

A GRAND STRATEGY ESSAY

KTO KOVO?

by Coit D. Blacker

Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy

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In considering Russia's military and political intervention in Ukraine, it strikes me as either an *unconventional threat* delivered conventionally or a conventional threat delivered unconventionally. I suspect it's a bit of both.

It's an *unconventional threat* in that overt military aggression—one sovereign actor attacking and invading another—is something of an anomaly, at least on the scale we are witnessing in Ukraine and within that part of the world we identify as “developed”.

It's a *conventional threat* in that for the most part the means are traditional, more or less, even if the goals and ambitions are opaque or at a minimum less than completely transparent.

Russia's Ukrainian adventure is unconventional in an additional sense: the level of mendacity that has accompanied and been employed to justify Russian policy is genuinely breathtaking. This, to me, reflects two judgments on the part of the Russian leadership: first, that much of the Russian population wants to believe what they're being told about the root causes of the conflict; second, that if you're the Russian leadership the cost of making things up out of whole cloth— or nearly so— although not cost free, is manageable because no one believes what governments say anymore and no one is going to hold you accountable in any event.

My second point is that there is a Russian side to this story. Russians have been slow to realize that they lost the Cold War and that Russia is today both in retreat and in decline. The country is smaller in territorial terms than at any time in the past three hundred years; the population is stable for the moment but still down by

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roughly ten million from 1991; and the average male life expectancy, at sixty-four, is the lowest in the developed world.

Prone to shifting responsibility for the conditions they now confront, Russians blame the West, and especially the United States, for their current predicament, which, bravado aside, they understand to be both undesirable and unstable. They see the expansion of NATO and the EU as directed against them, rather than a reflection of deeply held aspirations on the part of the Central and Eastern Europeans to escape Russia's orbit and to join or rejoin the West. On this issue, even sophisticated Russians are, for the most part, of one mind.

Many, even most, Russians also see the United States as the true rogue nation: content to abide by international norms and conventions only as long as they suit US purposes. Decisive in this regard, at least for Putin, was US support of the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2003/4 (as well as the Rose and Tulip Revolutions in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, respectively) and the US invasion of Iraq, which the Russians saw as an unlawful intervention into the internal affairs of a neighboring country and patently illegal. When Putin accused Hillary Clinton of meddling in Russia's parliamentary elections in 2011, he meant it.

(In the interest of full disclosure, my own early support for expanding NATO and the EU was based on an earlier assessment that the Russians would neither become a true representative democracy nor a well functioning capitalist economy in the foreseeable future, whatever we did or didn't do, and that we shouldn't hold the rest of Europe hostage to the vagaries of Russia's post-communist development. It was also my view that it would be much harder for the West to move east once the Russians realized that their own integration into Western institutions and structures—on essentially their terms—was not in the cards, resulting in their de facto rejection of that path. This is the context for Putin's depiction of Russia as the head of an ill-defined community of ex-Soviet states, the so-called Eurasian Economic Union, which is explicitly designed to counterbalance or offset the Euro-Atlantic bloc, as the Russians call it.

It is Ukraine's great misfortune to be caught in the netherworld between East and West, which is responsible at least in part for the evident inability of the West to devise a coherent policy response. In this context a key part of what is motivating Putin is his determination to demonstrate to the West that there are limits to Russia's patience regarding Washington's new containment strategy even if the

ultimate cost of his policy is rendering the Ukrainian state into two pieces, one that faces west and one that faces east. In this, importantly, he has the support of the majority of the Russian population, at least as of this writing.

Referring to essentially the same script, by the way, is how Russia justifies its longstanding involvement in Georgia and Moldova and in the on-again, off-again conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territorial enclave of Nagorno Karabakh, all of which resonate with Russian sensibilities (which is what you do when you're *primus inter pares*) and underscore Russia's determination to maintain a high degree of political and economic influence in parts of the former Soviet Union beyond the legal boundaries of the existing Russian state.

Perhaps understood in this context, the only real surprise in all the recent drama is how long it has taken the Russian leadership to get to this point.

As to the question of to whom or to what Putin's policies are being directed, three come to mind in the following order: the United States and the West; Ukraine and all the other former Soviet republics (including first and foremost the Baltic states and Kazakhstan); and the Russian public.

Although opinions differ, it seems likely that Putin did not have a true master plan in initiating this cascading crisis. Beyond wanting the political elites in Kiev to confront their actual as opposed to their imagined geopolitical circumstances and slow the slide toward the West, I do not think that the Russian leadership meticulously thought this through. Although not all that concerned with how the United States would respond, mostly because of their low estimate of the Obama administration's foreign policy, they have been surprised and a bit alarmed by the degree to which our European allies have decided to fall in line with the Americans, for the time being at least.

As to the possible resolution, in particular, of the Ukrainian crisis, it's hard to foresee a clean or a neat ending. Rather, I expect another so-called frozen conflict, akin to the current situations in Georgia, Moldova, and South Caucasus, where the Russians remain deeply mired, with the eastern regions of Ukraine functioning as a kind of statelet, propped up by Russian money, resources, and personnel. Crimea, by the way, is gone, whatever happens in or around the rest of Ukraine; notwithstanding its

technical status under international law, it is– and it will remain–an integral part of the Russian Federation, barring a collapse of central authority in Moscow.

What about the impact of Western sanctions? Over time, I firmly believe that the sanctions will exact a heavy toll on the Russian economy—an assessment shared by the bravest of Putin’s economic advisers—but that it won’t matter much as long as the current leadership continues to call the shots. In Russia, it’s never about economics; it’s always about power or, as Lenin would say, Kto Kovo (who is doing what to whom?). Rightly or wrongly, Putin believes that Russia can muddle through whatever economic downturn is occasioned by the imposition of Western sanctions. The Soviet Union did it, he seems to believe, so too will the Russian Federation.

What is important now is not so much whether Russia’s paramount leader is right or wrong. The real issue is for how long, and what cost, Putin will seek to impose his vision of the new Russia on the neighboring states of the region, in particular those that once constituted the fraternal republics of the USSR and find themselves within easy reach of Russia’s military forces, be they volunteers or regular uniformed units. Most problematic in this regard, of course, are the three Baltic republics that are now NATO member states, each of which shares a border with the Russian Federation.

Although one can hope that the current conflict in Ukraine will be self-limiting, this is in no sense the only outcome that one can imagine. In other words, as unpleasant as this crisis has become for all considered, it could be just the beginning.

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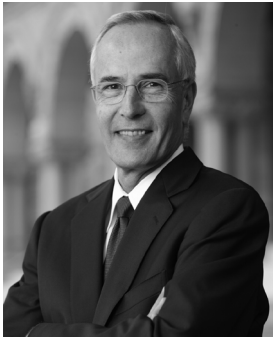


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Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy

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