald Trump said no fewer than seven times that it would be "positive," "good," even "great" if "we could get along with Russia." In fact, for all the confusion of his policies toward China, Europe, and the Middle East, Trump has enunciated a clear three-part position on Russia, which contrasts strongly with that of most of the U.S. political elite. First, Trump seeks Moscow's cooperation on global issues; second, he believes that Washington shares the blame for soured relations; and third, he acknowledges "the right of all nations to put their own interests first," adding that the United States does "not seek to impose our way of life on anyone."

The last of these is an essentially realist position, and if coherently implemented could prove a tonic. For 25 years, Republicans and Democrats have acted in ways that look much the same to Moscow. Washington has pursued policies that have ignored Russian interests (and sometimes international law as well) in order to encircle Moscow with military alliances and trade blocs conducive to U.S. interests. It is no wonder that Russia pushes back. The wonder is that the U.S. policy elite doesn't get this, even as foreign-affairs neophyte Trump apparently does.

MEMORY LOSS

Most Americans appreciate the weight of past grievances upon present-day politics, including that of the United States' own interference in Iran in the 1950s, or in Latin America repeatedly from the 1960s through the 1980s. Yet there is a blind spot when it comes to U.S. interference in Russian politics in the 1990s. Many Americans remember former President Bill Clinton as a great benefactor to Russia as the country attempted to build a market democracy under then President Boris Yeltsin. But most Russians see the United States as having abetted a decade of degradation under Yeltsin's scandal-ridden bumbling. Washington, they believe, not only took advantage of Moscow's weakness for geopolitical gain but also repeatedly interfered in Russia's domestic politics to back the person – Yeltsin – who best suited U.S. interests. Americans' ignorance of this perception creates a highly distorted picture of Russia's first postcommunist decade.

Russia's misery during the 1990s is difficult for outsiders to comprehend. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's economy entered a sharp slide that would continue for over eight years. Although this decline rarely is referred to as a depression in Western media, in fact it was much worse than the Great Depression in the United States between 1929 and 1932, U.S. GDP fell by some 25 percent, whereas Russia's fell by over 40 percent between 1990 and 1998. Compared with the Great Depression, Russia's collapse of the 1990s was nearly twice as sharp, lasted three times as long, and caused far more severe health and mortality crises. The public health disaster reflected Russia's prolonged agony: stress-aggravated pathologies (suicide, disease caused by increased alcohol and tobacco use) and economically induced woes (poor nutrition, violent crime, a crumbling public health system) combined to cause at least three million "excess deaths" in the 1990s.

Faith in free markets, and admiration for the United States, fell sharply in Russia in the 1990s. The failures of "shock therapy," or the rapid transition to a market economy, made such alienation inevitable, as the rush toward privatization and slashing of the state led not to self-regulating growth and broad prosperity but to a pillaging of national wealth by rapacious oligarchs, who flourished under Yeltsin. Worse, American talk of a Marshall Plan for Russia proved empty, and U.S. aid—particularly in the critical first years of transition—was a paltry \$ 7

billion. Much of that was in the form of credits that came attached with strings requiring the purchase of U.S. goods or the hiring of U.S. consultants. Also hurting America's image were much-publicized cases of corruption on the part of some Americans, involving insider trading, money laundering, and similar scandals.

In 1993, hyperinflation and poverty led to protests, and the Russian parliament passed legislation attempting to block Yeltsin's reforms. Yeltsin responded by deciding to close the legislature and redesign the political system to concentrate power in his hands. This, however, was blatantly unconstitutional, and many deputies refused to disband. Some turned to violent resistance and were crushed by the army. The Clinton administration regretted the bloodshed but blamed it on the opposition, while ignoring the illegality of Yeltsin's power grab. And the United States supported Yeltsin again two months later, when a referendum on a "super-presidential" constitution passed in a rigged vote.

In 1996, there was more U.S.-assisted mischief on the part of Yeltsin. The worst incident was the "loans for shares" scandal, a crooked privatization scheme in which Yeltsin sold Russia's most valuable natural-resource firms to oligarchs by way of fraudulent auctions - a fraud that was matched by that of the 1996 election, when Yeltsin won his second term. The United States was again tarred by complicity, by winking at such electoral violations as state media working to elect Yeltsin or the gross violations of campaign spending limits, and even by sending U.S. advisers to help Yeltsin's stumbling campaign.

The Clinton administration tolerated Yeltsin's regime in part to gain Russia's compliance on global issues, including NATO expansion. But even this was shortsighted as well as hypocritical. George Kennan, author of the Cold War containment policy, warned that pushing NATO toward Russia's borders was "a strategic blunder of potentially epic proportions," which was likely to provoke an anti-Western backlash. Other experts, such as intelligence veteran Fritz Ermarth, issued warnings at the time over the United States' complicity in Russia's domestic corruption. "We have largely lost the admiration and respect of the Russian people," Ermarth wrote. "Think how [U.S. policy] must look to Russians: you support the regime's corruption of our country on the inside so it supports you in your humiliation of our country on the outside. One could not concoct a better propaganda line for Russia's extreme nationalists."

ALTERNATIVE REALITY ABOUT RUSSIA

Few Russians who endured this corruption and humiliation have much sympathy with U.S. anger over Russian meddling in the 2016 election. And with any perspective on the 1990s, it is hard to fault them. Yet such perspective among Americans is rare, in part because the Western media often adopted the Clinton administration's cheery narrative, downplaying negative phenomena as bumps in the road toward a democratic Russia. And despite subsequent revelation of so many scandals from the 1990s, Putin's "autocracy" is still contrasted with Yeltsin's "golden era of democracy," ignoring the fact that it was Yeltsin's team who perfected such tactics as 110 percent turnout in remote precincts, and whose oligarchs used their media empires as lobbying firms while brazenly buying parliamentary votes (to create personal tax loopholes). Many myths about the Yeltsin years persist. A recent National Geographic article by Julia Ioffe, for instance, attributes Russian growth under Putin to "tough economic reforms adopted by Boris Yeltsin" and describes Putin as "coasting on historically high oil prices and economic reforms implemented in the Nineties."

High oil prices, yes. But had Putin merely coasted on the policies of Yeltsin, there would have been little tax collected on the oligarchs' profits to pay for pensions, rebuild infrastructure, and create reserve funds. And there would have been no agricultural revival, because private land tenure would have remained illegal. In his first few years in office, Putin passed tax and banking reform, bankruptcy laws, and other pro-market policies that Yeltsin hadn't managed in a decade. Denying Putin credit in this way is typical. Paul Krugman

recently argued in The New York Times, for instance, that growth under Putin "can be explained with just one word: oil." But note that in 2000, when Putin became president, oil stood at \$30 per barrel and petroleum accounted for 20 percent of Russia's GDP. But in 2010, after a decade's rise pushed oil over \$100 per barrel, petroleum had nevertheless fallen to just 11 percent of GDP, according to the World Bank. Thus as oil boomed, Russian agriculture, manufacturing, and services grew even faster.

Krugman's fellow columnist Thomas Friedman similarly decried Russia's low life expectancy over a period "that coincides almost exactly with Putin's leadership of the country ... the period of 1990-2013," while blaming Putin for "slow gains in the life expectancy of an entire nation." In fact, the first half of this period coincides almost exactly with Yeltsin's leadership, when male life expectancy fell by over six years-unprecedented for a modern country in peacetime. Under Putin, both male and female life expectancy have made rapid gains, and their combined average recently reached 70 years for the first time in Russian history.

VLADIMIR THE TERRIBLE

Distaste for many aspects of Putin's harsh rule is understandable. But demonization that veers into delusion by denying him credit for major progress (and blaming him for all problems) is foolish. Foolish because it widens the gulf between U.S. and Russian perceptions of what is going on in their country, with Russians rating Putin highly because they value the stability and pride he has revived. Foolish because it encourages the illusion that everything bad in Russia flows from Putin, so that if only Putin were removed then Russians would elect another liberal like Yeltsin. And foolish simply because that is how American leaders look when they mock Russia's prospects, as former U.S. President Barack Obama did when he said, "Russia doesn't make anything. Immigrants aren't rushing to Moscow in search of opportunity. The population is shrinking."

In fact, Russia's population has been growing since 2010, and the country has one of the higher birth rates in Europe. Russia is the world's third-largest immigrant destination in the world, behind only America and Germany. And Russian products include the rockets that ferry U.S. astronauts into space. Both Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were given to careless quips about Russia. Both mocked Putin, and Clinton compared him to Adolf Hitler – a comparison that would be laughable were they not so offensive to Russians, who lost 26 million countrymen in World War II. It was also reckless, given Putin's broad popularity in Russia. But when confronted with this popularity, Obama replied, "Saddam Hussein had a 90 percent poll rating." He explained, "If you control the media and you've taken away everybody's civil liberties, and you jail dissidents, that's what happens." This view is deeply mistaken.

There is, of course, much to fault in Putin's Russia, and both Obama and Clinton were subject to nastiness from Moscow. But it is undignified and unwise for a U.S. president to disparage not just a foreign leader but his entire country in the way that Obama did. The urge to answer taunts in kind cannot overpower regard for Russian public opinion, and so confirm the Russian media's portrayal of America as ignorant and arrogant. It seemed clever when Hillary Clinton pounced on Trump as "Putin's puppet." But apparently it didn't resonate much with ordinary Americans, who elected Trump, and neither does the pettiness and demonization of Putin resonate with ordinary Russians.

These ordinary Russians are the forgotten people – the hard-working teachers, doctors, and mechanics whose savings, careers, even health were destroyed by the catastrophe of the 1990s. They are the fledgling voters who saw their new democracy bought and sold by Yeltsin and his cronies, and the onetime admirers of the United States who longed for a leader to restore their pride in Russia after a decade of humiliation. Under Clinton, the United States treated Russia like a defeated enemy and capitalized on its weakness to expand NATO. Claims that this was merely a defensive expansion were belied by NATO's bombing

of Serbia, a Russian ally, in 1999. Under President George W. Bush, the United States further intimidated Russia by abrogating the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, imposing punitive tariffs, launching a reckless invasion of Iraq, continuing to expand NATO, and further encircling Russia by cozying up to Georgia and Ukraine.

It is thus unsurprising that in 2008, Russia hit back, answering a Georgian strike in the disputed region of South Ossetia (which killed some Russian peacekeepers) with a crushing counterblow. For finally pushing back, Putin's approval rating soared to nearly 85 percent—the highest it would reach until Crimea's annexation in 2014.

HOW NOT TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY

This is the Russia that Obama inherited in 2009: prideful, angry, and in no mood for the sanctimony that came with the new administration's stress on democracy promotion. They had seen Bill Clinton ally with a corrupt Yeltsin to make a mockery of their new democracy. They had fumed as Vice President Dick Cheney faulted Russian democracy while praising that of Kazakhstan. And they heard their country criticized for interfering in the affairs of weaker neighbors, even as NATO was expanding right up to Russia's borders, and the United States was launching an invasion of Iraq in the name of democracy promotion that would set the Middle East aflame. Not surprisingly, the Russian media ever more frequently paired the term "double standard" with America.

Thus it may have been unwise for the Obama administration to pursue democracy promotion as brashly as it did, criticizing Russian elections and encouraging Putin's opposition. This carried a whiff not only of hypo-crisy but of danger, too, appearing, as it did to many within Russia, as a threat to destabilize Putin's rule. Democracy promoters may draw a distinction between policies aimed at advancing NATO and those aimed at advancing political liberalization in Russia and other former Soviet states – emphasizing that Obama enacted the latter but not the former. But Putin's skepticism was easy to understand given the West's record of undermining Moscow's allies, as in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, and then seeking to anchor their new regimes in the Western political and military blocs. As a senator, too, Obama was an early supporter of Ukraine joining NATO, and preparations for Ukraine's integration with NATO continued throughout his presidency. Hillary Clinton also advocated a NATO "open door" for Ukraine, and then incurred Putin's wrath by pushing humanitarian intervention (which soon turned into regime change) in Libya. So her demand for "a full investigation of all reports of fraud and intimidation" in Russia's 2011 elections was most unwelcome. Michael McFaul, an expert on democracy promotion and longtime critic of Putin, was a particularly provocative choice for new Obama's ambassador to Russia in 2012. Neither should righteous indignation at Putin's post-election crackdown prevent rethinking of the targets as well as the tools of American public diplomacy. Some fault the focus on Russia's liberal opposition, a small number of Moscow-centered activists who best reflect U.S. values. Many of them are discredited in the eyes of the Russian majority: for their earlier support of Yeltsin's regime, for their disparaging of the widely admired Putin, and for their reflexive backing of U.S. policies – such as NATO expansion even when they clash with Russian interests. They appear, in a word, unpatriotic. They are earnest, articulate, and highly admirable. But even if they weren't stigmatized by Putin or tarred by identification with the 1990s they embody liberal-cosmopolitan values alien to most conservative-national Russians. And while this makes them appealing to the West, it also makes them a poor bet as the focus of democracy-promotion.

Consider the case of Pussy Riot, the feminist-protest rock group, some of whose members were convicted of hooliganism in 2012 for staging a protest in Moscow's Church of Christ the Savior profanely mocking not only Putin but also the Russian Orthodox Church and its believers. Both activists and state officials in the United States praised Pussy Riot and demanded their release. Yet basic decency and regard for the values and traditions of others would suggest that hailing Pussy Riot as champions of free speech was disrespectful of

Russia. It was also insensible if the United States is interested in cultivating sympathy among Russians, some 70 percent of whom identify as Orthodox believers. Russia is a conservative society that viewed the years of Yeltsin's rule, and its onslaught of pornography and promiscuity, with horror. In polls, only seven percent of Russians said that political protest was permissible in a church, and only five percent agreed that Pussy Riot should be released without serious punishment. Surely the sensibilities of ordinary Russians deserve as much regard as those of a minority of cosmopolitan liberals. And hectoring by the West will hardly ease traditional Russian homophobia. Indeed, the outcry on behalf of Pussy Riot likely strengthened popular support for the notorious 2013 law against "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations."

Russians see a double standard in U.S. judgments about their country – a prosecutorial stance that criticizes Russia for behaviors that go unnoticed in other countries. For example, The Washington Post has closely covered Russia's anti-LGBT policies but has paid scant attention to the same in countries such as Lithuania, Georgia, and Ukraine, and when it has it has suggested that Russia is to blame for exporting its anti-gay beliefs. Since 2014, the Western media has similarly reported on Moscow's alleged propaganda onslaught, while largely ignoring the brazen purchase of positive publicity by countries such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. This is not the usual lobbying or public relations but the funding of ostensibly independent research on a country by that country itself paying for upbeat election reports and other assessments by such groups as the Parliamentary Association of the Council of Europe.

Americans rarely hear of such activity, even as alarm over Moscow's subversion nears hysteria. A recent U.S. intelligence report on Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election warned of "a Kremlin-directed campaign to undermine faith in the U.S. government and fuel political protest." Yet a key culprit is the news channel RT (which has a miniscule share of the U.S. audience), on the grounds that it runs "anti-fracking programming highlighting environmental issues" and "a documentary about the Occupy Wall Street movement [that] described the current U.S. political system as corrupt." In fact, unlike the 2014 Maidan occupation in Ukraine, which was actively supported by some U.S. and EU officials, Russian diplomats care-fully kept their distance from the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests.

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

Another double standard, ignored by the U.S. media but noted overseas, was Obama's denunciation in 2014 of the Crimea secession referendum that preceded the peninsula's annexation by Russia. Rejecting parallels between Crimea's secession from Ukraine and Kosovo's 2008 secession from Serbia which the West supported but Russia, along with Serbia, rejected as illegitimate. Obama said that Kosovo only seceded "after a referendum was organized ... in careful cooperation with the United Nations and with Kosovo's neighbors. None of that even came close to happening in Crimea." In fact, none of that even came close to happening in Kosovo. There was no referendum at all - just a vote by Kosovo's Albanian-majority parliament. As for cooperation with the neighbors, Serbia desperately opposed Kosovo secession; Bosnia-Herzegovina, Romania, and Slovakia still have not recognized Kosovo; and others, such as Bulgaria, Croatia, and Hungary, only agreed under Western pressure.

Such a factual error – belief in things that never occurred, yet are cited as legal justification to dismember a country – is worrisome regardless. It also highlights an illusion about the free, democratic choice facing countries in central and eastern Europe as they are tugged between Washington and Moscow. In fact, the freedom of their choice belies the powerful political and economic levers employed to pry these countries away from Russia. As noted above in the case of the Kosovo referendum, Kosovo's neighbors were pressured by the United States and NATO to recognize the region's secession from Serbia. In fact, carrots and

sticks have been continually applied to the countries of eastern Europe to encourage the policies desired in Brussels, Berlin, and Washington, D.C. When eastern Europeans grew concerned about the higher than expected costs of joining the EU – or about the backlash that NATO expansion was provoking in Russia-accession was sweetened for political and business elites while the masses were sometimes sidestepped with popular referenda replaced by simple parliamentary votes. Occasionally Brussels and Washington pulled in opposite directions, as with the International Criminal Court – backed by the EU but opposed by the Administration of George W. Bush. In this, as in other cases, the countries of central Europe exercised their supposedly free choice under enormous political and economic pressure.

Nobody argues that joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union would benefit most countries more than the EU. (NATO is another matter, as the costs of Russian backlash now rival any security benefits from further expansion.) The point is simply to grasp the legitimacy in Moscow's perspective that expansion of the Western blocs is not an organic, democratic process but, rather, one engineered by the United States and its allies, and motivated as much by power as by principle. The West must also see the costs to the countries involved (and to its own alliances) in a payoff-driven, elite-centered process that shortchanges the concerns of majorities and is in key ways undemocratic. Long before the Syrian refugees crisis soured them even further, support for the EU in central Europe had already fallen because the costs were much higher than expected, whereas the benefits seemed mainly to reward a wealthy business elite.

As an example of this dynamic, consider the case of Moldova, where the EU has supported local pro-European parties to help this desperately poor country toward accession. Few in the West read much about the country until a spate of headlines last November, such as the Telegraph's announcement: "Pro-Russia Candidate Wins Moldova Election." Spinning this result in terms of geopolitics was misleading. The election had turned largely on domestic issues, such as corruption and the economy. Ordinary Moldovans worried that EU accession would mainly benefit elites, and Moldova's pro-EU Liberal Democratic Party was reeling from a scandal in which party leaders funneled \$1 billion - half the reserves of the Moldovan National Bank-into private bank accounts. But just as in the cases of similar elections in Bulgaria and Montenegro, U.S. media focused on the struggle for influence with Moscow. Indeed, Montenegro casts all of these issues into sharp relief. This is a country whose secession from Serbia the United States encouraged for geopolitical goals, to weaken the Serbian leader Milosevic by backing the epically corrupt boss Milo Djukanovic. Now, a decade later, Djukanovic's Democratic-Socialist party exploits similar geopolitical tensions to engineer Montenegro's accession to NATO – a step of doubtful benefit to either the alliance or Montenegro, provocative to Russia, and one that buttresses a deeply corrupt, patronage-based regime. This focus on geopolitical threats, however, obscures the bigger socioeconomic one: pluralities or even majorities in many eastern European countries now believe that life was better under communism. Such alienation drives anti-EU sentiment in those countries and empowers demagogues like Hungary's President Viktor Orban not some nefarious influence from Vladimir Putin but deep economic inequality and the manifest failings of European integration.

Western understandings of the conflict in Ukraine show a similar bias. Recall that the crisis erupted in 2013 when President Viktor Yanukovich balked at the EU's harsh accession terms and opted instead to align with Russia. And he was ousted in a revolt that America and the EU openly cheered. No matter how corrupt his rule was, he was elected democratically and had acted constitutionally in making his decision. (In fact, he was elected in 2010 because the previous pro-EU government had proved both corrupt and incompetent.) But in 2014, as the protests in Ukraine grew, the United States decided to abandon a power-transition deal that it had agreed upon with Russia, and instead supported the protests calling for Yanukovich's ouster, which essentially turned into a coup. But this quickly boomeranged, as the Russians concluded that if the West could support an unconstitutional

seizure of power in Kiev, then they could hold an unconstitutional referendum in Crimea or support an unconstitutional seizure of power in Donbas. There was a compromise path, but treating Ukraine as something to be yanked from Russia's orbit – which raised the specter of NATO again as well as loss of their centuries – old Crimean naval base-made Putin's choice to hit back an easy one.

Of course this hardly justifies the savagery that Russia has abetted in fighting over the Donbas. But U.S. and EU actions helped spark the conflict by treating Ukraine as a prize to be grabbed, rather than as a linguistically and ethnically divided country in which Russia has legitimate interests. Western policies recklessly ignored these interests and needlessly raised the stakes. As seen, some officials stressed a NATO "open door" for Ukraine while the likelihood of rapid EU accession was exaggerated as well. Before the war, Ukraine had an annual income-per-capita of \$4,000, on par with Albania and Kosovo, and in corruption surveys it ranked below Russia and on the same level as Nigeria. Today, after an Association agreement, billions in aid, and three years of EU-mandated reforms, Ukraine is still a corrupt, bankrupt mess – highlighting how unprepared it was for EU accession, how heavily it depended on Russian trade and subsidies that are now lost, and how unwise it was for Western leaders to push an either-or choice on Kiev.

THE ART OF THE DEAL?

In the latest corruption surveys, Ukraine still ranks below Russia. Scandals erupt daily, with an economic drain greater than the conflict in Donbas. Ukraine's pro-EU President Petro Poroshenko has a 17 percent approval rating, lower than the pro-Russian Yanukovich's 28 percent on the eve of his ouster in 2014. Ironically, this means that the pro-Russian Yanukovich was the most popular Ukrainian president of this century. And in the latest poll finding, only 41 percent of Ukrainians still support the EU Association Agreement, the rejection of which sparked the Maidan revolution in the first place. It is trends like these, along with a right-wing turn in Western European states that erodes their patience and generosity with troubled eastern neighbors, that should trouble EU leaders. Instead, across the region, Europeans are on high alert for Russians spreading anti-Western news, supporting anti-Western politicians, and deploying an army of anti-Western internet trolls. Yet for all the paranoia about Russian subversion, crisis is more likely to come from elsewhere, such as an unraveling of fragile Bosnia leading to a clash between Serbia and NATO. Or it could be Moldova, with the nationalist majority renewing a push to unite with their Romanian kin, thereby reviving conflict with the Russian minority. Hungary could leave the EU, delivering a critical blow to European unity. Or Ukraine could simply collapse of its own corrupt, bankrupt weight.

Yet Ukraine could also be where America and Russia begin repairing ties. The Russian economy is weak -incomes are down a third since 2013 – and relief from Western sanctions is sorely needed. Europe, too, cries for the revival of normal trade with Russia. A deal between Russia and the West would build upon the stalled Minsk Accords. Moscow would withdraw from the Donbass and restore Ukraine's eastern border, and Kiev would grant local self-rule to this Russian-speaking region. Russia would, in turn, get a commitment from NATO not to incorporate Ukraine, and Ukraine would get a treaty guaranteeing its territorial integrity as well as military aid. Kiev would also gain major Western investments, while benefitting enormously from restoration of trade with Russia.

Purists will call such a deal a betrayal, as it would be a de facto recognition of the Russian annexation of Crimea. But the best is the enemy of the good. Moscow will not allow Crimea to be snatched away again, as it was in 1954, after nearly 200 years as part of Russia. And by democratic rights, it shouldn't – the fact is that a large majority of Crimeans want to remain with Russia. Ukraine, moreover, would benefit from peace and investment, instead of diverting more resources into conflict. Normal political and trade ties with Russia would also benefit Europe as a whole, helping to slow and maybe to reverse the current slide toward

dissolution. Continuation of the status quo, by contrast, only exacerbates crisis.

WILL THE REAL VLADIMIR PUTIN PLEASE STAND UP?

A diplomatic breakthrough between Russia and the West on Ukraine or on Syria, or other major issues will also require firm agreement on non-interference in each other's domestic affairs. Such diplomacy would test the mettle of the Trump administration's foreign-affairs neophytes, but the greater unknown is Putin. A majority of the U.S. political elite believes that no deals are possible because Putin is irremediably hostile. Whether they attribute that hostility to ideology (an ingrained KGB worldview) or corruption (an illegitimate regime that needs a foreign enemy to distract its people from domestic woes), many American policymakers believe that Putin simply has no interest in peace with the West. In their view, he is bent on expansion and will gladly endure sanctions as the price of fomenting discord in the West.

Another group of policymakers is also skeptical of Putin, but do not blame him alone for the deterioration of relations. Many of these analysts opposed NATO expansion from the outset, for the same reasons that Kennan did – because it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. These experts also criticize the United States' misadventures in Iraq and Libya, failure to respect Russia's red lines on expansion into Georgia and Ukraine, and petty demonization of Putin. Yet they mainly stand with the first group now in believing that containment, not cooperation, is what the West must practice, because Putin's recent actions threaten the postwar liberal order.

A third group of analysts – the realists, who make up a minority of the foreign-policy establishment – reply that Putin does not threaten the entire postwar liberal order but only challenges the post-Cold War U.S.-dominated order that consistently ignores Russia's interests. They wonder how some can admit the folly of NATO's continual expansion and fault the many double standards in U.S. policy but not agree that America must meet Russia halfway. Like realists such as Kennan or Hans Morgenthau, who early warned against the folly of Vietnam, they are sometimes derided as weak (or Putin apologists) for cautioning against inflating foreign threats while ignoring the United States' domestic weaknesses. These realists argue that the early Putin prioritized market economic reforms and good relations with the West, yet saw his open hand met by the clenched fist of the George W. Bush-era neoconservatives. And Obama, reset or no, continued efforts to expand the Western economic and military blocs that had started under Clinton in the 1990s. In other words, for over two decades, whether motivated by residual Cold War mistrust or post-Cold War liberal hegemonism, America has steadily pushed Western military and political-economic power deeper into Russia's backyard. If history teaches anything it is that any great power will, when facing the continued advance of a rival, eventually push back. And much as Obama-Clinton defenders dislike being reminded of it, any chance of America's post-Cold War power being seen as uniquely benign ended in Serbia, Iraq, and Libya.

It may be that both sides are correct that two decades of ignoring Russia's interests have abetted Putin's embrace of a deep-seated anti-Americanism and that a new détente is impossible. Or it may be that Putin is not innately hostile, but rather a typical strongman: proud and spiteful, but not uniquely corrupt or cruel, and capable of embracing a cooperative position if he finds a partner skilled enough to forge a deal respecting both U.S. and Russian vital interests. The only thing not in doubt is that both America and Russia – indeed, Europe and the wider world – badly need that détente.

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