In the late 1990s, as Russia’s economy descended into a death spiral—eventually culminating in the August 1998 crash of the ruble and the government’s default on its international loan commitments—a series of books and articles appeared asking, “Who Lost Russia?” Fingers pointed in many directions, but almost all to the West: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), NATO, President Bill Clinton, and then later in the next decade, President George W. Bush. Arguments came in many varieties, but divided into two polar opposite views: the West did too much, and the West did too little.

The “too much” camp blamed the IMF, Treasury, shock therapists, and democracy promoters for pushing too hard and too fast for reform within Russia. The “too much” camp also blamed the West for exerting excessive external pressures on Russia—NATO expansion, the bombing of Serbia and the overthrow of its leader Slobodan Milosevic, the first so-called “color revolution” in post-communist Europe. Bush then piled on, cancelling the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, invading Iraq in 2003, expanding NATO for a second time in 2004, and allegedly fomenting new color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 (the Rose Revolution) and Ukraine in 2004 (the Orange Revolution).
Conversely, the “too little” camp focused on the West’s uncritical support for Russia’s corrupt, undemocratic, and belligerent government. The IMF was too lax, lending money to President Boris Yeltsin’s underperforming government for political reasons. Clinton, so the argument went, was too easy on Yeltsin in welcoming Russia into the G7 when it had no economic business being there. President Clinton also was accused of placing too much trust in Yeltsin, who turned out allegedly to be a drunken buffoon presiding over a corrupt regime, uninterested in or incapable of reform. Clinton’s lenient policy toward Russia resulted in the 1998 ruble crash, Russia’s default on its international loans, and discrediting the idea of democracy among the Russian people.\(^3\) Subsequently, President George W. Bush also embraced uncritically Russia’s new president, Vladimir Putin. Bush infamously claimed after first meeting with Putin in 2001 to have “looked the man in the eye…to get a sense of his soul; [I saw] a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country”—when he should have been criticizing Putin’s growing autocratic policies.\(^4\)

This debate about the United States’ flawed approach to Russia is replaying today. Many, not only in Moscow but in Washington, New York, Berlin, Tallinn, and Beijing—are blaming the West, and the United States in particular, for a return to Cold War confrontation between the United States and Russia following the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014, as well as Russia’s subsequent annexation of Crimea and ongoing intervention in eastern Ukraine.

The contemporary “too much” camp resuscitates many of the old arguments from the 1990s, insisting that the United States pressed Russia too hard both on its domestic and foreign policy, forcing President Putin to finally strike back.\(^5\) U.S. support for the overthrow of Yanukovich and his government in Kyiv in February 2014, the argument goes, was the final straw that ultimately compelled Putin to annex Crimea and invade Ukraine.

The updated “too little” camp blames President Obama and his administration for acting too softly on Moscow. According to this line of analysis, the “reset” in U.S.–Russia relations that Obama initiated in 2009 was a mistake, signaled U.S. weakness, and therefore invited Russian aggression. Putin knew he could invade Ukraine, so this argument goes, because Obama would not stop him.

In the 1990s, U.S. policies of both varieties—doing too much and doing too little—may have influenced Russian domestic reforms and foreign policy responses. But these experiences from the past cannot be invoked as analogies to explain the current U.S.–Russian conflict. Russia today is not the same country as it was in the 1990s. Nor do Obama’s policies toward Russia or the rest of the world have much in common with this earlier era. Specifically, President Putin’s annexation of Crimea and proxy war in Eastern Ukraine are not a natural or inevitable reaction to either a “too hard” or “too soft” approach from...
Washington. Nor are recent Russian foreign policy decisions a natural result of Russia doing what it has always historically done. Russia has not always invaded neighbors; Russian culture, history, and power did not always compel clashes with the West; and Russia is not destined to be forever in conflict with the United States or Europe.

Instead, Putin’s pivot toward anti-Americanism, anti-liberalism, radical nationalism, and an ever more aggressive foreign policy toward his neighbors is a direct consequence of recent Russian domestic political and economic developments. This turn against the West, and the United States in particular, began in 2012, not 2014. It is part of Putin’s strategy to preserve his regime. Consequently, a different U.S. policy toward Russia—a more confrontational stance or a more pliant approach—would have had only marginal effects on the current condition of U.S.–Russia relations.

To develop this argument, the next section refutes the argument that U.S. aggression provoked the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014. The following section interrogates the converse claim—that the United States was too soft on Russia during the “reset,” which in turn invited Russian aggression. The third section outlines our explanation for the negative turn in U.S.–Russian relations: Russian domestic politics. Who lost Russia this time? Vladimir Putin, we argue, specifically his unique response to domestic political upheaval. Finally, we conclude with our recommendations on how the United States and the West more generally should deal with Putin’s Russia.

The “Too Much” School

The 1990s was a tough decade for Russians. The economy contracted by nearly fifty percent, and then collapsed in August 1998. Although regional and national elections took place on a regular basis (with elections in 1991 and 1999 being the most competitive), and society certainly liberalized, democracy did not consolidate. Many Russians blamed the United States for the economic chaos that ensued from 1992 and the start of Yeltsin’s failed attempt at shock therapy—an economic reform strategy of liberalization, macroeconomic stabilization, and privatization all at the same time.

The “too much” argument contends that the United States forced Russians to endure the economic hardships, which could have been avoided, and exported democracy to a Russian society that did not want it. U.S. and European analysts also looked the other way on unfair privatization schemes, exploding corruption,
and Yeltsin’s bombing of the parliament in October 1993, which reinforced the idea of Western hypocrisy and indifference. Some argued that what the United States really wanted was not a vibrant Russian economy or functioning democracy, but a weak Russia. With Russia weak, the United States and its allies could expand NATO, attack Serbia, ignore Russian interests in the Middle East, and foment revolution against regimes considered close to Moscow.

U.S. foreign policy most certainly influenced the course of Russian internal reforms in the 1990s, but also certainly did not determine it. Decades ago, in fact, some analysts worried that the United States was not doing enough to help Russia’s transition to democracy and markets succeed. One of us (McFaul), for instance, wrote this dire prediction on August 19, 1990, one year to the date before the August 1991 coup that triggered the collapse of the Soviet Union six months later: “Failure [by the West] to embrace and defend the upstart [Russian] leadership [after the fall of Gorbachev] would provide the real opportunity for a counterrevolutionary backlash. If economic decline and civil strife were to continue under a new regime, calls for order and tradition flavored with nationalist slogans will resonate with a suffering people. At this future but avoidable stage in the drama of the Soviet revolution, the specter of dictatorship will be real.”

More aid—meaning more focus on strengthening democratic and market institutions—might have made a difference. In turn, a democratic Russia, more fully integrated into the West, would have been less likely to turn so dramatically away from the United States by 2012. Other post-Communist countries—like Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and the Czech republic, for example, which did make the transition to democracy and capitalism more quickly and more successfully—are now some of the United States’ strongest allies in Europe.

Undeniably, some U.S. foreign policy decisions in the 1990s and 2000s also triggered tensions in U.S.–Russian relations. Neither “democrat” Boris Yeltsin in 1999 nor “autocrat” Vladimir Putin in 2004 reacted indifferently to NATO expansion. Likewise, NATO’s aerial assault on Serbia in 1999, as well as the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, sparked further strains. In addition, President Bush’s unilateral decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty threatened Russian security interests, or so many Russian officials and analysts have claimed.

Nonetheless, U.S. actions or inactions in these earlier two decades cannot explain current tensions with Russia for one simple reason: the reset. For the first three years of his presidency, President Barack Obama’s reset with Russia yielded successful cooperation between Russia and the United States, a “reset.” This period of cooperation occurred after three rounds of NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, after U.S.-led interventions in Serbia and Iraq (1999 and 2003),...

During the height of the reset, President Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev worked together on several projects, which improved the security and prosperity of both countries. In 2010, they signed and then ratified the New Start Treaty, which eliminates 30 percent of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons, while also keeping in place a comprehensive inspections regime that allows both countries to verify compliance. In that same year, the White House and the Kremlin worked together to pass United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, the most comprehensive set of sanctions against Iran ever. Together, the United States and Russia greatly expanded the Northern Distribution Network (NDN)—a mix of air, rail, and truck routes through Russia and other countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus to supply U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and reduce U.S. military dependency on the southern route through Pakistan. NDN grew from just a trickle of supplies to U.S. forces fighting in Afghanistan to over fifty percent by 2011. This dramatic shift was essential in allowing the United States to risk disruptions to the southern supply route, most importantly after the operation to kill Osama bin Laden in May 2011.

The United States and Russia also collaborated in avoiding conflict during the reset era. There was no second Russian–Georgian war after 2008. When another popular uprising toppled President Bakiev in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the United States and Russia could have squared off again. After all, dozens of people died in the initial fighting (almost as many as were shot in Maidan Square in Kyiv in 2014), and tens of thousands of ethnic Uzbeks fled southern Kyrgyz cities when it looked like this regime change might unleash an ethnic civil war. In response to this crisis, though, the White House and Kremlin worked together to help diffuse a very dangerous situation.

Perhaps most remarkably, President Medvedev agreed to abstain on UN Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973, thereby authorizing the use of force against the Libyan regime of Mohamar Quadaffi in the spring of 2011. No Russian leader had ever acquiesced to an external military intervention into a sovereign country.

In addition to security issues, the Obama and Medvedev governments collaborated on several projects to increase trade and investment between the United States and Russia during the reset years. The United States helped Russia obtain membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). Trade between the United States and Russia also increased dramatically between 2009...
and 2012, as did foreign direct investment. A new visa regime expanded the number of Russians traveling to the United States, and vice versa. And even bigger plans were afoot, including the massive joint venture between ExxonMobil and Rosneft, a large oil company majority-owned by Russia.

And the dreaded issue of NATO expansion that has somehow now provoked Russia into grabbing Crimea? It was not a problem during the reset. Aside from the addition of Croatia and Albania in 2009, two countries far away from Russia, NATO did not expand in the Obama–Medvedev era. Despite pressure from George W. Bush at the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit, other NATO allies refused to allow Georgian membership. After Russia’s invasion of Georgia in August 2008, the issue within the alliance died. Even under President Yushchenko, the leader of the Orange Revolution in 2004, Ukraine never pushed for NATO membership. There was simply no support within Ukrainian society at that time. After President Yanukovich was elected Ukraine’s new president in 2010, the idea faded completely. Consequently, during the reset years, neither President Medvedev nor Prime Minister Putin ever objected to NATO expansion because there was nothing to which to object.

Indeed, when President Medvedev attended the NATO summit in Lisbon in November 2010, he echoed other Western leaders in waxing effusively about NATO–Russia relations. “Incidentally,” he said, “even the declaration approved at the end of our talks states that we seek to develop a strategic partnership. This is not a chance choice of words, but signals that we have succeeded in putting the difficult period in our relations behind us now.” In his last meeting with Obama in his capacity as President in March 2012 in Seoul, Medvedev also praised the reset, saying, “[W]e probably enjoyed the best level of relations between the United States and Russia during those three years than ever during the previous decades.” This new level of cooperation between the Russian and U.S. governments even impacted public opinion in both countries. In 2010, nearly sixty percent of Russians had a positive view of the United States, and roughly the same number of Americans had a positive view of Russia.

Again, all of these successful initiatives during the reset occurred after the bombing of Serbia, after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, after the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq beginning in 2003, and after NATO expansion. Previous rounds of NATO expansion or U.S. military intervention cannot explain the era of cooperation that followed. Nor, therefore, can they be cited to
explain the current era of confrontation. Other factors—more proximate variables—must be added to the analysis.

The “Too Weak” School

A second critique of U.S. foreign policy blames the current U.S.–Russian confrontation on U.S. weakness. One variant of this argument posits that Russia is belligerent today because the regime in Moscow is autocratic, and U.S. presidents allowed Russian dictatorship to develop.19 Clinton was too soft on Yeltsin, calling him a democrat when he bomed the parliament in 1993 and comparing him to Lincoln when he invaded Chechnya. Bush also went soft on Putin at their very first meeting.20 During Putin’s first eight years in the Kremlin, many U.S. analysts, including one of us, criticized both the Clinton and Bush administrations for their indifference to growing Russian autocracy.21 For some, U.S. inattention to democracy and human rights continued during the Obama administration. He did not push hard enough to democratize Russia, critics say, and therefore an autocratic Russia became more bellicose and anti-Western in the conduct of its foreign policy.22

The more damning claim, however, was that Obama’s “reset” created the permissive conditions for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. Obama showed weakness, so this line of analysis contends, and therefore Putin took advantage. Other commentators have even suggested a direct connection between Obama’s backing down on his threat to use force against Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad after he used chemical weapons and Putin’s decision to annex Crimea. Obama undermined U.S. credibility by backing away from his own red line. Therefore, Putin thought he could do what he wanted, where he wanted, and when he wanted.

This claim about Obama’s “reset” mixes causation and correlation. The reset came before Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, but did not cause it. This argument also conveniently forgets a lot of history.

The reset ended in 2012—two years before Putin intervened in Ukraine. In December 2011, immediately after the Russian parliamentary election, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed “serious concerns about the conduct of the election” and called for a “full investigation” of irregularities.23 Putin and other Russian leaders strongly reacted, blaming Clinton for fomenting the massive public demonstrations that followed the parliamentary vote. As discussed in detail in the next section, Putin’s need for a new enemy to help him address his domestic challenges compelled him to reject the reset.

After a few failed attempts to engage the new Russian president on a substantive agenda, the Obama administration eventually responded and changed policy toward Russia. The U.S. administration cut off talks with the
Russians on missile defense, did not invite Putin to the 2012 NATO summit, eventually stopped pursuing arms control, signed into law the Magnitsky Act (even though the Obama administration had initially objected to this law; it was designed to punish Russian officials for the death in prison of Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky), cancelled a two-day summit planned in Moscow in September 2013, met with human rights activists on the sidelines of Putin’s G20 summit in St. Petersburg in 2013 (the only head of state to do so), and then sent a White House delegation to the Sochi Olympics in February 2014 with a strong message of support for LGBT rights in response to Russia’s “anti-gay propaganda” law. These were not policies of weakness, but strong responses to Putin’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy stances and growing autocratic tendencies at home.

The end of the reset and the more confrontational approach toward Russia by the U.S. government after 2012 failed to deter Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. But has any U.S. policy over the last seventy years deterred Russian aggression—direct or through proxies—against its neighbors in Eastern Europe and or the former republics of the Soviet Union? In February 2014, Putin could have reviewed the 70-year history of Russian military interventions in neighboring countries and correctly concluded that the United States and NATO were not willing to stop his invasion plans into Ukraine. For instance, when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, George W. Bush did little. He did send the USS McFaul (a naval destroyer ship named after Chief Petty Officer Donald L. McFaul, a Navy SEAL killed in action in 1989, and no relation to either author) to troll the waters off the coast of Georgia, as well as provide humanitarian assistance to Georgia, but there were no sanctions of Russian government officials or Russian companies, no NATO troop movements, and no lethal assistance besides transporting Georgian troops back to Georgia from Afghanistan. In Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush had bolstered his credentials for using force, but that reputation did not deter Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008.

President Ronald Reagan could not be accused of being weak on the Soviet communist regime. Yet, when Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev colluded with Polish General Jaruzelski to crush Solidarity (the Polish labor movement led by Lech Walesa) and implement martial law in December 1981, Reagan could not deter this brutal crackdown. President Carter, of course, did not stop the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, just as President Johnson did not prevent Brezhnev from intervening in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and President Eisenhower, even
armed with his rhetorically muscular “roll back” of communism policy, failed to stop Soviet tanks from rolling into Hungary in 1956. And obviously, President Roosevelt had no ability to push the Red Army back to Soviet borders at the end of World War II. The pattern of Russian aggression and U.S. response is clear. Whether Democrat or Republican, no U.S. president has ever succeeded in deterring Soviet/Russian military intervention in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan.

Wag the Bear: Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy

Russia’s foreign policy, including specifically the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine, did not change in response to U.S. foreign policy, strong or weak. Rather, Russian foreign policy changed in large measure as a result of Putin’s response to new domestic political and economic challenges inside Russia.

For his first eight years as president, from 2000–2008, President Putin enjoyed solid public support because of economic performance. After a ten-year depression, Putin moved into the Kremlin in 2000 just as the Russian economy started to grow for this first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union (see Figure 1). Between 2000 and 2008, Russia’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita grew 7 percent per year on average. In contrast to the 1990s, when the economy declined steadily such that public sector wages and pensions went unpaid for months, this growth produced huge positive changes in the lives of average Russian citizens. Wages increased 400 percent between 2004 and 2008.25

Some of Putin’s first-term reforms (introduction of a flat income tax, lower corporate taxes, and creation of sovereign wealth funds, for example) contributed to this economic turnaround; but rising energy prices were the real driver.26 In the 1990s, as Yeltsin’s government was undertaking dramatic structural reform, Russia’s main export, oil, cost about $17 per barrel on average, bottoming out at $12.76 in 1998. But by 2002, oil prices had doubled in the ensuing four years, and then shot up further to $132.32, an all-time high in June 2008, just as the global financial crisis hit.27 Whatever the true reasons were for Russian economic growth, this didn’t really matter to the Russian people. Putin got the credit. He was in the right place at the right time.

At the same time that Russia’s economy began to boom, Putin contracted political rights. Almost as soon as he assumed office, he cracked down on the

Putin got the credit for Russian economic growth in the 2000s.
Russian media, taking back broadcasting licenses to make the media “more responsible,” that is more responsive to the state, and specifically to perpetuating his regime. Independent media was virtually eliminated, except for a handful of independent radio, print, and television stations. Civil society also became a target, as did oppositional political activity. Putin's preferred political party, United Russia, dominated parliament after the 2003 elections. He began to appoint regional governors. Russia was becoming increasingly autocratic, but Putin remained popular, his approval rating hovering around 70 percent during his first two terms as president.

As Figure 2 will indicate, during his years as prime minister (2008–2012), Putin's popular support fell slightly. His numbers dipped to their lowest point since the summer of 2000 in the fall of 2011, when they hit 63 percent after Putin announced unexpectedly at the United Russia Congress that he planned to return to the presidency. Putin clearly expected most Russian citizens to welcome news of his return to the Kremlin. In fact, the reaction was less than enthusiastic. In November 2011, he was publicly booed at a martial arts match as he jumped into the ring in front of 20,000 people to congratulate the winner. In the parliamentary elections a few weeks later, Putin's party, United Russia, performed shockingly poorly, even with the help of complete control of national television stations, unlimited financial resources, the backing of regional governments, and a bump up from falsification in United Russia's favor.

The extent of falsification was probably no more than previous Russian elections. But in 2011, the proliferation of smart phones, better organized election monitoring organizations, Twitter, Facebook, and VKontakte (the largest Russian social network in Europe) combined to expose it. Compelling evidence that this election had been stolen in favor of Putin's party in turn triggered popular demonstrations, numbering at first in the thousands, and then tens of thousands, and occasionally hundreds of thousands. The last time so many Russians had taken to the streets for a political act was 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed. Moreover, these demonstrations in Russia in 2011 were occurring in the same year that massive demonstrations were toppling regimes in the Arab world.

At the same time, the Russian economy was not growing at the same clip as during Putin's first eight years in office. As Figure 1 indicates, the global economic meltdown in 2008 hit Russia particularly hard as demand for oil fell. In 2009, the Russian economy contracted by 8 percent, and only grew at around 4 percent in the three years before Putin's 2012 presidential campaign.

The social contract that Putin had struck implicitly with the Russian people—high growth in return for contracted political rights—appeared to be unraveling. The Russian regime was not delivering on its part of the deal. Moreover, the newly emerging Russian middle classes, who took to the streets in
Moscow and St. Petersburg, wanted more from their government than just economic growth. These protestors first demanded cleaner elections and lamented Putin’s decision to run for a third term, but eventually increased their demands by calling for a change in government and the removal of Putin himself.32

This growing popular unrest meant that Putin needed a new argument in order to achieve re-election as President of Russia for a third time, in 2012. To counter this new wave of social mobilization, Putin revived an old Soviet-era argument as his new source of legitimacy—defense of the motherland against the evil West, and especially the imperial, conniving, threatening United States. In particular, Putin argued that the United States was seeking to topple his regime. Like the old days, the United States was interfering in Russia’s internal affairs, “We know, regrettably, that…some representatives of some foreign states are gathering those to whom they are paying money, so-called grant recipients, carrying out instruction sessions with them and preparing them to do the relevant ‘work,’ in order to influence, ultimately, the election campaign process in our country.”33 Putin, his aides, and his media outlets accused the leaders of Russian demonstrations of being U.S. agents, traitors from the so-called “fifth column” (internal enemies whose goal is to bring the regime down).

Putin’s campaign against protestors, opposition parties, and civil society did not end after his re-election. Opposition leaders were arrested or placed under detention for extended periods. For example, Putin’s most feared opponent, anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, is currently under house arrest, while

Figure 1. Russian GDP Annual Growth Rate 1996-2014
his brother sits in jail. New laws restricted the activity of non-governmental organizations and independent media outlets, and the introduction of significant fines for participation in protests effectively took Russians off the streets.

Putin’s particular response to his domestic challenges was not inevitable. Other Russian leaders before him chose a different course. In fact, following the mass demonstrations held in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow to protest the results of the December 2011 parliamentary elections, and other popular protests in the winter of 2012, President Medvedev initially tried to negotiate with the opposition and introduce some limited political reforms. He met with protest leaders and appeared on the independent television station Dozhd. He reinstated direct elections for regional governors, introduced a new electoral law, made it easier for opposition parties to register, and even proposed a public television station that would have considerable independence from the state, like the BBC in the United Kingdom or the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in Canada. Putin, however, in 2012 reversed this engagement. Instead of working with opposition leaders, he crushed them.

In parallel to this crackdown on domestic dissent, Putin and his government expanded media attention to the U.S. threat.Echoing the Cold War era, the Kremlin propaganda machine portrayed the United States as an imperial, predatory state, which constantly undermined international stability and violated the sovereignty of other states. Different from the Cold War, however, Putin’s regime added a new dimension to the ideological struggle—conservative Russia versus the liberal West. Russian state-controlled media asserted that Putin had nurtured the rebirth of a conservative, Orthodox Christian society. By contrast, these same media outlets presented the West as decadent, hedonistic, godless, and homosexual. Russians needed protection from these dangerous Western ideas. This is why the Kremlin passed a law against homosexual “propaganda”—while decadent Western countries like the United States and Ireland legalized gay marriage. His growing embrace of the Russian Orthodox Church is another part of his campaign to champion Russia as a culturally conservative alternative to a hedonistic Western culture. The Russian government also shut down the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), chased several U.S. NGOs out of the country, and banned adoptions of Russian orphans by U.S. citizens. Increasingly, Russian television, where most of the population receives their news, painted the United States as an enemy, out to weaken and ultimately destroy Russia.
Putin’s domestic turn against the United States made cooperation with the United States more difficult. After all, he could not be seen as resetting relations with the enemy. Moreover, his distrust of the United States was not just on display for domestic consumption. Putin genuinely believed that the United States represented a threat to Russian stability. In his view, the United States sparked the Arab Spring, and so he firmly resisted U.S. proposals to negotiate a political transition in Syria. When Edward Snowden appeared unexpectedly in Moscow, Putin deliberately sought to embarrass the United States by giving him asylum in 2013. His new domestic agenda and new foreign policy priorities supported each other.

In response, the Obama administration also found it increasingly difficult to cooperate with Putin, although there were compartments of cooperation with Russia. Between 2012 and 2014, the Rosneft–Exxon-Mobil deal kept on course. The various working groups within the Bilateral Presidential Commission between the U.S. and Russian governments continued to meet. The FSB (the Russian Internal Security Service) assisted the FBI’s investigation of the Tsarnaev brothers, Chechen immigrants who killed two innocent Americans and wounded hundreds of others at the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013. The P5+1 negotiations with Iran continued uninterrupted. Most dramatically, Presidents Obama and Putin agreed in September 2013 to work together to remove and eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles.

In addition, Putin seemed to still care somewhat about Western perceptions during the first two years of his third presidential term. In December 2013, he released Russian billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky (jailed on trumped up charges of money laundering and corruption) after ten years in prison, freed the Pussy Riot singers (a group of three women arrested for singing a few lines of an anti-Putin punk rock song in Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow), and then in 2014 hosted the Sochi Olympics, which were designed to display to the world the new, modern Russia.

Most of these pockets of cooperation ended or were significantly disrupted after the fall of the Yanukovich government in February 2014 and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine. (Amazingly, Russian cooperation in the P5+1 negotiations with Iran has endured, to date.) In November 2013, Ukrainian President Yanukovich refused to sign the Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement. The Agreement had been drafted in March of 2012, and committed both the EU and Ukraine to closer political and economic ties, but contained no promise of future Ukrainian membership in the European Union. Since the agreement had been so long in the making, Yanukovich’s sudden decision not to sign it triggered massive demonstrations on the streets of Kyiv.
The United States supported European efforts to negotiate a deal between Yanukovich and the opposition. In the early morning of February 21, 2014, the two sides signed an agreement to cease hostilities and hold new elections later that year. For a few hours, it appeared that a major confrontation between the government and the protestors had been avoided. After signing the agreement, however, Yanukovich fled the country, eventually showing up in the southern Russian city of Rostov. The Ukrainian Rada (parliament) filled the political vacuum by impeaching Yanukovich and voting in Oleksandr Turchynov as interim president and Arseniy Yatsenyuk as prime minister. In May 2014, Ukrainian voters elected a new president, Petro Poroshenko.

The Obama administration, along with other European governments, had pushed hard to get both Yanukovich and opposition leaders to sign an agreement. When it fell apart, Western governments recognized the decisions of the Rada, and supported the new transition plan. Putin did not. What happened in Ukraine was exactly what Putin feared for Russia—hundreds of thousands of demonstrators flooding the streets and demanding their corrupt, autocratic president step down. And he did! Putin described the events in Kyiv as a U.S.-backed coup, while his media outlets described the transition in government as Nazi-led regime change. In Putin’s view, the same foreign forces, which had attempted to overthrow his government in December 2011 and the spring of 2012, were now at work in Ukraine. Allowing them to succeed would encourage them to mobilize again against his regime. So he struck back, first by using special operations forces to seize and then annex Crimea, and then supporting a proxy war against the new government in Kyiv in eastern Ukraine.

In parallel to Russian military actions in Ukraine, anti-American propaganda on Russian state-controlled media outlets reached a fevered pitch. For instance, on his evening program broadcast to tens of millions on Channel One, Dmitri Kiselev, a TV journalist and head of the Russia Today news agency, compared Obama’s ideology to that championed by ISIS leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi. Kiselev also noted, in what seemed like a thinly veiled threat, that Russia is the only country that can turn the United States into radioactive dust. Also in parallel, Putin suppressed independent sources of power even further. The Kremlin effectively kicked Dozhd off the air, increased penalties for “unauthorized” protests, and signed a law which allows the state to label as “undesirable” (a purposely flexible term) foreign organizations, including even businesses, “posing a threat to Russia’s defense capabilities, security, public order, [or] public health.”
As Figure 2 indicates, during the first two years of his third term, before his annexation of Crimea, Putin’s popular approval rating was stuck. For most of this period, fewer than half of Russian voters reported that they wanted to reelect him to a fourth term. Moreover, while most Russians maintained a positive perspective on Putin personally, they also expressed real dismay with the general trajectory of their country. Half of those polled thought the country was on the wrong path. In the wake of annexation, Putin’s popularity soared. As Figure 2 shows, his popular approval rating rose from an almost all-time low of 61 percent in November 2013 to 80 percent in March 2014 as Russian forces took control of Crimea. By June 2014, following the referendum in Crimea, his approval rating reached an all-time high of 86 percent, where it has remained ever since.

Putin’s perceived success among Russians in battling neo-Nazis in Ukraine, the evil Americans, and the decadent West more generally will make it hard for him to change course. To maintain his argument for legitimacy at home, Putin needs perpetual conflict with external enemies—not full-scale war, not a direct clash with the United States or NATO, but a low-level, yet constant confrontation that supports the narrative that Russia is under siege from the West, that Russia is at war with the United States.

**Staying the Course of Neo-Containment, Selective Engagement**

To Putin’s annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine, the Obama administration, together with NATO allies and EU friends, had to respond forcefully. And they did. In his speech in Tallinn on September 2, 2014,

**Figure 2. Responses to Monthly Question: Do You Approve of the Job President (Prime Minister) Putin is Doing?**

![Graph showing responses to monthly question](image)
Obama explained that Russian intervention in Ukraine “is a brazen assault on the territorial integrity of Ukraine—a sovereign and independent European nation. It challenges that most basic of principles of our international system—that borders cannot be redrawn at the barrel of a gun; that nations have the right to determine their own future. It undermines an international order where the rights of peoples and nations are upheld and can’t simply be taken away by brute force. This is what’s at stake in Ukraine. This is why we stand with the people of Ukraine today.”

Obama’s response to Russia’s latest military intervention in Europe compares in scale and scope to Reagan’s vigorous reaction to the Soviet-ordered crackdown on Solidarity in Poland in 1981, and has been considerably more robust than Bush’s response to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, or President Lyndon B. Johnson’s reaction to Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, or President Eisenhower’s reaction to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.

First, the Obama administration (in concert with the European Union) sanctioned dozens of Russian individuals and companies. Not even Ronald Reagan slapped sanctions on the Kremlin chief of staff, as Obama has. The G7 also agreed to kick Russia out of their club, a decision not made after the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008. Western leaders have promised additional sanctions in response to future Russian military aggression in Ukraine.

Second, the Obama administration (again in close coordination with the EU and the IMF) has pledged billions of dollars to help reform and rebuild the Ukrainian economy. The IMF pledged $17.5 billion, and roughly $40 billion over four years. The European Union has provided three macro-financial assistance (MFA) packages to Ukraine for a total of €3.41 billion, while the United States has added $1 billion in loan guarantees as well as tens of millions in humanitarian assistance. The United States also has provided nonlethal military assistance, including training and equipment, to Ukraine’s military.

Third, NATO has moved rapidly to make credible the Article 5 commitment that an attack on one of the 28 members is an attack on all. In direct response to Russia’s annexation and continuing support of unrest in Eastern Ukraine, NATO has doubled the size of its NATO Response Force, which is “NATO’s high-readiness force comprising land, air, sea and Special Forces units capable of rapid deployment wherever needed.” At its core is a new brigade known as Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which is the “spearhead” that can rapidly deploy within 48 hours and that will eventually be comprised of 5,000 troops. For the first time, NATO also has a rotating force in the seven alliance members that border Russia. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called the Readiness Action Plan “the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense...
since the end of the Cold War” when the program was introduced after the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014.\textsuperscript{47} NATO also is creating six new command centers in Eastern Europe, to better connect local military forces to NATO, and the U.S. Department of Defense is considering prepositioning tanks, fighting vehicles, and other heavy weapons in Eastern Europe, which, if executed, would dramatically increase the Alliance’s ability to deter Russia.\textsuperscript{48}

This three-pronged strategy is smart and comprehensive, but more could be done. The West, for instance, is not adequately explaining its policies to people in eastern Ukraine, let alone to Russians in Russia. Even in some allied countries, the U.S. perspective is losing out to the Russian propaganda machine.\textsuperscript{49} Ukrainian leaders also need more help from Western leaders to restructure its debt, deepen economic reforms, and attract new investment. If the Ukrainian economy implodes, Putin wins. Providing the Ukrainian military more sophisticated radar and drones, as well as sharing intelligence, could help reduce civilian casualties should fighting flare substantially again. And over time, the Ukrainian military must receive the weapons, training, and equipment they need to deter future Russian military threats.

The West also could be doing more to reach out, nurture, and support directly the people in the Donbas, including the 1.2 million of them currently displaced in other parts of Ukraine. They need immediate humanitarian assistance, as well as long-term support—education, housing, and retraining—to rebuild their futures. Similarly, independent and objective reporting in the Russian language needs support and resources. The United States and our European allies also should increase efforts to engage directly with the Russian people, including students through exchanges and scholarships, peer-to-peer dialogue with non-government organizations, and allowing Russian companies not tied to the state to continue to work with Western partners.

Most importantly, the Obama administration, the next U.S. president, and our allies must simply stay the course. In coordination with our European allies, sanctions must continue until Putin changes his behavior in Ukraine, including most immediately meeting his commitments outlined in the Minsk accords, which call for an immediate ceasefire by all parties, withdrawal of troops and equipment to a buffer zone, eventual elections in Donbas and Luhansk, and the restoration of Ukrainian control over its eastern border with Russia. Aid for Ukraine must continue. Plans for strengthening NATO must be executed. Selective engagement of Russian society must also occur. And
selective engagement with the Russian government on issues of mutual interest, such as Iran, Syria, or North Korea, must continue.

Our greatest worry is that U.S. and European leaders will not fully implement their own declared policies. Some EU leaders already are hinting at the need to return to business as usual with Russia. U.S. attention, always hard to maintain for complex foreign policy issues, is waning. And some already are asserting that the policy is not working: sanctions on Russia are not biting; Ukrainian reforms are failing; NATO members are not willing to spend additional resources on defense. Therefore, it is time to change course.

We disagree. Only one year in, it is too early to assess the efficacy of the new U.S. policy. Containment—a policy now celebrated as strategic wisdom—did not produce results a year after its adoption, or even a decade later, or even several decades later. The current U.S. and European policy of selective containment and selective engagement also will take time to yield intended outcomes. Putin has locked into his current confrontational course, especially given the domestic political and economic environment that he has created. We too must stay the course.

Notes


2. The first expansion into Eastern Europe was in 1999 and included Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic; the second expansion was in 2004 and included Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania (the only 3 post-Soviet republics in the alliance), Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The most recent expansion occurred in 2009 when Albania and Croatia became NATO members, making for a total of 28 members. NATO expansion details available at “History,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, http://www.nato.int/history/index.html.


6. See for example, Thomas Graham, “Europe’s problem is with Russia, not Putin Moscow is not a rising revolutionary force but one seeking to restore power,” The Financial Times, May 31, 2015, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f0ff7324-03b5-11e5-a70f-00144feabdc0.html-axzz3c6030PB.


14. Gorbachev did not try to stop the first Gulf War, but the U.S. response there, in cooperation with many other countries, was in response to Iraqi intervention in Kuwait.


24. Known as the anti-gay propaganda law, the official name of the law is “The defense of children from information and propaganda promoting non-traditional family relationships” and is available in Russian at: http://pravo.gov.ru:8080/page.aspx?50556.

25. See: http://www.tradingeconomics.com/russia/wages. This site has data provided by the Russian Ministry for Economic Development, including historical data on inflation, GDP per capita, employment rates and other key economic indicators.


35. “Russians Call for Putin’s Resignation,” CNN international.
38. Ibid.
42. Every month, the Levada Center carries out omnibus surveys in order to make current and accurate data available on a constant basis. The results of the nationwide polls are based on a representative sample of 1600 over-18s from 130 sampling points across 45 regions of the Russian Federation. Data available at Levada-Center, “Indexes,” www.levada.ru/eng indexes-0.
47. Ibid.