

Political Realism and the Ukraine Crisis

Clinton's ... Russia policy was clownish and ultimately detrimental to US interests. Bush's was reckless and lost one opportunity after another ... Obama's is either uninformed or out to lunch.

Stephen Cohen, Professor Emeritus of Russian Studies, New York and Princeton Universities

As the Cold War came to a close, Soviet leaders preferred that U.S. forces remain in Europe and NATO stay intact [to] keep a reunified Germany pacified. But they and their Russian successors did not want NATO to grow larger, and assumed Western diplomats understood that. The Clinton administration thought otherwise, and in the mid-1990s, began pushing for NATO to expand.

John Mearscheimer, Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago

We would not want the democracy they have in Iraq, quite honestly.

Vladimir Putin, replying to George W. Bush's 2006 "hope that Russia will follow Iraq in turning to democracy"

For all I know Putin really is a nasty piece of work who tortures kittens and cheats at chess. The Litvinenko and Politkovskaya killings left a rotten stink, that's for sure, and if all the post-Soviet oligarchs¹ finding tax-friendly haven in Mayfair and Knightsbridge are anything to go on, Vlad plays hardball in that quarter too. I doubt he can match Blair's and Dubya's old buddy, Uzbeki boss Islam Karimov - he who showers wealth on his delightful family while boiling political opponents in oil - but who cares? Karimov was an ally. Putin isn't.

Did Putin stir up East Ukraine's ethnic Russians? Almost certainly. From a point of view I'll get to shortly, he'd have been a fool not to. Did Russian secessionists blast Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 from a blue Ukrainian sky? We may never know. Did Washington orchestrate President Yanukovich's ousting last year, after he'd pulled back from closer EU ties for business as usual with Moscow? Almost certainly², while the presence or not of fascists in the new Kiev regime is a matter of ongoing and heated debate.

Such arguments will run and run. One pundit, his knowledge of modern Russia probably without equal outside the country, is Professor Cohen, quoted above. He's alarmed at what he sees as US ineptitude, and more alarmed still at the implications for the Ukraine Crisis.³ Aged seventy-six and internationally renowned, Cohen cares little for career advancement. That's just as well given a campaign of opprobrium that spans America's political mainstream. For a taster, read Cohen's interview in Salon (parts [one](#) and [two](#)) and Cathy Young's *Putin's Pal* attack in [Slate](#). Then decide who knows their stuff and who, for want of breadth or depth, trades in vitriol.⁴

Not that I agree entirely with Cohen's analysis. His approval of Reagan is misplaced in my view and he tends, post Reagan, to see folly in Washington where I see something darker. But for all practical purposes we can agree to differ on such things. They don't alter what needs to happen next. What's more, a mire of on the ground accusation and counter accusation can be bypassed in its entirety since there's a way of looking at the Ukraine that hangs neither on whether Putin is seen as hero or bully, nor on whether we believe Washington gives a damn for democracy other than as a means of rationalising a new cold war. That way is [political realism](#).

1 For an impressively documented but highly readable account of how ex KGB got super rich - to the chagrin of a Wall Street and Washington that had always intended the spoils of Cold War victory to flow westwards - on fire sales of state assets, see Chapters 11-12 of Naomi Klein's incomparable Shock Doctrine.

2 On the eve of Yanukovich's ousting Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Republican presidential hope Senator John McCain took part in Kiev demos against him. Some have asked, not unreasonably, how Washington would react were Medvedev and Sergei Lavrov to fly into New York to show solidarity with Occupy Wall Street protesters.

3 I'm alarmed too. A small but influential segment of America's ruling class may be of the view that a limited nuclear strike would be worth the risk for the lesson delivered to Moscow, and warning to Beijing. Such talk is conducted in what I'd call mirror-English - *those damn Ruskses still want to nuke us* - but whether we see Russia or America as the likelier instigator is secondary to the fact the current situation, to which many remain oblivious, is exceedingly dangerous.

4 I'm sure there *are* critiques of Stephen Cohen that rise above rottweiler level. It's just that I haven't yet found one.

The significance of political realism to the Ukraine Crisis lies in its bypassing of moral values, since politics based on assumptions of virtue usually end in tears, by way of a core understanding that all states seek to maximise power. As a spin-off I take political realism to be *self-awareness in statecraft*, and through it the ability to put oneself in the other's shoes. We're talking empathy not sympathy: this is *realpolitik*.

Political realists include Machiavelli, Hobbes, Metternich, Bismarck, Churchill, Stalin and Nixon. Carter - whose call for morality in US foreign policy proved as short lived as the 'ethical foreign policy' espoused twenty years later by New Labour's Robin Cook - was not one, and Brezhnev's Politbureau had more trouble reading him than they ever had Nixon, whom they'd understood and who in turn had understood them.

(I include Stalin but he was bad at it, as shown by his ignoring clear signs of Hitler's true intent. Days before the Barbarossa invasion, German grain ships were steaming with unseemly haste from Black Sea ports, their holds only half full of Ukrainian wheat. But Stalin chose to trust the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact over such signs, despite their tallying with reports of German tanks at borders further north. That invasion leads us to the fact that both Napoleon and Hitler struck at Russia through the Ukraine. Why wouldn't NATO? Putin, whatever else he may be, is nobody's fool, which is what he'd have to be to trust lofty sentiment - *democratic values* in today's parlance - over *realpolitik*.)

Politically realist leaders ask the question: *if we do such and such, how will they interpret it?* Cue for another expert quoted at the start. John Mearscheimer is professor of political science at the University of Chicago. Hostile both to Israel and antisemitism, [Wiki](#) has him as best known for the views that leaders seldom lie to one another, and that democratic leaders are more likely than autocratic leaders (of whom Putin is surely one) to lie to their own people.

[Mearscheimer's take](#) on the Ukraine echoes Cohen's but is less obscured by detail for the good reason he knows less. That makes his arguments easier to follow once we've grasped the framework he's working to.

Political realists - Mearscheimer as an article of faith, Cohen by the logic of his own vast disciplinary knowledge and acquaintance with the key players - may or may not wish Putin well. Where they do agree, however, is that *any* Kremlin leader would have seen NATO's enlargement as intolerable.



NATO was formed in 1949 and swiftly followed by the Warsaw Pact. Germany's reunification in 1999 brought East Germany into NATO, with no objection from the dying USSR, but Clinton's administration began to push east,⁵ admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999; Secretary of State Madelaine Albright saying, to the surprise of most Russians, that Russia would benefit and its leaders had no objection. This was [promptly repudiated](#) by Vladimir Lukin, chair of the Russian Duma's International Affairs Committee, who told reporters: "of course we are

⁵ Russia-watchers sympathetic to Putin level two charges against his predecessor. One is that all the truly eye-watering corruption was on Yeltsin's watch, with Putin struggling ever since to rebuild a traumatised middle class. (If so, this casts new light on those nouveau billionaires strutting London Town, their ill-gotten gains beyond Putin's reach.) The other, relevant here, is that Yeltsin was too trusting of 'western values'. Where political realists look to maps, resources and strategic advantage, Yeltsin took 'democracy' and 'friendly intent' at face value, never more so than in allowing the break up of Yugoslavia into NATO-friendly statelets. Yeltsin, Cohen argues, naively believed such friendly gestures would be reciprocated in due course. By contrast, even the many Russians who are wary of Putin's high-handed ways tend to back him, seeing in him a man with balls, able to restore strategic balance and national pride.

offended". Expanding the alliance would, he said, be "dangerous ... isolating Russia [and] strengthening nationalist forces in Russia."

That last points to a symbiosis, also seen in US relations with Iran, whereby hardliners in each camp strengthen the hand of those in the other. But despite Russia's strong objections and warnings, Bush maintained the course set by Clinton. In 2004 Bulgaria, Romania, the three Baltic States, Slovenia and Slovakia were admitted, with Albania's and Croatia's 2009 entry a done deal by the time Obama arrived at the White House. It takes no genius of empathy to see how this all appears to Russian eyes.



The next signal event was [Georgia 2008](#), an uncanny harbinger of the Ukraine Crisis. Both states were considering joining NATO, bringing for the first time this anti-Russian alliance to her very borders.⁶ Both had provinces - South Ossetia in Georgia; Crimea and eastern regions in Ukraine - with restless ethnic Russian majorities.⁷ To political realists (who, I repeat, regard Washington's Russia policies as ill advised where I see darker motives⁸) Putin served clear warning in Georgia of what Russia would and would not stand for. To the extent he stirred up South Ossetia and East Ukraine he was (a) pushing open doors; (b) doing as any statesman in their right mind would. We needn't guess how Washington might react in comparable circumstances. Recent history tells us exactly what it does in situations more or less threatening: Cuba 1962, Chile 1973, Grenada 1983, its backing of repression in Central America, and less successful moves against Venezuela under Chavez. But it's fun to play the guessing game so let's suppose a large bloc including the likes of Brazil, Russia, India and China, with Iran and Bolivia thrown in for good measure. Let's further suppose a Mexico and Canada openly considering joining.⁹

We really needn't lose ourselves in interminable argument over rights and wrongs in Ukraine. We have only to glance at the map to see what must happen for a nightmare to be avoided. NATO, which means Washington, has to back off. Now would be good.

Philip Roddis. May 23, 2015

⁶ Note that, besides the expanding NATO threat from the west, Turkey's membership will pose a grave peril to Russia's southern flank should the new cold war turn hot.

⁷ One *difference* is the aggravating factor of Ukraine's history of fascism. Since the thrust of this essay is that knowledge of Ukraine's messy and in any case highly contentious internal affairs is not needed to make fundamental sense of the crisis, that aspect is not explored here.

⁸ This is too big and controversial - since it runs counter to decades of western framing of the narrative - a subject to explore here but in my view the cold war was always about opening up markets to capital. Since former Soviet officials were the primary beneficiaries (see footnote 1) when the state planned economies imploded, the west in general and Washington in particular felt cheated. This analysis, for which there is much evidence, would explain why cold (for now) war is still being waged against Russia. The rationale has been part modified but the real aims are unchanged.

⁹ A factor seldom considered is the role played by EU enlargement. The irony of UKIP alarm at ceding sovereignty to Brussels, when the greater surrender has been to Washington, is not lost on the left. But with no left critique of the EU for decades, a further irony goes largely unnoticed. Who most benefits from UKIP's main recruiting sergeant, EU expansion? To the extent it weakens a formidable trade rival, Washington gains. And to the extent 'western values' are brought to Moscow's doorstep, Washington gains again.

