



Policy Brief

DON'T BET AGAINST THE WEST!

Dan Fried



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The US tried to integrate Russia with the liberal international order, but Putin destroyed the basis for cooperation by dismantling democracy and seeking domination of his neighbors, writes Dan Fried.

Starting with the Administration of George H. W. Bush until Putin's war against Ukraine, the United States generally sought to support the integration of post-Soviet Russia (and even the USSR, in its final year under President Mikhail Gorbachev) with the liberal international order of which the US was principal founder after 1945. That meant developing good bilateral relations with Russia and, to the degree possible, encouraging Russian partnership in international affairs including against terrorism after the September 11, 2001 attacks. The US advanced this policy with two conditions, however. First, the US did not recognize a Russian sphere of domination over its neighbors and former satellites in Central and Eastern Europe; and, second, the US predicated its Russia policy on that country's continued evolution in the direction of democracy and the rule of law.

Those US conditions were generally acceptable to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, especially in his early years of better health. They were not acceptable to President Vladimir Putin. Indeed, Putin had his own conditions for better relations with the US: these included US acquiescence to Russia's attempts to dominate its neighbors, especially Ukraine and Georgia, the two countries most committed to finding a place in Europe and its institutions; and US acceptance of Putin's deepening autocratic rule at home, the tactics of which included assassination.

The rise and fall of US-Russian relations from a high point of hope in the early 1990s to a return to a hostile, adversarial relationship between not just Russia and the US, but between Russia and almost the whole of Europe and North America is a result of the incompatibility of these views of Russia's place in the world.

Notwithstanding arguments that the US humiliated Russia after 1991 (arguments that echo but without much basis the case that rough treatment of Germany in the Treaty of Versailles was partly or even largely responsible for the rise of Hitler), the US did not seek to isolate, punish, or otherwise treat Russia as a defeated foe. The US did not seek to impose reparations on Russia; it provided assistance. The US did not shun Russia's new leadership; it reached out to them. And Boris Yeltsin reached back. In a speech to a joint session of Congress in June 1992, Yeltsin spoke of Russia, through its own efforts, having ended "seventy-five years of [communist] nightmare," thanked the American people "for their invaluable moral support," committed himself to free-market, democratic reforms, and promised that Russia would never again lie in foreign affairs.^[1]

Western critics often cite NATO's decision to accept for membership Poland and other newly liberated countries in Central and Eastern Europe as an original sin that alienated Russia by "drawing a new line in Europe" (as opponents of NATO enlargement often put it). In fact, US policy on NATO reflected its determination to end the Stalinist division of Europe. Rejecting the push for NATO membership from Poland, the Baltics, and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe would have meant perpetuating the line of the Cold War into the future, tacitly recognizing a Russian sphere of domination in Europe and signaling to Moscow that the US and Western Europe in fact regarded the former captive nations of Europe as in some sense property of Moscow, to be reclaimed when possible. Those of us making the case for NATO enlargement from inside the Clinton Administration and later in the Bush Administration were aware of this; in retrospect, given Russia's attack on Ukraine, its claims against that country, and official demands for NATO withdrawal from its eastern flank members, the decision to allow additional European countries to join NATO seems even more justified.

NATO enlargement was not the whole story, however. The US sought to integrate its support for NATO enlargement with its inclusive policy toward Russia. The decision to enlarge NATO was made in parallel with an effort to develop a NATO-Russia relationship, an "alliance with the Alliance" as some of us in the Clinton Administration put it at the time of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, a document concluded in 1997 before NATO's decision to offer membership to Poland, Czechia, Hungary. The Founding Act not only established a NATO-Russia structure to support common actions and decision making, it set limits on NATO's deployments in Europe by eschewing "additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces." This commitment by NATO — made in parallel with an unspecified Russian commitment in the Founding Act to exercise similar restraint in its deployments — was intended to reassure the Kremlin that NATO enlargement would not be followed by a massive buildup akin to the stationing of US, British, and other forces in Cold War West Germany. Indeed, NATO enlargement was accompanied by a steady withdrawal, not buildup, of US forces from Europe to the point where, on the eve of Putin's war against Ukraine in 2014, there were no US tanks stationed permanently in Europe.

The Administration of George W. Bush sought to deepen partnership with President Putin, starting with their famous meeting in Slovenia in June 2001. This meeting followed Bush's Warsaw speech which signaled US intent to continue with NATO enlargement.^[ii] That signal notwithstanding, the Bush-Putin meeting went well. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, Putin seemed prepared for deeper strategic partnership, with counter-terrorism and strategic arms control leading elements. The Bush Administration responded with enthusiasm and several good years of relations followed, with some achievements in counter-terrorism and arms control.

Bush's decision to continue NATO enlargement even to the Baltic States (a decision made at the Prague NATO Summit in November 2002 shortly before the US decision to attack Iraq) did not derail this US-Russian cooperation. Like the Clinton Administration, the Bush policy toward Russia included an element of "hedging." Even in the 1990s, the Clinton Administration had urged Europe to avoid energy dependence on Russia and had championed alternative, non-Russian energy projects for Europe such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. The Bush Administration continued this policy even as it built its relations with the early Putin team.

What soured US-Russia relations were Putin's decisions to advance his authoritarian control at home, starting by destroying independent television in Russia, and, especially, Putin's reaction to what he perceived as US instigation of the pro-Western "Color Revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, respectively. The Bush Administration started, slowly and unevenly, to realize that Putin's dismantling of Russian democracy meant that, as President Bush observed at the time, Putin might not be the reform-minded leader we thought and hoped

he was.^[iii] Putin, in true Stalinist fashion, assumed that the US was behind the Color Revolutions. He was mistaken — Georgia's Rose Revolution and Ukraine's Orange Revolution reflected genuine home-grown political forces and surprised the US — but Putin seemed convinced that the US had broken his condition of US acquiescence in Russia's domination of its former Soviet possessions and, with that, the basis for cooperation with the US was gone.

Putin's hostile, anti-US and anti-Western speech at the February 2007 Munich Security Conference reflected his new assessment of US policy as inconsistent with Putin's view of core Russian interests. This clash — Russia's insistence on and US resistance to Russia's domination of Georgia and Ukraine in particular — intensified as the US sought to gain NATO consensus on a NATO Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia at the April 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit. That effort failed — the Alliance was divided over that question — but the consensus reached included a NATO statement that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually be members of the Alliance. That in turn seemed to infuriate Putin, who in a speech at the Bucharest NATO Summit (at the NATO-Russia Council portion held the day following the Summit proper), laid the basis for a Russian claim of Ukraine's Crimea territory.

The Bush Administration still sought to maintain good relations with Russia and, immediately after the Bucharest Summit, Bush and his team flew to Sochi for a meeting with Putin and newly-installed temporary President Dmitry Medvedev. But Putin no longer appeared interested in cooperation with the US. Instead, he provoked a war with Georgia in August 2008, after which the Bush Administration acknowledged the failure of its efforts to work with Putin's Russia^[iv].

The Obama Administration, despite the Russo-Georgian War, sought to return to the early Bush assumptions that some short of partnership with Putin's Russia was possible. To this end, it launched the "reset" with Russia based on the same Bush team assumptions: that there was room for partnership with Russia even given US conditions about Russia's neighbors and human rights and democracy within Russia. Like the Bush policy, the Obama Reset yielded some initial results, particularly in strategic arms control.

But, also like the Bush policy, the Obama Reset fell afoul of Putin's deepening authoritarianism at home and aggression against his neighbors. Putin's manipulation of Russia's 2011 elections provoked demonstrations inside Russia and criticism from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Putin appeared to be infuriated by this. In Ukraine, Putin overreached, not for the last time, when in late 2013 he forced his preferred ruler, Viktor Yanukovich, to break his commitment to sign a relatively modest Ukraine-EU Association Agreement that had wide support in Ukraine. That led to demonstrations in Kyiv that Yanukovich attempted to suppress violently, the "Maidan" named after the downtown Kyiv square where they took place. This set off an escalatory cycle that ended with Yanukovich fleeing the country and a pro-European government assuming power.

As with Ukraine's Orange Revolution, Putin assumed the "Maidan" was US controlled. He responded within days by invading Crimea; when this succeeded against the disoriented new Ukraine government, Putin escalated by launching "separatist movements" in the Donbas. The first phase of the Russo-Ukraine War was on.

As with the Bush Administration after the Russo-Georgian War, the Obama Administration realized after Putin's attack on Ukraine that its outreach to Putin had failed. It shifted course, opting for sanctions against Russia as its principal instrument to resist Russia's aggression. The Obama Administration did not, however, provide arms to Ukraine, concerned that doing so would be futile because (as the argument went inside the Obama NSC staff) the Russians had

“escalation dominance.” The sanctions, joined by the EU, combined with Ukrainian resistance on the ground, caused Putin to pull back from his initial expansive claims to vast parts of Ukraine. Putin started but shortly dropped claims to “Novorossiya” – vast parts of southern and Eastern Ukraine conquered by Catherine the Great in the late 18th century and even accepted the Minsk Accords framework negotiated with France, Germany, and Ukraine that acknowledged that Ukraine’s Donbas region, effectively occupied by Russia, was in fact, Ukrainian territory.

But Putin had no intention of honoring the Minsk Accords and, by late 2015 at least, it became clear that Russia was not taking the Minsk negotiating process seriously. Instead of escalating, the Obama Administration allowed sanctions to plateau and did not respond strongly even to Russian interference in the US 2016 Presidential elections until after those elections were over. The US had dropped its objective of outreach to Russia but had not fully replaced it with a policy of resisting Russian aggression.

The Trump Administration’s Russia policy was inconsistent, even incoherent. On the one hand, capable foreign policy experts, especially the NSC’s Senior Director Fiona Hill, State Department Assistant Secretary for Europe Wess Mitchell, and Treasury Undersecretary Sigal Mandelker maintained the Obama Administration’s sanctions pressure on Russia. The Trump Administration even started sending modest amounts of weapons to Ukraine (while restricting their placement). But President Trump himself, and many of his ideological supporters in and out of government, seemed to admire Putin as a like-minded strongman and looked at Ukraine as a political irritant, something that led to Trump’s first impeachment. This vitiated US pressure against Putin.

The Biden Administration’s foreign leadership was composed of people who had been on the more hawkish side of the Obama Administration debates about Russia after Putin’s invasion of Ukraine (including Secretary of State Tony Blinken and Undersecretary Toria Nuland). Nevertheless, the Biden Administration sought to avoid a clash with Putin’s Russia, opting instead to seek a “stable and predictable” relationship. That was the message from the Biden-Putin Geneva meeting in June 2021. This was no reset, as with Obama in 2009, but an effort to park the US-Russia relationship at a low but sustainable level the better to focus on China policy. The US condition was modest: that Putin refrain from escalation in Ukraine.

As it turns out, Putin was having none of it. Without even a poor excuse, Putin built up his forces, made extravagant (and public) demands of the US and NATO, and, in February 2022, launched a full-on invasion of Ukraine. The Biden Administration had cautioned Putin, first in private and then in public, not to invade. When he did, the Biden team chose to support Ukraine, including through provision of arms (slowly at first, perhaps assuming that Ukraine could not withstand a determined Russian assault). Strategically, the Biden Administration effectively ended the US policy of reaching out to Russia that had been in place since the late-1980s. The US began to regard Russia as a full-on adversary.

The US, France and Germany shared mistaken assumptions about the possibility of working with Putin’s Russia

It is easy to parody the differences between US and Polish policy toward Putin’s Russia on the one hand and the French and German approach on the other. During the Cold War, the US was generally (but not always) harder edged toward the Kremlin than either France or Germany and this difference reemerged in approaches to Russia even after Putin’s 2014 attack on Ukraine. The French and Germans had more faith in the Minsk negotiating process to end the war in Ukraine than was justified. German energy policy rested on a misplaced conviction in the stabilizing effect of dependence on Russian gas; its investment in the Nord Stream gas pipelines instead of LNG infrastructure was a bad choice, belatedly recognized by the German government.

Nevertheless, the US, French, and German governments for years shared many hopeful and ultimately mistaken assumptions about the possibility of working with Putin's Russia; all were reluctant to accept the conclusion that Putin was a dangerous and aggressive ruler close in spirit and many tactics to 20th century dictators. Polish governments (as well as Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian governments as well as others in Central and Eastern Europe), as it turns out, were right about the danger from the Kremlin and were not, as some Western critics patronizingly put it, "Russophobic" or "prisoners of history." Still, Germany, France, and the US all joined in resisting Putin's initial aggression against Ukraine in 2014. None accepted Putin's claim over Ukraine. The arc of US, French, and German Russia policies have run in rough parallel, moving closer to Polish assessments of the Kremlin.

German policy toward Russia has been upended and Germans are struggling with the magnitude of the policy reorientation needed to deal with Putin's Russia as it is. Germany's struggle to organize its foreign policy around different assumptions about Russia and a different, more forward leading German role in helping Europe resist Putin's aggression, is painful, necessary, and familiar to Americans who have had to contend with their own policy failures in past decades.

Russia is a strategic adversary as long as Putin is in power

The US search for some "deal" with Russia to enlist it as a partner in managing the rise of China has been a persistent speculation that has led nowhere. With good reason. The precedent set by Henry Kissinger's successful outreach to Mao's China while pursuing détente with Brezhnev's Soviet Union remain attractive to some. Many in the Trump Administration (and many beyond it) expressed interest in making the effort.^[1]

The problem arises as soon as a prospective "deal" with Moscow takes shape: it always seems to involve recognition of Moscow's dominance over Ukraine and Georgia, and indifference to human rights and the rule of law inside Russia, conditions no US Administration, not even that of Donald Trump, has been willing to accept. Some tacit understanding over Ukraine might have been possible when Yanukovich was in charge in Kyiv. The US had accepted his election and Ukraine's NATO aspirations were going nowhere. Even afterwards, in the runup to the current phase of Russia's war against Ukraine, Germany offered to maintain its effective blockage of Ukraine's NATO aspirations as a way to head off the Russian offensive. That wasn't enough for Putin, who sought an end not just to Ukraine's NATO aspirations but to its independence. A deal with Putin over Ukraine would be near impossible under current conditions, given Putin's escalation and the atrocities Russian forces have committed and continue to commit.

Moreover, Putin is committed to an anti-American course as strategy. Russia and China see common strategic purpose in combining to weaken the US and the international system it has championed. Efforts to entice Putin to change strategic course in favor of the US and at China's expense would be futile and making the attempt would require abandoning US strategic principles in a display of weakness, giving Putin a win he has not earned either on the Ukrainian battlefield or economically, at least so far.

Russia is a strategic adversary and is seen as such by most governments in Europe and the US, albeit with varying degrees of conviction. This will remain the case as long as Putin is in power. The current US Administration is clear on that point.

In the US, the hard left and – more worrying — the Trumpist right have sympathy for Putin

In US politics, support for Ukraine and for resisting Russia aggression includes what is left of the Reaganite Right through the pro-internationalist center to much (not all) of the left. The left, historically reluctant to support resistance to Kremlin aggression, now includes many with an aversion to Putinism and supportive of Ukraine, thinking similar to that among many Greens in Germany.

Opposition to this approach can be found among some on the hard left, who express an “anti-imperialist” approach with its origins in the 1970s that amounts to sympathy for many (and perhaps any) forces seen as reliably anti-American. These views are not strong or influential. More worrying are views held by the Trumpist right that are outright pro-Putin and hostile to Ukraine. These views, championed by Fox media star Tucker Carlson, recall pro-fascist arguments of the late 1930s that prevailed in American rightist circles until the Japanese attack on the US in 1941. These views, once common, now almost forgotten, but revived by Trumpist circles, include sympathy for hard right, nationalist strongmen, hostility to “cosmopolitan” Europe and US support for Europe, and cynical hostility to application of values in foreign policy as weakening American freedom of action. These views overlap to some degree with those held by a small but influential circle of foreign policy thinkers, some serious and scholarly, who champion “realism and restraint,” which in the case of Russia seems to come down to acquiescence in a Russian sphere of domination over Ukraine and other countries. The “realism and restraint” school, combined with the Trumpist right, appeals to a tradition in US foreign policy thinking often termed “isolationism” but in fact meaning a sometimes unilateralist, value-free foreign policy based on transactional relationships with other great powers.

Milder versions of “realist” thinking had influence in the Obama Administration but generally did not prevail. This school has had even less impact on the Biden Administration but is making considerable headway within on the right, e.g., the once-Reaganite Heritage Foundation think tank has shown more sympathy for Trumpist views and the Quincy Institute champions versions of “realist thinking.” (To be fair, other schools of realist foreign policy thinking have admirable records of achievement: Brent Scowcroft, National Security Advisor for President George H.W. Bush, applied many of the virtues of realist thinking, including operational and rhetorical caution and restraint, in the 1989–91 period with spectacular results.)

Sanctions sceptics get little traction in the US

Support for sanctions against Russia often align with the categories of foreign policy thinking discussed above: support is generally high among those inclined to support Ukraine and oppose Putin and weak among the Trumpist Right, “realist” right and center, and hard left. The Trump Administration, however, was enthusiastic about sanctions against Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela, and even against Russia (to little effect, however, given Trump’s own sympathy for Putin that weakened their impact).

The debate about the use of sanctions has its own dynamic, however. Some economists and economic policy specialists worry about what they term sanctions overuse, including creating perverse incentives for rival powers, e.g., China, to break from the US dollar as the accepted international reserve currency and from the US-dominated international financial system. Thus far, however, those arguments have not gained major traction either within the US government or Congress. If anything, Congress has pushed for more intense sanctions against Russia.

The US and Europe defied predictions that their resistance to Putin's Russia would fail

US support for Ukraine's resistance to Russia's aggression has been persistent. Whether it will continue so in the face of Russian escalation, more severe economic dislocations such as energy price spikes and/or shortages, or a failure of European political support for a similarly strong approach is an open question, but the US and Europe have since 2014 defied persistent predictions that their support for Ukraine and resistance to Putin's Russia would fail. I would not bet against the West.

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Dan Fried is a retired US diplomat who served as assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs from 2005 to 2009. Between 2013 bis 2017 he headed the US Office of Sanctions Coordination. He was a speaker at the LibMod conference "Russia and the West" in March 2022.

[i] [Link to Yeltsin June 1992 speech to the US Congress: Boris Yeltsin "Address to U.S. Congress" Transcript \(speeches-usa.com\)](#)

[ii] [Link to Warsaw speech: CNN.com](#) — Transcript: President Bush speech in Warsaw — June 15, 2001

[iii] Bush made this observation to then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in October 2003 in a meeting in London in which I participated.

[iv] [Link to Secretary Rice's GMF speech fall 2008: Secretary Rice Addresses U.S.-Russia Relations at GMF | RealClearWorld](#)

[v] I heard this a lot personally in the early weeks of the Trump Administration.

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