

Out of Focus: The U.S. Response to Putinism

S. Frederick Starr

From the outset, Putin's Eurasian Economic Union, and the larger political-security project of which it as core element, presented themselves as a kind of litmus test for America's understanding of post-Soviet Russia's development as a whole. Throughout the period down to the 2014 Ukraine crisis Washington chose to view the EEU in the only way it could be understood within the framework of the existing and positive policy towards Russia, namely, as a largely economic arrangement entered into by sovereign states on their own volition. This hypothesis survived the appearance of massive evidence to the contrary, because the larger paradigm of post-Soviet Russia as a partner, albeit a somewhat difficult one, remained intact. Only when the three cornerstones of that paradigm were cast in doubt did a more critical perspective emerge. This coincided with the spring 2014 crisis in Ukraine. Even then, the response to events was hesitant and uncertain. As a result, the U.S. government has neither defined nor embraced an alternative paradigm, as a result of which its response to the EEU and Putin's larger project remains, with respect to strategy, out of focus.

Russia as a Partner

During the 1990s the U.S. was quick to recognize the new post-Soviet states and to declare the preservation of their sovereignty as a prime strategic goal. For this reason Washington strongly backed NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, NATO's Partnership for Peace program in Central Asia, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline in the Caucasus. At the same time, it worked to foster amicable relations with Russia, supporting the creation of a NATO-Russia dialogue and western investment in Russia and throughout the post-Soviet sphere. It occurred to few Americans that many members of the old Russian elite might

view all this as leading to the diminution of Russia as a great power and even as an attack on its sovereignty. The American approach made good sense in terms of politics and economics but no sense at all in the tortured and brooding realm of Russian psychology.

Against this background, it is no surprise that Washington had no difficulty accepting the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States or the reassertion of Russia's military presence into Armenia, Tajikistan, or Sevastopol in Crimea. The key, in Washington's view, was that all such arrangements were entered into voluntarily by sovereign states. Washington could simultaneously support the accession of Russia and the newly independent states into the World Trade Organization as just one more manifestation of an emerging post-Soviet world of free markets, self-government, and pluralism.

The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, did not change this. Russia was to be commended for using its armed forces to prevent the incursion of militants from Afghanistan into Central Asia, and also for fighting the drug trade throughout the region. Never mind that few, if any, radical Islamists penetrated Central Asia from Afghanistan after 2001 and that more than a few elements of the Russian army itself were actively involved in the drug trade at the Afghan border of Tajikistan. When it became necessary to transport military goods into Afghanistan via the so-called Northern Distribution Network through Russia, and for Russian oil companies to provision the NATO base at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, the alignment of interests between Moscow and Washington seemed complete.

It took the Rose Revolution in Georgia in November 2003 to shake this structure. The "Orange" revolution in November 2004-January 2005 constituted a further tremor, as did the "Tulip revolution" in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005. Viewed from Moscow, these events constituted a single and well-coordinated conspiracy by the West to undermine pro-Moscow regimes in the name of "democracy" and self-government. In retrospect, it is now clear that these all threw Putin and members of his circle on the defensive. The result was not long in coming. On April 24, 2005, Putin announced to the Russian people that the collapse of the USSR was nothing less than "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."

It was in this mood that Putin crystalized a bevy of dour ruminations rooted in a Spenglerian sense of impending doom into a coherent revanchist strategy. Such a strategy, he realized, could refocus the energies of the Russian civil and military elite onto a grand project that was totally independent of Russia's progress, or lack of progress, towards democracy and an open market economy.

Putin's first steps towards implementing this strategy caused barely a ripple in American official thinking, focused as it was on the campaign in Afghanistan. Having defined Russia as an ally, Washington was not about to jeopardize what it wanted to believe was a strategic asset by criticizing Putin. As a result, Washington chose to ignore Putin's advice to all leaders of Central Asia that they not enter into arrangements with Washington without obtaining his prior approval. Putin could demand to join the newly established Central Asia Union and then, having done so, close it down in favor of a new grouping dominated by Moscow—all without a murmur from Washington. And Russia could make similar strategic moves in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe (particularly in Transnistria) without eliciting a serious American response.

The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 repeated this pattern of non-response from Washington. Earlier that year, the Bush Administration failed to realize the consequences of its support for Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, although Russian leaders had made it clear that the response would come in Georgia. In a similar vein, the U.S. did push for a NATO Membership Action Plan to be given to Georgia and Ukraine at that year's Budapest Summit, but failed to grasp the consequences of failing to bring that about—in spite of Putin's personal quip to President Bush during that Summit that "Ukraine is not even a state."

The outgoing Bush administration did contribute to halting the invasion of Georgia by its decision to send humanitarian aid through military channels, and by rapidly flying the cream of the Georgian army home from Iraq in spite of the objections of Moscow, which by then controlled Georgian airspace. One of its final decisions before the incoming Obama Administration took office was the signing of the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, which remains a useful instrument.

The Predictable Failure of the “Reset” Policy

However, the principled strategic response of the new Obama administration to Russia’s unprecedented territorial grab by military force was to declare the now-notorious “Reset” policy. According to this fanciful project, Obama himself would dissuade Putin from further such adventures by the sheer force of the presidential personality. Never mind that leaders from throughout the former Soviet Union were forcefully expressing their concerns over Russian behavior to U.S. ambassadors, and supporting their arguments with case after case of Russian pressure and strong-armed tactics in the economic, political and security spheres. Washington, it was believed, would negotiate over the heads of the new states of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and achieve a new world order which none of those states could achieve on their own.

American officials were aware of these concerns, but dismissed them. President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden stated repeatedly that the reset does not come at the expense of other countries. Vice President Biden stated in Tbilisi in July 2009 that President Obama had asked him to travel to the country “‘to send an unequivocal, clear, [and] simple message’ that U.S. efforts to reset relations with Russia would not come at the expense of ties with Georgia.”¹

A senior Defense Department official clarified the Administration’s perspective:

We don't accept a zero-sum frame, but this is a frame that everyone keeps trying to force on the United States, that American perspectives on Eurasia, on Europe, on arms control must be zero sum. We don't think they're zero sum.... we think that we can cooperate with Russia and engage with Russia and also affirm that countries in Europe and Eurasia can have successful, prosperous, secure futures as well.

This official added that:

the same set of rules and norms by which Russia exists in the international community and commands our respect, as it does, apply to Russia's neighbors. And that's really the basic principle, that the United States expects Russia to

¹ Jim Nichol, “Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests,” Congressional Research Service, October 20, 2009, http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33453_20091020.pdf.

abide by the same rules of the game that Russia expects the rest of the international community to approach Russia with.”²

The problem, simply put, is that this expectation did not play out. And when it did not, American officials did not respond, did not alter the “Reset” policy. Instead, the fear of the Reset’s critics became reality: American officials appeared to calibrate their every move in the region to the expected Russian reaction, and desisted from initiatives that would “irritate Moscow.”

In fairness, the “Reset” policy was launched at a time when a consensus reigned that Russia itself had appeared to take on a new and more conciliatory tone toward the West. Having taken a serious hit in the financial crisis, and with the more amenable Dmitry Medvedev as President, Russia moved to resolve a decades-old dispute with Norway on maritime boundaries, to patch up its longstanding differences with Poland, and working with NATO on a compromise on missile defense. Moscow appeared to reciprocate the “Reset” policy, cooperating with the U.S. on Iran sanctions and logistics to Afghanistan. Simply put, the Russia of 2009 seemed very different from that of 2008.

That, in turn, strengthened the assumptions of the Obama Administration that the problem had been American policies, not Russia. The Bush Administration, the new U.S. administration felt, had been unnecessarily anti-Russian, and Russian misbehavior in the former Soviet space was a reaction to perceived American inroads in areas where Russia had “legitimate interests.” That was a misinterpretation of Bush Administration policies, which were similarly naïve about Russia in the early days, but that is not the point here. Rather, the point is that the Obama Administration assumed that if Washington took a step back in the post-Soviet space, so would Moscow. But reality was the opposite: whatever happened in other areas, the post-Soviet space is one area where Russian policies did not change. As the contributions to this volume make clear, Putin benefited from American disengagement in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and

² Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Celeste Wallander speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations, October 28, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/international-organizations-and-alliances/russia-update-reset-working/p20573>.

Central Asia to intensify his efforts to restore Russian pre-eminent influence everywhere.³

From the outset, Russian leaders did not hide that their primary interest in the “Reset” was to achieve American recognition for what Medvedev had termed a “zone of privileged interests.” American leaders maintained they would never accept this; but Putin drew inference from Washington’s actions rather than Washington’s rhetoric. By 2011, if not earlier, Moscow concluded that Obama’s “Reset” policy did constitute an implicit acceptance of Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence. Certainly, American officials would never admit that, and would argue the opposite; but the fact that they deferred to Moscow on their initiatives across Eurasia suggested that they did.

As a result, the “Reset” policy backfired spectacularly. Far from ushering in a Russian policy that respected the sovereignty of its neighbors, the Reset brought about the exact opposite: a boost for Russian revisionists that concluded that they had a green light to restore Russian control over the former Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, the European Union a more pro-active course. As discussed in the chapter of this volume devoted to the EU, Brussels chose to brush aside all political and geo-strategic concerns in Moscow and establish its Eastern Partnership. To the West, this project seemed to advance, if at all, through the turgid bureaucratic measures that were all too typical of Brussels. To Putin, however, the partnership was nothing less than a further step in the process that began with the expansion of NATO membership to Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries. Left unchecked, it would not only destroy Putin’s scheme to build a new Eurasian bloc but would directly threaten Putin’s program to reorient Russian domestic policy—and Russian identity and psychology—around his grand external project.

Russia’s more aggressive actions in its neighborhood over the previous half-decade had not gone unnoticed in Washington. However, the combination of the focus on Afghanistan and the hopes implicit in the “Reset” effectively prevented the U.S. from acting on its concerns. This engendered deep but unex-

³ Svante E. Cornell, “No Reset in the Post-Soviet Space,” *Journal of International Security Affairs*, Spring/Summer 2011, http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/2011-Cornell_JISA.pdf.

pressed frustration in some quarters within the Obama Administration. Finally, on December 6, 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in one of her last public utterances before leaving her post, declared, “Let’s make no mistake about it. We know what the goal (of the EEU) is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it.”⁴

It was well and good for a departing Secretary of State to attack the EEU as an “effort to re-Sovietize” the former Soviet space, but quite another matter to translate that insight into policy. In fact, nothing was done. Not only did Clinton’s outburst not go beyond the seventh floor of the State Department, it found no resonance either in the National Security Council or in the White House. This important fact was duly noted by the FSB and Russian policymakers, which served to embolden them further—particularly as Clinton’s successor failed to uphold her rhetorical resistance to Russian neo-imperialism.

Excuses for Inaction

The details of Washington’s response to Moscow’s heavy-handed moves against Kyiv need not concern us here. But two general features are to be noted. First, many members of the Obama Administration, echoing statements of such leading pundits as Tom Friedman of the *New York Times*, contended that Putin’s project was doomed to fail, and would in the end do more damage to Russia itself than to its neighbors.⁵ Never mind that in the interval between Putin’s current actions in Ukraine and the ultimate collapse of his dreams, immeasurable damage could be done to Russia’s neighbors in the Baltic area, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. What might otherwise have been an important insight thus became an excuse for inaction. Many in America turned what might otherwise have been an important (but unprovable) hypothesis about the future into an operational doctrine that held that “We do not need to take strong action because History itself will bring Putin’s project to naught.”

Second, because of this, it was concluded that any kind of military response to military action is unwarranted, and that the best rejoinder would be through the

⁴ Charles Clover, “Clinton Vows to Thwart New Soviet Union,” *Financial Times*, December 6, 2012.

⁵ Casey Michel, “Vladimir Putin’s Impotent Eurasian Union,” *Foreign Policy*, June 5, 2014.

economic sphere, i.e., through sanctions. That the first sanctions were directed against individuals rather than the Russian state suggests that as of that point the U.S. did not take Putin seriously. It remains to be seen whether further sanctions will provide any kind of brake on Putin's larger project.

Third, if Putin's efforts are doomed in the end, there is no need to devise a larger strategy to meet them, one that embraces the various sovereign states threatened by Moscow's multi-sided campaign of subversion. Of course, this happily Panglossian posture leaves all of America's erstwhile friends throughout the region in the lurch. Why provide defensive arms to Georgia, which has already seen itself invaded and its territories stolen, if in the end Putin will fail? Why, for the same reason, should the U.S. do anything if India, Israel, or other countries choose to close their eyes to recent events and open bilateral relations with the EEU? Two possible answers to such questions suggest themselves: the U.S. will remain on the sidelines either because the present policy of sanctions will in the end succeed, or, as Stratfor has argued, the U.S. lacks the "resources to double down on Russia."⁶

Viewed from the perspective of Moscow, the reconsolidation of what is believed to be Russia's historic territory is akin to Bismarck's historic consolidation of the German states in the nineteenth century. True, such a grand mission may involve coercion and the use of force but this is inevitable in any great geostrategic project. It also recalls Trotsky's use of the Red Army to reconquer former tsarist territories during the Russian Civil War, the only historical precedent for a European empire to be reconstructed after it collapsed. America, in this view, is doubly naïve: itself the product of continental conquest, it now fails to appreciate the great forces of destiny as they operate in today's world. As an otherwise sober Russian pundit, Dmitri Trenin, surveys the scene in 2014, he concludes that the U.S. government is hostile to any enhancement of Russia's presence in the Former Soviet Union, "whether it is economic, cultural, or any other influence."⁷

It is fashionable in some quarters in the West to argue that Putin's grand project, involving economic, political, military, and cultural elements, is the last

⁶ "Russia and the U.S. Spar Over the European Union," *Stratfor*, December 10, 2012.

⁷ Nikolai K. Gvosdev, "The Realist Prism: US Stance on Eurasian Union Threatens Russian Reset," *World Politics Review*, December 14, 2012.

emanation of nineteenth century geopolitics. As of this writing, it is equally plausible to conclude that it represents the first manifestation of a new kind of geopolitics, steeped in the world of Bismarck and of Alexander III but adapted to a new century and to the possibilities of irregular warfare that the new technologies make possible. At some future date it will be possible to adjudicate between these two hypotheses. For now, it is clear that the struggle that burst into the open in Georgia in 2008, extended to Putin's effort to gain a military base in south Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and is now manifest in Ukraine and other territories in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, represents a direct challenge to fundamental values concerning sovereignty, self-determination, and self-government which the U.S. and Euro-Atlantic world hold to be universal and fully applicable in the twenty-first century. For the time being, it appears that Mr. Putin has a strategy for achieving his ends while the U.S. is still in denial over the need for a counter-strategy.