

POLICY FOCUS

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Russia's War and America's Follies

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HIGHLIGHT

From the Soviet Union's defeat in the Cold War, Russia has emerged as an aggressor against its neighbors and a disruptive foe of America and a free world order. Russia's dictator, President Vladimir Putin, aspires to reassemble the Soviet empire, not as a communist system but as a globally powerful imperium under his rule. His onslaught in Ukraine comes as a five-alarm warning of proliferating dangers that the Biden administration, focused on its radical domestic agenda, has been doing too little to deter.

INTRODUCTION

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, marking the end of the long Cold War, the U.S. swooped in not as conqueror but as a partner, aiming to help Russia replace the debris of its destitute and brutal communist system with a market economy and democratic institutions. The hope was for a new era of comity and peace. That did not work out. Russia shed the worst inefficiencies of communism, but under the rule of President Vladimir Putin for the past 22 years has been making a comeback as a

predatory autocracy, seeking to expand its reach and revive its role, via both commerce and conquest, as a major world power.

Putin has described the Soviet collapse as the 20th century's "greatest political catastrophe," for which he has by his lights been seeking remedy, and—to judge by some of his statements—revenge. He has been leveraging Russia's military and huge natural resources, especially oil and gas, not only to resurrect the power of the Kremlin, but to undermine America, savage its friends and attack its values. President Biden, with a foreign policy signaling weakness, presented Putin with opportunities to advance his messianic projects. Putin, with his renewed assault on Ukraine, is seizing those opportunities to create the worst crisis in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Among the main features of the U.S.-Russia showdown:

- The Biden administration, focused on its agenda of radical transformation of America at home, is failing to deter an array of interrelated and rising threats abroad, including Russia.

THE TRAGEDY OF RUSSIA

Russia is on a trajectory aggressively at odds with a free world order. But that is not a destiny all Russians want. It is worth a salute to the many brave individual Russians who over the years have tried to steer their country in a better direction. For more than a generation they have been fighting the grim legacy of the Soviet system, which spawned a regime no longer communist, but still built around communist methods of ruthless central control, versed in the methods of propaganda, secret police, deception (for which the Russian term is *maskirovka*) and brazen intimidation. The

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- Russian bullying and aggression, both armed and more insidious, has exploded into a full bore military invasion of Ukraine—an assault Putin telegraphed well in advance, and America and its allies failed to stop. There are echoes here of the 1930s, in which the great democratic powers did too little, too late, to stop the cascading violations that finally turned into the conflagration of World War II.
- Russia is making common cause with what we might call a conglomerate of evil, expanding ties and coordination with other hostile tyrannies, especially the predatory communist regime in China, and including such malign regimes as those in Iran, Syria, North Korea, Venezuela and Cuba.

names of some of these courageous souls have surfaced as dissidents, defectors and reformist politicians, who have been variously threatened, assaulted, imprisoned, exiled, poisoned or shot.

IMMEDIATE CRISIS IN UKRAINE

As this report goes to press, Putin is presiding over a massive Russian military invasion of Ukraine, a sovereign nation that in 1991 declared independence from the collapsing Soviet Union. At stake is not only Ukraine, but Putin's expanding challenge to the norms of a Pax Americana that has kept relative order and breathing room for freedom in the world since the end of World War II.

Having massed war ships along Ukraine's coast and more than 190,000 troops conducting war exercises along its land borders, Putin in a Feb. 21 speech declared that Russia has "every right" to the entire nation of Ukraine, plus territory beyond. He also declared Russian recognition as "People's Republics" of two breakaway enclaves in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, where Russia since 2014 has stirred up violence in which more than 13,000 have died, including the shootdown over the region of a Malaysian commercial airliner. On the pretext of securing their defense, Putin then launched a massive armed invasion of the entire country of Ukraine, starting with strikes on a number of major cities, including the capital of Kiev.

Biden, having threatened Russia with the most severe sanctions ever, defaulted initially to a relatively moderate round of sanctions, which the U.S. and its allies somewhat escalated only after Putin invaded. It is highly unlikely that any of this will stop Putin, who has clearly made a strategic bet that he can ride out short term pain for long term plunder and power.

Biden has also stressed that while America would fight if Putin attacked any of the 30 members of the U.S.-led NATO defense alliance, the U.S. will send no troops to Ukraine, which is not a NATO member. Whatever Biden's aim in saying this, he would have been wiser to keep quiet and leave Putin guessing. Biden's insistence that outside of NATO America will send no troops to fight Russians translates into an invitation to Putin to send in his guns.

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Putin had been demanding guarantees that NATO will never admit Ukraine, as well as NATO concessions on missile and troop deployment

within the alliance. NATO has rejected Russia's demands and has been providing Ukraine with some arms and logistical support. But the bottom line is that Ukraine, vastly outgunned, has been left to face Russia on its own.

BACKGROUND ON RUSSIA-UKRAINE RELATIONS

Russia's creation of crisis over Ukraine tracks back to Putin's blitz annexation in 2014 of Crimea, a region that Soviet party boss Nikita Khrushchev transferred to Ukraine from Russia in 1954, as a symbolic fraternal gift among Soviet republics—a gift that unexpectedly became a reality when the Soviet Union fell. When Putin snatched Crimea eight years ago, the U.S. under President Obama scolded and imposed an array of sanctions, but failed to reverse the deed. Crimea has remained in Russia's hands, including the strategically important port of Sevastopol, home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet with its warm water access to the Bosphorus, Mediterranean, and thence to the Atlantic and maritime access via the Suez Canal to the Middle East.

Putin argues that Ukraine belongs to Russia for reasons tracking back centuries. It is easy to see why Ukraine in our time prefers independence. Under the Soviet Union, in which Russia was the control tower, first among erstwhile equals of the 15 Soviet republics, Moscow's communist rule visited horrors upon Ukraine. Two leading examples:

- In the 1930s, Soviet boss Joseph Stalin collectivized Ukraine's farms and confiscated their crops. In the resulting and deliberate famine, remembered in Ukraine as the terror-famine, or "*Holodomor*" almost four million Ukrainians died.

- In 1986 came the nuclear disaster at the Chernobyl reactor, near Ukraine's capital of Kiev. Ukraine's Soviet bosses in Moscow, who had overseen the flawed design of the reactor, at first refused to believe it had exploded, then tried to downplay it, before the sheer scale and lethality of the catastrophe forced them to own up.

statements, the most recent promulgated in tandem with Putin's visit to Beijing this year as Xi's honored guest at the opening of the Olympics. That statement amounted to the declaration of a new world order in which they proclaimed Russia and China as the ascendant powers, and dismissed the U.S. as a power in decline, and an obstacle to world progress.

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VLADIMIR PUTIN, GODFATHER

It is now more than 22 years since Vladimir Putin took control in Russia, as successor to President Boris Yeltsin. He has remolded the country from a fractious and struggling post-Soviet state into an aggressive dictatorship in which he rules as a mix of mafia-style godfather and 21st century czar. Under his rule, Russia's relations with the U.S. have gone from relatively cordial to hostile.

Putin embarked years ago on a strategy of reassembling the USSR's dominions. He has been rebuilding and modernizing his armed forces, presided over massive infiltration, influence and sabotage operations abroad, and embarked on campaigns configured to bully, threaten and swipe turf from neighboring countries. Before attacking Ukraine, Putin in a weaker phase of his buildup tried in 2008 to invade the former Soviet republic of Georgia. That assault ended with a ceasefire and Russia's continuing support for two breakaway enclaves in Georgia.

Increasingly, Putin has been partnering with China's dictator, President Xi Jinping. Since Xi rose to power in 2012 as General Secretary of China's Communist Party, the two tyrants have met more than 20 times. Russia and China have cut trade and energy deals, tag-teamed at the United Nations, and engaged with increasing frequency in joint military exercises by land and sea. In recent years they have released a series of joint

It is often noted that Russia and China are not natural allies, have had their disputes, and might again turn on each other. Resource-hungry China is home to 1.4 billion people, just south of the resource-rich sparsely populated Russian Far East. But for now, they are cooperating in their efforts to marginalize and supplant what both see as their most powerful common enemy: longtime leader of the free world, the United States.

PUTIN AND THE KGB LEGACY

Putin, now 69 years old, was born during the murderous reign of Stalin, in what was then the Soviet city of Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. He served as a foreign intelligence officer in the KGB, and as the Soviet Union headed for collapse, he went into politics. During the 1990s, the era of Boris Yeltsin's presidency and Russia's chaotic transition from communism, Putin landed a job in the Kremlin and rose to become Prime Minister. On New Year's Eve, 1999, Yeltsin abruptly resigned, naming Putin as his successor.

Putin has ruled Russia ever since, presiding over elections he invariably wins, and initially finessing term limits on the presidency by swapping jobs with his prime minister. His KGB background, amplified by a talent for manipulation and ruthless power plays, has been evident in his governance style, and the fate of many who have opposed him. Among the most internationally notorious cases are the 2006 poisoning in London of Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko, with

radioactive polonium-210, served in a teapot at a luxury hotel; and the 2018 assault with Russia's Novichok nerve poison, in Salisbury, U.K., on a former Russian double agent and his daughter.

RUSSIA'S TREASURE HOUSE

Buttressing Russia's role in world affairs is the country's vast trove of natural resources. Russia encompasses the largest land mass of any nation in the world, stretching from the borders of Eastern Europe to the Asian Pacific, from the Arctic to the Caucasus, including 11 time zones, with a population of some 144 million.

Russia is rich in oil, gas, minerals, lumber and other natural resources. This bounty helped the Soviet Union survive the self-imposed destitution of communism in the 20th century, and is fueling the rise and reach of Putin's dictatorship today. A Congressional Research Service report released last April lists Russia as the world's leading exporter of natural gas, and second largest exporter of oil.

top five. Russia has some 3.5 million people in the armed forces, of whom roughly one million are in active service. In 2008 Putin launched a revamp and buildup in which Russia today is projecting armed power and/or selling weapons around the world, from the Middle East to Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Arctic. Russia, like China, has been developing hypersonic missiles configured to defeat U.S. air defenses.

On the diplomatic front, Russia's highest profile position is its seat on the United Nations Security Council, where as one of the permanent five members it wields a veto. Beyond that, Russia belongs to a wide array of international organizations, including the UN World Trade Organization, where it became a member, with the support of President Obama's administration, in 2012.

THUMBNAIL HISTORY

Ruled for centuries under the Czars, Russia cast a ruinous shadow across much of the 20th century, starting with the 1917 Bolshevik

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Russia's economy as of 2020 ranked as 11th largest in the world, with gross domestic product of some \$1.4 trillion, [according to the World Bank](#). That amounts to about 1/10th the GDP of China, and 1/14th the GDP of the U.S., but Putin has proved adept at leveraging his country's resources to further his ambitions of empire.

MILITARY AND DIPLOMATIC ARSENALS

Russia is a major military and nuclear power, secondary to the U.S., but ranked according to various authorities among the world's

revolution that brought Vladimir Lenin to power. From that came the Soviet Union, with its repression, gulag and messianic mission to spread communism worldwide.

In 1939, in the runup to World War II, the USSR under Stalin signed a secret non-aggression treaty with Nazi Germany, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This included secret protocols on how the two countries proposed to divide the spoils of Europe. In 1941, Hitler turned on Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union. Stalin then allied with the U.S. and Britain, rounding out the alliance that in Europe won the war. The price for that alliance, as Stalin then turned

on the West, was the advent in the late 1940s of the Cold War.

From the late 1940s until the endgame approaching 1991, the Soviet Union imposed, patronized or promoted communism, misery and destruction across vast parts of the planet, from client states such as Cuba and North Korea, to the wars in Korea and Vietnam and the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, to the agonies of Eastern Europe, to Mao's 1949 communist revolution in China (which then quarreled with the USSR, and later reconciled). When Russia emerged from the Soviet collapse, as chief heir of its own empire of horror, there were no great demands for apology; there was no real reckoning. For a while, it seemed the nightmare was over.

Under President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, the U.S. confronted the Soviet Union with an arms race it did not have the efficiency to win. Reagan openly deplored the USSR's cruel and destructive communist system. In 1983, Reagan delivered his famous speech calling the USSR an "evil empire." In 1987, speaking in West Berlin, Reagan made his famous demand of the USSR's communist party boss: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."

U.S. POLICY: FROM TRIUMPH TO TRAINWRECK

Reagan's Victory

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In the late 1980s, the USSR's satellite states in Eastern Europe began breaking free. In 1989 Berliners tore down the wall. Two years later, during the tenure of President George H.W. Bush, on Christmas Day, 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. It was a triumph of U.S. leadership, wisdom and will to win the Cold War.

Clinton's Illusions

What followed was less edifying. Under President Bill Clinton, the U.S. embarked on a hodge-podge effort to revive and help reform a crumbling and profoundly corrupt Russia, too often mistaking government plans and wishful thinking for real progress. Clinton ensured that Russia was invited into the G-7 group of developed democracies, and with some overly creative financial fiddling ushered it into the Paris Club of creditor nations. In 1998, when Russia defaulted on its debt, the U.S. via the International Monetary Fund ensured a bailout. There were already signs of plenty going awry, including Russia's 1994-96 brutal war in the rebellious republic of Chechnya, and a business environment riddled with graft, dominated by a wheeling and dealing Kremlin and rising oligarchy.

Bush's Wishful Thinking

When Putin rose to power, President George W. Bush during a meeting in mid-2001 looked him in the eye and pronounced him "straightforward and trustworthy." No such luck. In 2008, during Bush's final year in office, Putin launched an armed invasion of the former Soviet republic of Georgia. That ended a few days later with a ceasefire reached under pressure from the U.S., Britain and other NATO members. It deeply soured U.S.-Russia relations. Years later, former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili wrote in a Wall Street Journal Op-ed that with respect to Russia, "the West has the upper hand, but consistently fails to play it."

Obama's Failed "Reset"

In 2009, President Obama took office and dispatched his first secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, to pursue a Russian "reset," pandering to Putin and scrapping a planned U.S. missile defense shield for Eastern

Europe. In 2012, Obama mocked Republican candidate Mitt Romney for warning that Russia was a prime geostrategic threat. Obama was also caught on an open microphone privately promising that after he'd won a second term he could deliver "**more flexibility**" to Putin.

In 2014, when Putin annexed Crimea, Obama responded with sanctions. But Obama wanted Russia at the Iran nuclear talks then taking place in Vienna. While there were many factors at work, one bottom line is that with Russia's assent, Obama got his deeply flawed Iran deal. Putin kept Crimea.

In 2013, Obama condoned Russia's reentry into Syria as a monitor of the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, even as Putin gave asylum to Edward Snowden, the American contractor who stole the National Security Agency's files and playbook, and decamped with his plunder via Hong Kong (territory of China) to Russia.

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The Trump Collusion Narrative

President Trump's administration was dogged even before it began by the "Russia collusion" allegations spun out of the Obama administration and Hillary Clinton's campaign. These had more to do with U.S. domestic antagonisms than with Russia. That narrative proved false, but as former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has noted, it greatly limited Trump's latitude on Russia policy. It bears noting, however, that Trump's tougher approach in practice toward America's enemies, from ISIS to the Chinese Communist Party, apparently helped deter Putin from invading other countries on Trump's watch.

Biden's Appeasement

President Biden took office in 2021 with an agenda that valued virtue-signaling and appeasement abroad, and massive

government spending and state control at home. The effect was a series of green lights to Putin's plans for conquest. Biden began by scuttling America's recently won energy independence, scotching the Keystone pipeline and choking the domestic petroleum industry, to U.S. detriment. At the

same time, to Putin's benefit, Biden waved ahead Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline, built by Russia to increase supplies of Russian gas flowing to Germany. When Putin began massing troops along Ukraine's border in the spring of 2021, but went no further, Biden congratulated himself on successful diplomacy, and dignified Putin with a bilateral summit in Geneva.

In August, 2021 came Biden's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the mighty U.S. desperately conducting an emergency evacuation to escape the Taliban. There were predictions at the time that this would embolden the world's predators. Within months, Putin resumed his troop buildup threatening Ukraine. Biden and his team responded with a frenzy of diplomacy and threats of sanctions, none of it adequate to stop Putin.

WHAT NOW?

There are measures Biden could still take to blunt Russia's threats and deter Putin. For instance, Biden could free the U.S. energy industry he is now strangling, thus helping the U.S. economy, while downgrading Putin's leverage as czar of the world's biggest gas station. Biden could begin urgently building up a U.S. military focused on deterring and winning wars, rather than social issues and eco-fuels. America has experience in standing up to the Kremlin. Reagan showed the way. As we head into a new Cold War—or not so cold—it is time to revisit how America won the last one.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Get Informed

Learn more about the threat of Russia. Visit:

- [Congressional Research Service, “Russia: Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations”; April 15, 2021](#)
- [“Mr. Jones”; a 2019 movie based on real events during Ukraine’s famine in the 1930s under the USSR’s Stalin](#)
- [State Department 2020 Report on Human Rights Practices in Russia](#)

Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what’s going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN’S FORUM

Independent Women’s Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility. IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.