

Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine

Russian President Vladimir Putin's evolving policies toward Ukraine have continued to surprise almost everyone. It was clear from the start that he considered the February 2014 ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to be illegitimate, another example of what he portrayed as Western-orchestrated regime changes—and feared he was potentially the next target. He also viewed Ukraine's definitive tilt toward the West as a challenge to Russia's power and control in its traditional sphere of influence. It was obvious that he was going to react negatively. But the specific choices he made have astounded even expert analysts.

First came the shock of Moscow's annexation of Crimea, using special operations forces known as “little green men” in Ukraine and “polite people” in Russia. After the fact, political scientist John Mearsheimer was quick to explain this as Putin's reaction to the possible expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to include Ukraine. The post-Cold War NATO enlargement process started in the mid-1990s with invitations issued to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, and official talk about extending NATO to include Ukraine began in 2008.¹ Mearsheimer argued that Putin's dread over the possible loss of Russia's naval base in the Crimean port of Sevastopol explained his 2014 gambit.² But in fact, there was nothing obvious that should have triggered this particular choice on Putin's part, and no one had (at least publicly) predicted it in advance. NATO had last expanded five years

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earlier, and further expansion of any kind was not on the alliance's agenda in 2014. No one in NATO was seriously considering inviting Ukraine to join the alliance anytime soon, given the abysmal state of Kyiv's economy as well as the corruption and Russian penetration of its armed forces, to say nothing of its lack of political stability.

A 2010 agreement with Ukraine guaranteed Russian access to the Sevastopol base through 2042, and Kyiv strongly benefitted from the heavily subsidized Russian natural gas supplies it received in return.³ While Ukrainian opposition leaders had long threatened to annul the agreement, Kyiv had little incentive to abrogate it unilaterally, and gas prices remained a powerful bargaining tool for Moscow in any future negotiations. By threatening Ukrainian sovereignty, Putin without question pushed Kyiv more closely into NATO's orbit, rather than securing its future cooperation with Moscow; and by taking Crimea's predominantly Russian ethnic voters out of Ukraine, he lost a political tool of influence that Russia had long held in Kyiv.

Following this annexation, Putin gave a triumphal speech before a joint session of the Russian parliament on March 18, 2014. For the first time during his fourteen-year tenure as president or prime minister, Putin used explicitly ethnic nationalist terms to explain and justify his foreign policy moves, calling Crimea "primordial Russian land"⁴ and complaining that with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 "the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest, ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders."⁵ While ethnic nationalism and violence against ethnic minorities had certainly been growing in Russian society in recent years, Putin himself had previously been careful to express his own nationalism in statist, not ethnic, terms.⁶ Once again, his choice was particularly confounding because it seemed to presage threats to the neighboring states of Estonia, Latvia, Kazakhstan, and Moldova, all of which have significant Russian ethnic minority populations, and each of which reacted negatively at a time when Putin needed whatever international support he could receive.

Then came Russian military support for separatists in the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk, known informally as the Donbas (or Donetsk Basin) region. These were areas where, unlike Crimea, *ethnic* Russians (at least in 2001, the last time a census was taken) formed only a predominant minority of the population, not the majority, even though native Russian-language *speakers* were in the large majority.⁷ While Putin talked about protecting the political rights of Russian-speakers in the Donbas who wanted more autonomy from Kyiv, experts immediately began to speculate that Putin's real goal was to create another "frozen conflict" (like those in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transdnier, and Nagorno-Karabakh), possibly in an attempt to ensure that NATO would never welcome absorbing Ukraine.

But the conflict in Donetsk and Lugansk wouldn't stay frozen. A September 5, 2014, ceasefire agreement reached in Minsk with the support of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—supposedly inspired by Putin's notes jotted on a plane trip to Mongolia⁸—never really stuck. The evidence indicates that Russia instead increased its supply of advanced equipment and weaponry to the rebels, alongside Russian troops disguised as “volunteers,” and by January 2015 a new winter offensive was underway against Ukrainian forces.

That month, Putin changed his rhetoric again. Now, he argued that the fighting in the east was not really a Ukrainian civil war aimed at resolving the kind of issues outlined in the Minsk accords, such as local autonomy and security provision for Russian-speakers in Donbas. Instead, he claimed, this was a NATO attempt to use the Ukrainian military as a “foreign legion” against the interests of the Ukrainian people, for the purpose of threatening Russian sovereignty and security.⁹ Simultaneously, the Russian state media purported to show a U.S. soldier involved in the fighting in the Donetsk port city of Mariupol.¹⁰ Rather than keeping the conflict frozen, it now appeared that Putin was laying the groundwork for a Russian escalation, perhaps to create a land-bridge to the Crimean peninsula, which had been economically devastated since being cut off from its only land border with Ukraine following the Russian annexation of 2014.

What explains these twists and turns, and what do they mean for the future of Russia's relationship with the West? Unfortunately, there is no way to know the answer to these questions until events in Moscow play themselves out. The next sections explain why, and what the United States and its NATO allies should do in the face of this terrible uncertainty.

What explains these twists and turns in Russian policy?

Putin the Unpredictable

U.S. and Western leaders would love to know what Putin's “endgame” is. The term comes from chess, where the goal is to trap one's opponent into checkmate after a long series of moves requiring strategic vision. But Putin has never claimed to be a chess master; he is a judo master. Judo is about immediate tactics, not long-term strategy. A judoka walks into a room, sizes up the opponent, probes for their weaknesses, and tips the other off-balance in a flash—causing the opponent to fall from their own weight. The victor in a judo match doesn't have to be bigger or stronger than the opponent, just quicker and

shrewder. When one match is over, the judoka moves on to the next, sizing up the new opponent and starting over again.

Judo has played a crucial role in shaping Putin's worldview. He credits judo for giving him discipline after a boyhood spent as a street fighter. He loves the sport so much that he starred in a film about it while serving as Prime Minister under the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev in 2008. Putin spoke in the film about the history of Russian victories in judo and demonstrated some of his favorite moves.¹¹ (Imagine U.S. President Barack Obama making a similar movie about basketball from the Rose Garden.) When Putin's longtime judo coach Anatoly Rachin passed away in August 2013, Putin told his security detail to stay well behind him after the funeral, so that he could take a lone—if televised—walk of mourning.¹²

Meanwhile during Putin's time in office, his childhood judo buddy, Arkady Rotenberg, skyrocketed up the list of Russian billionaires as the Gazprom state-controlled natural gas conglomerate sold off subsidiaries to him.¹³ Putin helped the climb by awarding Rotenberg's company construction contracts totaling over \$7 billion for the 2014 Sochi Olympics,¹⁴ and in January 2015 topped this off by giving him the contract for building the Kerch bridge planned for spanning the waters between Russia and Crimea.¹⁵ Putin's life is immersed in the world of judo—and a judo master doesn't need an endgame. Instead a judoka responds in the moment to the vicissitudes of a changing environment. The only goal is to be the last one standing at the end of the tournament, come what may.

It is not only immersion in the world of judo that shapes Putin's predilection for unexpected moves. His career history as a KGB operative also plays a crucial role. Putin credits the KGB with giving him the life-changing opportunity to transform himself from a mediocre student into a hardworking scholar.¹⁶ Exactly what Putin did in his KGB and FSB years remains hazy. Russia experts Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy believe that he was first a case officer, skilled at turning foreigners (including East Germans when he was stationed in Dresden) toward Moscow's ends. They believe he then added financial investigation skills to his intelligence portfolio during the early 1990s, when he temporarily resigned from official state service to work for the mayor of St. Petersburg on privatization and taxation issues.¹⁷ In addition, he has rewarded old friends, as his colleagues from the KGB and follow-on FSB (Federal Security Forces, using the Russian initials) have received high-ranking positions in government, and at the top of state-owned industrial conglomerates in the oil, nuclear energy, and defense sectors. Regardless of the specific roles Putin played, the KGB would certainly have trained him well in the arts of masking and deception, contributing to his talent for unpredictability. For this reason, Putin's continuing surprises should surprise no one.

Opaque Networks and Surprise Decisions

Moreover, even if Putin the individual were to be deposed (more on that later), the very nature of the current Russian *system* makes all of Moscow's moves unpredictable. This is because decisions stem from opaque political networks which connect to the leader through informal ties—not by well-defined institutions. Before the U.S. government makes any decision, its intentions are telegraphed far in advance: the executive branch launches trial balloons through well-placed leaks; experts debate each other endlessly in the media; Congress holds hearings; pollsters probe public opinion.

In contrast, the process of Russian policymaking is far less clear. Decisions are made not within well-defined constitutional bodies or bureaucratic institutions, but behind closed doors by unknown individuals. Authority comes through personal connections, cemented through family, neighborhood, and prior school or work experiences. While all political systems depend to some extent on such network ties, what sets Russia apart from its European or North American counterparts is the extent and depth of its personal patronage system.¹⁸ Leaders in every realm of Russian politics, business, and society have an obligation to protect and promote their personal clients in the network, and followers in turn owe a debt of loyalty to the patrons who care for them. Networks receive fortification from long-standing emotional ties whose power far exceeds the expediency of immediate self-interest.

There are reports that, over time, Putin's own personal circle has narrowed, and that he may increasingly be seeking advice from only a handful of people, especially his old KGB and FSB cronies.¹⁹ Hence, the surprising nature of his policy choices might in part reflect the incomplete information he has at his fingertips, if he is turning away from a broader range of expert advisers. As political scientist Jessica L.P. Weeks argues, personalist dictatorships the world over face this problem.²⁰ No one wants to serve as the bearer of bad news that contradicts the boss's views or challenges the wisdom of the leader's choices.

But far from being just an artifact of Putin's personality or of the current tense climate in Russia, this informal network system has been in place in Russia for many years, perhaps even centuries. Scholars have long thought that the Soviet system was based much more on traditional patron-client relationships between individuals than on any abstract Communist Party structure.²¹ While the people involved and their philosophies had radically changed, this was a stylistic holdover from the politics of the tsarist era.

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The fact that Putin's personal history and the overall Russian political system combine to favor surprises mean that we should continue to expect the unexpected. One prime example of this outside of Ukraine was the "September surprise" of 2013 in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suddenly announced a plan to remove all chemical weapons from Syria under UN aegis, just as the United States was considering launching an air strike in response to overwhelming evidence

that the regime of Bashar al-Assad had used chemical weapons against Syria's own population. The remarkable thing about Lavrov's announcement is that up until that point, Russia had consistently resisted all attempts by other members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to impose any sanctions or even any criticism against the Syrian regime for its attacks against civilians. Now suddenly it was Moscow that came to the rescue, spearheading a plan to send Western inspectors into Syria under UNSC oversight in order to take chemical weapons away from a regime that Russia itself had helped arm with conventional weapons. There was no apparent debate about the decision in the Russian press or by Russian experts in the area, either before or after the decision was made.

Predictions about How Informal Networks Operate

Despite the fact that the opaque Russian system produces surprise policy decisions, we can nevertheless make some predictions about how the system should operate, based on the logic of patron-client politics. First, as political scientist Henry Hale emphasizes, leaders in patron-client network systems must constantly signal their strength.²² This helps explain why Putin is relentlessly photographed while shirtless on horseback, shooting tranquilizer dart guns at tigers, or discovering ancient Greek vases while deep-sea diving. It isn't just his ego at play. These stunts are part of a concerted effort to send a strong signal to both the public and his network associates that he is a fit, vigorous, take-charge strongman, even past age 60. In turn, this has an important implication for Putin's foreign policy: he can never be seen as giving in to Western pressure.

Early on, in his first term as president, Putin reached out to the West. He attempted to find common cause with President Bush over the fight against Islamist extremism after the attacks of September 11, 2001, arguing that Russia faced a similar danger from Islamist rebels in the North Caucasus. Putin didn't even object when the United States first sent military trainers to neighboring Georgia to help develop Georgian peace operations skills, or when NATO

invited the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to join the alliance in 2002. (This marked the first, and so far only, time that former Soviet republics would join NATO, and it left the heavily militarized Russian seaport territory of Kaliningrad—separated from the Russian mainland by Latvia and Lithuania—surrounded by NATO on all land borders.) Instead, Putin commented to the Russian press that both Western actions were “no tragedy,” as long as they were not followed by militarization of those territories.²³

But Putin's outreach efforts soon cooled, largely because he felt disrespected by the West. As Russia expert Angela Stent argues,²⁴ Putin seemed particularly irked by two U.S. actions that failed to recognize what he thought should represent Russia's leading role in international affairs. First was President George W. Bush's December 2001 unilateral abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, a centerpiece of U.S.–Soviet arms control during the Cold War that emphasized parity between the two great powers. Second, and even more important, was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 without UNSC approval, in the face of a likely Russian veto of the action. As Russian power went into decline after the Soviet collapse, its veto in the UNSC remained its one clear lever of global influence. While the United States and Russia continued to find some common ground, especially during the interregnum presidency of Dmitry Medvedev from 2008–2012—for example, in crafting limited UNSC sanctions against Iran and North Korea, and in having Russia join the World Trade Organization—the relationship from then on was often fraught. Putin returned for a third stint as president in 2012, following massive political protests in Russia that began over vote fraud claims in the 2011 legislative Duma elections and morphed into a condemnation of Putin's rule itself. Putin portrayed these protests as U.S.-inspired and -coordinated, and from that point on the West seemed to become Putin's personal foe.

This helps explain the ferocity of Putin's reactions to the events in Kyiv in late 2013 and early 2014. Not only was what happened in neighboring Ukraine a central security concern for post-Soviet Russia; even more important, Ukraine—especially Crimea and the southeastern regions of the country—played a central role in Russia's conception of its own great power identity dating back to the time of Catherine the Great. Her expansion of the Russian empire into “Novorossiya” in the late 18th century marked the true emergence of Russia as a force to be reckoned with on the European stage. This means that it is likely politically impossible for Putin to compromise in Ukraine in the face of Western economic sanctions or other pressures. It is not surprising that he

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told the annual Valdai Club meeting in October 2014, “Pressure from outside, as has been the case on past occasions, will only consolidate our society.”²⁵

A second foreign policy outcome that we can predict from Russia’s informal politics system is that all interactions with foreign leaders will be heavily personalized, since Russian leaders think of politics in personalistic—not organizational or institutional—terms. This will prove especially true when they deal with those in other post-Soviet states, who all had school or workplace networks of one sort or another, not far removed from Moscow in past decades. Even those too young to have been directly connected in Soviet times are connected by ties stemming from their families or older colleagues.

This certainly applies to the relationship between Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Poroshenko was also a talented judo enthusiast in Soviet times, although he never reached Putin’s mastery level—a fact that may suggest their relative standing in Putin’s mind. Even more important, one of Poroshenko’s original patrons in Ukrainian politics was Viktor Medvedchuk, an oligarch who represented the rebels in early peace talks with the government in Kyiv and ran against Poroshenko in the March 2014 presidential elections in Ukraine. Even though Poroshenko had broken with Medvedchuk long ago (and indeed he was put on the 2014 U.S. sanctions list), Medvedchuk popped up again at the so-called Minsk II negotiations in February 2015—this time (in a surprising turnabout) representing the Ukrainian state and its security service, the SBU.²⁶ The reason this matters is because Putin is not merely an old friend of Medvedchuk, Putin is the godfather of one of Medvedchuk’s daughters. In other words, beyond whatever substantive conflicts lie between Putin and Poroshenko, there also hangs an emotional whiff of personal networks and their betrayal.

Given this, we should expect to see Russian personalization of interactions beyond the post-Soviet space, with a heavy load of emotional weight and expectations. Putin’s relations with U.S. leaders have certainly had an unusual tenor. *New York Times* reporter Peter Baker reports that Putin was overwhelmed by George W. Bush’s invitation to visit him at home on his Texas ranch, because he had never been to the home of a foreign leader before. Putin even tried to cut side deals with Bush, offering Bush’s friend and campaign supporter Don Evans a position in the Russian oil industry.²⁷ But while Medvedev got along well with Obama, happily eating cheeseburgers with him on a visit to Washington, Putin’s relations with the Obama administration have been consistently frosty.

One obvious sign of this was the terrible way that U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul was treated when Putin resumed the Russian presidency in mid-2012. McFaul and his family were hounded by the press as well as the security forces in an extraordinarily undiplomatic way during their two years in Moscow, and

Putin tolerated this, whether or not he was personally responsible for it.²⁸ The negativity extended even further in Putin's personal interactions with Obama. Putin has consistently seemed to look down on Obama, portraying him to the Russian press in 2012 as a weak leader who could not control his own government, and who might therefore not represent a reliable negotiating partner.²⁹ Putin was reportedly "infuriated" when Obama called him out publicly, and said that Putin looked "like the bored kid in the back of the classroom" in their negotiations over Syria.³⁰ A month later, Putin retaliated with what many found to be a patronizing opinion piece in *The New York Times*, scolding Obama over U.S. exceptionalism on the twelfth anniversary of the September 11 attacks.³¹ As NPR's Alan Greenblatt noted, "For all the tension that existed between them, Leonid Brezhnev never tried to pants Richard Nixon in quite this way."³² We can predict that Putin will prove especially likely to avoid giving in to Western demands over Ukraine that come from President Obama's office.

A third prediction about how leaders should act in patron-client systems may seem, at first glance, to make little sense given Putin's actions in Ukraine—leaders who must focus on providing patronage and protection to their clients should avoid taking actions that risk major losses, especially losses to the core economic interests of their personal networks. We might have expected Putin to speak and act with an aggressive swagger in order to demonstrate his power, but to avoid rash behavior that risked damage to his personal image and stature as well as his network's well-being. In fact, the hope that Putin's rashness in Ukraine would lead to his downfall appears to be one of the engines of the Western sanctions regime, explaining why his personal network has been directly targeted by both the United States and European Union.

But Putin may actually have believed that he *was* taking low-risk actions in Ukraine. The takeover of Crimea was almost bloodless. In eastern Ukraine, creating a frozen conflict with the help of informal militias followed a model used successfully in other post-Soviet cases, as noted earlier. Putin might reasonably have calculated that Western attention would turn away quickly, as it had following Russia's 2008 Georgia war, and that the sanctions regime would never last, given divergences in U.S. and European economic interests and what he saw as the disarray of Obama's control in Washington.

If this is correct, then Putin's seeming errors in this case may be explained by two events that could not have been foreseen in advance and that lay completely beyond Putin's control. First was the shocking and horrifying decision of a local militia commander in Donetsk to fire an anti-aircraft missile at a Malaysian civilian airliner in July 2014. This appears to have been a mistake on the commander's part. Twitter posts that were later deleted seemed to show that Igor Girkin (a Russian citizen who went by the nom de guerre

“Strelkov,” or Rifleman) believed he had hit a Ukrainian military jet.³³ It was this event—and the fact that a majority of the passengers on the flight were Dutch citizens—that helped propel the unexpected unity and longevity of EU sanctions that fall.

The second unexpected event was the sudden plummet of global oil prices in late 2014, after what had earlier been a more modest long-term decline. The sharp drop magnified the effects of sanctions on the oil export-dependent Russian state budget, and provoked a collapse in the value of the ruble. Putin was quick to accuse the United States of orchestrating oil prices in order to harm Russia. But the evidence indicates that the price dive was due to the decision by Saudi Arabia and its partners in the Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) not to limit their own production levels in the face of expanding global market supplies. OPEC members apparently decided that lower prices might drive out competition from higher-cost U.S. shale and other “tight oil” sources, allowing them to retain their market share. If there was any broader political target of their actions beyond U.S. shale oil, it may have been Islamic State (IS) extremists, not Russia, since IS funding at that point came largely from captured Iraqi oil wells.

It remains to be seen whether Western pressure, either from sanctions or from whatever comes next, will be sufficient to cause Putin’s coalition to crack. But it is worth exploring the logic of what such a crack would require.

Regime Change in Russia?

Patron-client systems can be very stable over long periods of time.

Patron-client systems can be very stable over long periods of time. Henry Hale’s analysis of post-Soviet regime elections and constitutions explains why this is so: the act of transferring group loyalty from one leader to another requires overcoming a difficult collective action problem.³⁴ Members of various (and potentially competing) sub-networks must agree that not only is it time to switch their allegiance away from their former chief patron, but must also agree on the new replacement patron. This requires sending and receiving clear signals about who that stronger and more capable individual might be, at a time when the declining patron is applying all possible mechanisms to try to remain in power.

In any patron-client system, this is risky business. The current patron (in this case, Putin) is a known entity who has demonstrated over many years his ability to continuously distribute resources to a wide variety of clients, while keeping their various internal competitions in check and in balance. Making a mistake

in selecting the new patron, or in failing to convince the entire networked system to move in sync, could lead to a permanent decline in the fortunes of mid-level leaders who also must signal their own wisdom and strength to keep lower-level personal networks in line. In the worst case, the result could look like a chaotic mafia war, with rival groups fighting violently for control.

In Russia, the situation is even more perilous, because Putin and his closest supporters are tied to KGB and FSB networks. This means that they have access to information (and can easily create false information) that could destroy any potential rival, either through public humiliation or through prosecution and imprisonment. As was recently shown in the case of anti-corruption crusader Aleksei Navalnyi, whose brother was sentenced to three years of hard labor in a case that seemed fabricated for political reasons, these weapons can be used not only against opponents but against their family members.³⁵ We know from Soviet history, especially during the blood purges of Joseph Stalin in the 1930s, that members of the security services did not hesitate to use the weapons of the state against each other.³⁶ It would take a brave challenger indeed to take on Putin, and the rival would need enormous competence to signal the move successfully, and then hold on to powerful Russian networks the way Putin has done.

What about the possibility of popular revolt? Toppling a police state requires an even greater concentration of collective action, this time across a huge swath of the population. The recent events of the Arab Spring in Egypt show how even a seemingly successful revolt can be parlous. If the security forces disapprove of a newly installed leader, their inaction in providing basic law and order could allow a new version of the old regime to return, after large numbers of citizens are killed in the process of even peacefully agitating for change. As scholars Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan argue, popular protest can serve as a very successful method of regime change—but only when it is meticulously organized. It succeeds best in cases like Poland, where the Solidarity movement established an entire parallel institutional structure, ready to assume the burdens of governance when the old regime crumbled.³⁷ Such well-coordinated private action is highly unlikely in the current Russian police state—especially since the majority of the Russian population, especially the kind of ordinary people who backed Solidarity in Poland, seems still to favor Putin and his strong-arm tactics.

Analysts are never good at forecasting sudden change. Witness the inability of anyone to predict the end of the Cold War, or the onset of the Arab Spring. But the logic of patron-client systems means that no one should count on the collapse of Putin's regime anytime soon. The incentive structure does not favor it, unless the Russian economy tanks so badly over the long term that risky action becomes profitable. (Rising oil prices in early February instead provide

fodder to those who think that Russia's troubles will only be temporary.) And given the growth of ugly ethnic nationalism in Russia, there is far from any assurance that whoever replaced Putin would be a liberal democrat. We should remember that the last time a coup attempt occurred in Moscow—against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991—it was led by KGB officers; and that Russian President Boris Yeltsin waged a bloody battle against violent nationalists in October 1993, winning only because he called in the army on his side.

The Western Response

What does this analysis lead us to conclude about future Russian actions toward the crisis in Ukraine, and the effects that the United States and the broader Western community might have on those actions? First, Putin is highly unlikely

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to give up anything he and his supporters have already achieved. It is virtually unimaginable that he would change his mind about Crimea being a constituent part of Russia, after his triumphal March 2014 speech to the parliament. Nor is it likely that he would allow the insurgents of Donetsk and Lugansk to be defeated, now that he has portrayed the conflict in Ukraine as a struggle against NATO encroachment on Russia. As long as he remains in control, the best that Kyiv can likely hope for is a stalemate. Insistence

that Russia roll back its presence, or even at this point that rebels retreat to the territorial lines of the Minsk agreement, will likely be a non-starter. Putin will not back down.

Second, the West should not assume that more pressure on Putin will convince him even to stop his forward movement in Ukraine. Sending new weapons to Ukraine, for example, will most likely lead him to ramp up countering support for the Donbas rebels, as he would interpret such a move as a new challenge to Russia's place in the world that demanded a response. He could even use such an escalation, in combination with his recent rhetorical shift, to explain to the Russian public why open Russian military intervention in Ukraine is now necessary to preserve Russian sovereignty against NATO expansion on its borders. This would likely result in a more intense war of attrition on Ukrainian territory. This also means that any stepping up of sanctions against Russia—for example, the possible removal of Russia from the SWIFT system of international transfers communication between banks—would become in its own way a war of attrition, too. In that case, the question would

be who could last longer, the global economy without Russia, or Putin without the global economy.

Third, as long as hope remains in Russia that Western pressure is temporary—as long as it seems possible that the European Union will fall into discord over sanctions, or that big Western petroleum companies will successfully lobby for their removal—regime change is highly unlikely. The difficulties facing collective action in Russia at both the network and the public level are immense, and the personal risks of such action are enormous. Even if Putin himself were overthrown, the KGB/FSB network he elevated would likely come roaring back, without any guarantee of the foreign policy direction it would take in the future.

Of course, Putin is full of surprises, so he might shock the world with sudden cooperation with the West. And the opacity of the Russian system may mean that a liberal-democratic cabal is busy cooking up plans for a successful coup that no one will see coming. But under the assumption that both of these things are unlikely, what can we predict about events in Ukraine?

Unfortunately, this analysis implies that the most likely *peaceful* solution to the current situation in Ukraine is both politically and ethically unpalatable: to recognize Russian and pro-Russian territorial gains as permanent, and to provide Putin with the assurance that he can keep what he has gained without punishment. U.S. and other Western leaders would have to admit that Putin will get away with breaking international law in his seizure of Crimea and his destabilization of the Donbas, and watch as Putin crows at home about his victories. It is unclear that the rest of Ukraine would remain at stable peace if this were to occur, since pro-Western nationalist militias would have every incentive to try to unseat Poroshenko's regime if Kyiv approved this arrangement. The West would certainly have to provide at least an implicit security guarantee to Kyiv in any case, so that Putin (or his replacement) had no temptation to go even further into Ukrainian territory—and as of yet, neither the United States nor NATO as a whole has seemed willing to do this.

The only clear alternative for ending the grinding low-level conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas would be to wage a Western proxy war in Ukraine, using imported weapons and military advisers. Such a war would prove immensely costly in both dollars and lives. It would be such a significant and controversial event in the heart of central Europe that it would risk permanently breaking apart the NATO alliance. (That would suit Putin just fine.) If the costs of waging such a war were eventually to destabilize the Russian leadership, we must also recognize that extreme nationalists in Russia would portray this as an existential threat to Russia's continued survival. The threat of nuclear escalation might be a real possibility if Russia started losing, more than fifty years after we thought both the Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis were behind us.

Finally, whatever happens in Ukraine, an understanding of who Putin is—and of the KGB/FSB network standing behind him—makes it vitally important for the United States to send the strongest possible signal that the NATO mutual defense pact will not falter. Washington must make clear that the U.S. nuclear umbrella will maintain the borders and security of the Baltic states and Poland in particular.

It is a sad reality that a new version of the Cold War in Europe—this time without ideology³⁸—will stay with us for the foreseeable future, and that Ukraine as a unified sovereign nation will likely face a tragic fate. But that is the upshot of the Russian system under Putin's reign.

Notes

1. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Enlargement," June 12, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm.
2. John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2014), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.
3. Philip P. Pan, "Ukraine's Extension of Russian Base's Lease May Challenge U.S. Goals in Region," *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/27/AR2010042703887.html>. The Ukrainian language text of the agreement is reprinted in "Dogovor Yanukovicha i Medvedeva pro Bazuvaniia Flotu do 2042 roku. Tekst dokumentu," *Ukrainska Pravda*, April 22, 2010, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2010/04/22/4956018/>.
4. The Russian phrase he used was "iskonno russkaya zemlya." In an interesting twist, the official Kremlin English translation of the speech substitutes the word "historical," which normally uses a very different word in Russian, for what is properly translated as "primordial, immemorial." See Vladimir V. Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," official Kremlin-translated transcript, March 18, 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889>, which can be compared to the Russian original at <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/20603>.
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