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Faulty Powers

Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?

Moscow's Choice

Michael McFaul

John Mearsheimer ("Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," September/October 2014) is one of the most consistent and persuasive theorists in the realist school of international relations, but his explanation of the crisis in Ukraine demonstrates the limits of realpolitik. At best, Mearsheimer's brand of realism explains only some aspects of U.S.-Russian relations over the last 30 years. And as a policy prescription, it can be irrational and dangerous—as Russian President Vladimir Putin's embrace of it demonstrates.

According to Mearsheimer, Russia has annexed Crimea and intervened in eastern Ukraine in response to NATO expansion, which he calls "the taproot of the trouble." Russia's state-controlled media have indeed pointed to the alliance's enlargement as an explanation for Putin's actions. But both Russian television coverage and Mearsheimer's essay fail to explain why Russia kept its troops out of Ukraine for the decade-plus between NATO's expansion, which began in 1999, and the actual intervention in Ukraine in 2014. It's not that Russia was too weak: it launched two wars in Chechnya that required much more military might than the Crimean annexation did.

Even more difficult for Mearsheimer to explain is the so-called reset of U.S.-Russian relations, an era of cooperation that lasted from the spring of 2009 to January 2012. Both U.S. President Barack Obama and then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to moves that they considered in the national interest of their respective countries. The two leaders signed and ratified the New START treaty, voted to support the UN Security Council's most comprehensive set of sanctions against Iran ever, and vastly expanded the supply route for U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan that travels in part through Russia. They worked together to obtain Russian membership in the World Trade Organization, created a bilateral presidential commission to promote cooperation on everything from nuclear energy to counterterrorism, and put in place a more liberal visa regime. In 2010, polls showed that over 60 percent of Russians held a positive view of the United States.

Russia has pursued both cooperation and confrontation with the United States since this century began. Mearsheimer's single variable of NATO expansion can't explain both outcomes. For the real story, one needs to look past the factor that has stayed constant and focus on what has changed: Russian politics.

SOME STRATEGIST

Although realists prefer to focus on the state as the unit of analysis, for his explanation of the Ukraine crisis, Mearsheimer looks to individual leaders and their ideologies. He describes Putin as "a first-class strategist" who is armed with the correct analytic framework—that is, Mearsheimer's. "Putin and his compatriots have been thinking and acting according

to realist dictates, whereas their Western counterparts have been adhering to liberal ideas about international politics," he writes. "The result is that the United States and its allies unknowingly provoked a major crisis over Ukraine."

By introducing leaders and their ideas into his analysis, Mearsheimer allows for the possibility that different statesmen guided by different ideologies might produce different foreign policies. Mearsheimer presumably believes that the United States and the world would be better off if U.S. leaders fully embraced his brand of realpolitik, whereas I think both would be better off if Putin and future Russian leaders embraced liberalism. But we don't have to dream about what this counterfactual might look like; we witnessed it during the Medvedev era.

In the first months of his presidency, Medvedev sounded very much like his realist mentor, Putin. He supported the Russian military intervention into Georgia and coined a strikingly realist term, "sphere of privileged interests," to assert Russia's hegemony in former Soviet territory. Obama rejected Medvedev's interpretation of realism. Meeting with Medvedev in April 2009 in London, Obama countered that the United States and Russia had many common interests, even in Russia's neighborhood.

At the time, the Obama administration was fighting desperately to keep open the U.S. military's Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan. Several weeks earlier, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev had traveled to Moscow and received a pledge for $2 billion in economic assistance, and soon thereafter he announced his intention to close the base. With Medvedev, Obama acknowledged the balance-of-power politics that the Kremlin was playing, but then asked if closing the base was truly in Russia's national interest. After all, the U.S. soldiers flying through it were headed to Afghanistan to fight terrorists whom both the United States and Russia considered enemies. Keeping the base operating, Obama reasoned, was not a violation of Russia's "sphere of privileged interests" but a win-win outcome for both Washington and Moscow.

A realist would have rejected Obama's logic and pressed forward with closing the base—as Putin eventually did, earlier this year. In the months after the Obama-Medvedev meeting in 2009, however, the Kyrgyz government—with the Kremlin's tacit support—agreed to extend the U.S. government's basing rights. Medvedev gradually embraced Obama's framework of mutually beneficial relations. The progress made during the reset came about partly due to this shift in Russian foreign policy. Medvedev became so convinced about the utility of cooperation with the United States and support for international institutions that he even agreed to abstain from voting on (instead of vetoing) the UN Security Council resolutions authorizing the use of force against Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011—hardly behavior consistent with realism. After his final meeting with Obama in his capacity as Russian president, in South Korea in March 2012, Medvedev told the press that the reset was "an extremely useful exercise." "We probably enjoyed the best level of relations between the United States and Russia during those three years than ever during the previous decades," he said.

What he did not mention was NATO expansion. In fact, in the five years that I served in the Obama administration, I

attended almost every meeting Obama held with Putin and Medvedev, and for three of those years, while working at the White House, I listened in on every phone conversation, and I cannot remember NATO expansion ever coming up. Even months before Putin's annexation of Crimea, I cannot recall a single major statement from a senior Russian official warning about the dangerous consequences of NATO expansion. The reason is simple: for the previous several years, NATO was not expanding eastward.

Other realist critics of U.S. policy make a similar mistake when they argue that the Obama administration showed weakness toward the Kremlin, inviting Putin to take advantage of it. Like Mearsheimer's analysis, this argument is fuzzy on causation. It's not clear, for example, how refusing to sign the New START treaty or declining to press Russia to vote for sanctions against Iran would have reduced the odds that Russia would have invaded Ukraine. Moreover, after 2012, Obama changed course and pursued a more confrontational approach in reaction to Putin's behavior. He abandoned missile defense talks, signed no new arms control treaties, levied sanctions against Russian human rights offenders, and canceled the summit with Putin scheduled for September 2013. Going further than what President George W. Bush did after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, Obama worked with U.S. allies to impose sanctions on individual Russian leaders and companies. He shored up NATO's security commitments, provided assistance to Ukraine, and framed the West's response to Russia's aggression as necessary to preserve international norms and defend democratic values.

These moves can hardly be described as weak or unrealistic. Nonetheless, they failed to deter Russia's recent aggression, just as all U.S. presidents since 1956 have failed to deter Russian interventions in eastern Europe and Afghanistan. Realists who criticize Obama for failing to stand up to Putin must make a persuasive argument about how a different policy could have led to a different outcome. There is only one alternative policy that could have plausibly given Russia pause: granting NATO membership to Ukraine many years ago. But making that counterfactual convincing requires revising a lot of history. For the last several years, neither the Ukrainian government nor NATO members wanted Kiev to join the alliance anytime soon. Even before Viktor Yanukovych's election as president in 2010, Ukrainian leaders were not pressing for membership, and nor were the Ukrainian people.

THE REAL STORY

Russian foreign policy did not grow more aggressive in response to U.S. policies; it changed as a result of Russian internal political dynamics. The shift began when Putin and his regime came under attack for the first time ever. After Putin announced that he would run for a third presidential term, Russia held parliamentary elections in December 2011 that were just as fraudulent as previous elections. But this time, new technologies and social media—including smartphones with video cameras, Twitter, Facebook, and the Russian social network VKontakte—helped expose the government's wrongdoing and turn out protests on a scale not seen since the final months of the Soviet Union. Disapproval of voter fraud quickly morphed into

discontent with Putin's return to the Kremlin. Some opposition leaders even called for revolutionary change.

Putin despised the protesters for their ingratitude. In his view, he had made them rich. How could they turn on him now? But he also feared them, especially in the wake of the "color revolutions" in eastern Europe (especially the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine) and the Arab Spring. In an effort to mobilize his electoral base and discredit the opposition, Putin recast the United States as an enemy. Suddenly, state-controlled media were portraying the United States as fomenting unrest inside Russia. The Russian press accused me of being an agent sent by Obama to lead another color revolution. U.S. policy toward Russia hardly shifted at all between the parliamentary vote and Putin's reelection. Yet by the time Putin was inaugurated, in May 2012, even a casual observer of Putin's speeches or Russian television would have thought that the Cold War was back on.

Some observers of Russian politics hoped that this onslaught of anti-American propaganda would subside after the Russian presidential election was over. Many—including me—assumed that the Medvedev-Putin job swap would produce only minor changes in Russia's foreign policy, since Putin had remained the paramount decision-maker when Medvedev was president. But over time, it became clear that Putin conceived of Russia's national interest differently from how Medvedev did. Unlike Medvedev, Putin tended to frame competition with the United States in zero-sum terms. To sustain his legitimacy at home, Putin continued to need the United States as an adversary. He also genuinely believed that the United States represented a sinister force in world affairs.

Then came the upheaval in Ukraine. In November 2013, Ukrainians took to the streets after Yanukovych declined to sign an association agreement with the EU. The U.S. government played no role in sparking the protests, but it did prod both Yanukovych and opposition leaders to agree to a transitional plan, which both sides signed on February 21, 2014. Washington also had nothing to do with Yanukovych's surprising decision to flee Ukraine the next day.

Putin interpreted these events differently, blaming the United States for the demonstrations, the failure of the February 21 agreement, and the subsequent change of government, which he called a coup. Putin's ideology compelled him to frame these events as a struggle between the United States and Russia. Constrained by this analytic framework, he reacted unilaterally in a way that he believed tilted the balance of power in his favor, annexing Crimea and supporting armed mercenaries in eastern Ukraine. He was not reacting to NATO's long-ago expansion.

PUTIN'S LOSS

It is too early to judge whether Putin's particular brand of realism is rational in terms of Russia's national interest. So far, however, the gains have been limited. His allegedly pragmatic and realist actions in Ukraine have only served to forge a stronger, more unified, and more pro-Western identity among Ukrainians. They have guaranteed that Ukraine will never join his most prized project, the planned Eurasian Economic Union, and have instead pushed the

country toward the EU. Meanwhile, Belarus and Kazakhstan have turned into nervous, less enthusiastic partners in the Eurasian Economic Union. At the same time, Putin has strengthened NATO, weakened the Russian economy, and undermined Moscow's international reputation as a champion of sovereignty and noninterference.

This crisis is not about Russia, NATO, and realism but about Putin and his unconstrained, erratic adventurism. Whether you label its approach realist or liberal, the challenge for the West is how to deal with such behavior forcefully enough to block it but prudently enough to keep matters from escalating dramatically.

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How the West Has Won

Stephen Sestanovich

The United States has handled its relations with Russia so badly, John Mearsheimer argues, that it, not Vladimir Putin, should be held responsible for the crisis in Ukraine. By trying to get Ukraine into NATO, he writes, Western governments challenged Russia's core security interests. The Kremlin was bound to push back. Meanwhile, silly idealism kept U.S. and European leaders from recognizing the trouble they were creating.

To see what's wrong with this critique, one can start by comparing it with Mearsheimer's 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent." Back then, Mearsheimer was already worrying about a war between Russia and Ukraine, which he said would be "a disaster." But he did not finger U.S. policy as the source of the problem. "Russia," Mearsheimer wrote, "has dominated an unwilling and angry Ukraine for more than two centuries, and has attempted to crush Ukraine's sense of self-identity." Given this history, creating a stable relationship between the two countries was bound to be hard. "Hypernationalism," Mearsheimer feared, would make the situation even more unmanageable. In 1993, his assessment of the situation (if not his policy prescriptions) was correct. It should serve as a reminder that today's aggressive Russian policy was in place long before the mistaken Western policies that Mearsheimer says explain it.

The prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine may, of course, have made a bad problem much worse. In 2008, Mearsheimer points out, NATO declared that Ukraine would at some point join the alliance. But he does not acknowledge what happened next. For more than half a decade, nearly all Ukrainian politicians—not just pro-Russian ones such as Viktor Yanukovych—steered clear of the issue. They recognized that NATO membership lacked strong domestic support and, if mishandled, could threaten national unity. NATO itself put the matter aside. Admitting Ukraine remained a pet project for a few members of the alliance, but most were opposed, many of them implacably so. The Obama administration, for its part, paid no

attention to the subject, and the issue virtually disappeared.

That changed, Mearsheimer claims, with the fall of Yanukovych. Mearsheimer endorses Putin's label of that event as a "coup": a Western-supported provocation that reignited Moscow's fears and justified an aggressive policy. But the facts do not support this interpretation. Few elected presidents have lost their legitimacy as quickly and fully as Yanukovych did. At every step during the "Euromaidan" protests, he kept the confrontation going by resorting to force. In February 2014, after police killed scores of demonstrators in downtown Kiev, the whole country turned against him, effectively ending his political career. Parliament removed him by a unanimous vote, in which every deputy of his own party participated. This is not what anyone has ever meant by the word "coup."

Yanukovych's fall was a historic event, but it did not, despite Russian claims, revive Ukraine's candidacy for NATO membership. Ukrainian politicians and officials said again and again that this issue was not on the agenda. Nor was the large Russian naval base in Crimea at risk, no matter the feverish charges of Russian commentators. That Putin picked up this argument—and accused "fascists" of having taken over Ukraine—had less to do with Russia's national security than his desire to rebound from political humiliation. Moscow had publicly urged Yanukovych to crack down hard on the protesters. When the Ukrainian leader obliged, his presidency collapsed, and with it Russia's entire Ukraine policy. Putin's seizure of Crimea was first and foremost an attempt to recover from his own egregious mistakes.

This sorry record makes it hard to credit Mearsheimer's description of Putin as "a first-class strategist." Yes, Russian aggression boosted Putin's poll numbers. But success in Crimea was followed by a series of gross miscalculations—about the extent of separatist support in eastern Ukraine, the capacities of the Ukrainian military, the possibility of keeping Russian interference hidden, the West's ability to agree on sanctions, and the reaction of European leaders who had once sympathized with Russia. And all of this for what? Putin cultivates a mystique of cool, KGB professionalism, and the image has often served him well. But the Ukraine crisis has revealed a different style of decision-making. Putin made impulsive decisions that subordinated Russia's national interest to his own personal political motives. He has not acted like a sober realist.

CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE

Even if Putin is to blame for the current crisis, it might still be possible to find fault with U.S. policy of the past two decades. There is, after all, no doubt that Russians resented NATO enlargement and their country's diminished international standing after the Cold War. For Mearsheimer, the West needlessly stoked this resentment. As he sees it, once the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia was simply too inconsequential to be worth containing, since it was "a declining great power with an aging population and a one-dimensional economy." Today, he calls its army "mediocre." Enlarging NATO was a solution to a problem that didn't exist.

This would be a compelling case but for one thing: in the early 1990s, Mearsheimer himself saw the post–

Cold War world in much more menacing terms. Back then, no one knew what demons would be let loose by the end of East-West competition. Germany, just reunified, might once more go the way of militarism. Yugoslavia was undergoing a bloody breakup. Unscrupulous political leaders had been able to revive eastern Europe's many ancient hatreds. Add to this the risk that Russia itself, once it regained its strength, might threaten the independence of its neighbors, and it was not hard to imagine a Europe of severe turbulence.

Mearsheimer no longer mentions these problems, but at the time, he saw them for what they were. In a much-read 1990 *Atlantic Monthly* article, he predicted that we would all soon "miss the Cold War." To preserve the peace, he even proposed a set of extreme countermeasures, such as letting Moscow keep its large army in central Europe and encouraging Germany and Ukraine to acquire nuclear weapons. Today, these initiatives seem outlandish and otherworldly, to say the least, but the problems they aimed to solve were not imaginary.

Mearsheimer has long ridiculed the idea that, as he describes in his recent *Foreign Affairs* article, "Europe can be kept whole and free on the basis of such liberal principles as the rule of law, economic interdependence, and democracy." In his ire, however, he misses something fundamental. The goals of Western policy have been just as visionary and idealistic as he says, but the means employed to achieve them—at least by U.S. leaders, if not always by their European counterparts—have been far more traditional. They have been the medicine that a realist doctor would have prescribed.

The United States has defended its stake in a stable post–Cold War European order not through airy appeals to shared values but through the regular and effective use of old-fashioned American power. President George H. W. Bush, intending to limit the independence of German foreign policy, demanded a reunification deal that kept Germany within NATO. President Bill Clinton, believing that the Balkan wars of the 1990s were undermining U.S. power and credibility in Europe, twice used military force to stop Serbia under President Slobodan Milosevic. That President George W. Bush continued to take new eastern European democracies into NATO did not mean Washington believed that democracy alone would sustain the peace. It meant Washington believed that an enduring liberal order needed the anchor of U.S. commitment. (You might even say it meant U.S. policymakers did not in fact believe that democracy alone assures peace.)

No one, least of all Mearsheimer, should be surprised to discover that power calculations undergirded U.S. foreign policy. In his 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, he explained that politicians and policymakers in liberal democratic states often justify hardheaded actions in highfalutin language. Now, however, he takes everything that political leaders say—whether Obama's pieties or Putin's lies—at face value.

The resulting analysis makes it much harder to see whose policies are working, and what to do next. Mearsheimer seems to take it for granted that Putin's challenge proves the complete failure of U.S. strategy. But the mere fact that Russia has a leader bent on conquest is not by itself an indictment of the United States. Putin is certainly not the first

such Russian leader, and he may not be the last. Nor are Ukraine's current agonies, as acute and unnecessary as they are, the best way to measure what NATO enlargement has accomplished. Two decades of U.S. policy have both stabilized Europe and narrowed the scope of the current crisis. Had NATO not grown to its present size and borders, Russia's conflict with Ukraine would be far more dangerous than what is occurring today. Western leaders would be in a state of near panic as they tried to figure out, in the middle of a confrontation, which eastern European countries deserved security guarantees and which did not. At a moment of sudden tension, they would be obliged to improvise. Finding the right middle ground between recklessness and acquiescence would be a matter of guesswork, with unpredictable life-and-death results.

CALMING EUROPE

The addition of so many new NATO members in recent years does mean that the alliance needs to think carefully about how to implement the commitments it has made. But the job of promoting security in eastern Europe has been made much easier because a basic strategic framework is already in place. Ironically, even Putin, for all his complaining, benefits. Despite the rude jolt of his aggression against Ukraine, Western governments are less frightened than they would be without the comfort of a larger NATO and the relatively stable European order that U.S. policy has created. Putin faces less pushback today in part because the United States succeeded in solving the problems of the 1990s.

In proposing to turn Ukraine into "a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia," Mearsheimer offers a solution to the current crisis that ignores its real origins and may even make it worse. He is on solid enough ground when he reminds readers that Ukraine has no inherent "right" to join NATO. But good strategy doesn't look only at rights and wrongs; it looks at consequences. The best reason not to push for Ukraine's entry into NATO has always been to avoid tearing the country apart. By forcing Ukraine to repudiate a mere free-trade agreement with Europe last fall, Putin brought on the most extreme turmoil Ukraine has seen in 20 years of independence. Now that the world has seen the results of this little experiment, why should anyone think that declaring Ukraine a permanent gray area of international politics would calm the country down?

Ukraine has not been—and is not—ready for NATO membership. Only Putin has forced this issue onto the agenda. The immediate goal of prudent statesmen should be to figure out a way to hold Ukraine together. If the great powers impose or foreclose its future, they may deepen its present turmoil. The best way to avoid an escalation of radical political confrontation inside Ukraine is not to resolve the big geopolitical questions but to defer them.

Mearsheimer's real subject is, of course, not Ukraine but U.S. foreign policy. After the exertions of the past decade, some retrenchment was inevitable. That does not mean, however, that Washington was wrong to choose an ambitious and activist policy in Europe after the Cold War, or that it should not move toward a more ambitious and activist one now. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer wrote that it was "misguided" for a state to "pass up an

opportunity to be the hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive." He may have forgotten his own advice, but Washington, in its confused and halting way, has usually followed it. Even today, the West is better off because it did.

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Mearsheimer Replies

It is not surprising that Michael McFaul and Stephen Sestanovich disagree with my account of what caused the Ukraine crisis. Both the policies they helped frame and execute while in the U.S. government and their responses to my article exemplify the liberal foreign policy consensus that helped cause the crisis in the first place. Accordingly, they challenge my claims about the West's role, mostly by suggesting that I regard NATO expansion as the sole cause of the crisis. McFaul, for example, maintains that my "single variable of NATO expansion" cannot explain the ebb and flow of recent U.S.-Russian relations. Both also claim that the alliance's growth was a nonissue after 2008.

But McFaul and Sestanovich misrepresent my core argument. I did call NATO expansion "the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West." Yet I also emphasized that the strategy had two other "critical elements": EU expansion and democracy promotion. My essay makes clear that NATO enlargement did not directly cause the crisis, which began in November 2013 and continues to this day. It was EU expansion coupled with the February 22, 2014, coup that ignited the fire. Still, what I called "the West's triple package of policies," which included making Ukraine part of NATO, provided fuel for it.

The notion that the issue of NATO membership for Ukraine, as Sestanovich puts it, "virtually disappeared" after 2008 is also false. No Western leader publicly questioned the alliance's 2008 declaration that Georgia and Ukraine "will become members of NATO." Sestanovich downplays that push, writing, "Admitting Ukraine remained a pet project for a few members of the alliance, but most were opposed, many of them implacably so." What he does not say, however, is that the United States was one of those members backing that pet project, and Washington still wields enormous influence within the alliance. And even if some members were opposed to bringing in Ukraine, Moscow could not count on the naysayers to prevail forever.

Furthermore, the association agreement that the EU was pushing Ukraine to sign in 2013 was not just "a mere free-trade agreement," as Sestanovich calls it; it also had an important security dimension. The document proposed that all parties "promote gradual convergence on foreign and security matters with the aim of Ukraine's ever-deeper involvement in the European security area" and called for "taking full and timely advantage of all diplomatic and military channels between the Parties." This certainly sounds like a backdoor to NATO membership, and no prudent

Russian leader would interpret it any other way. McFaul and Sestanovich may believe that expanding NATO was genuinely off the table after 2008, but that is not how Vladimir Putin and his colleagues saw it.

To argue that Russia's reaction to NATO expansion was based on "resentment," as Sestanovich does, is to trivialize the country's motives. Fear is at the root of Russia's opposition to the prospect of Ukraine becoming a Western bastion on its border. Great powers always worry about the balance of power in their neighborhoods and push back when other great powers march up to their doorsteps. This is why the United States adopted the Monroe Doctrine in the early nineteenth century and why it has repeatedly used military force and covert action to shape political events in the Western Hemisphere. When the Soviet Union placed missiles in Cuba in 1962, U.S. President John F. Kennedy, risking a nuclear war, insisted that they be removed. Security fears, not resentment, drove his conduct.

The same logic applies to Russia. As its leaders have made clear on countless occasions, they will not tolerate Ukraine's entry into NATO. That outcome scares them, as it would scare anyone in Russia's shoes, and fearful great powers often pursue aggressive policies. The failure to understand that Russian thinking about NATO enlargement was motivated by fear—a misreading McFaul and Sestanovich still embrace—helped precipitate the present crisis.

COOPERATION AND CONFLICT

McFaul claims that I cannot explain the periods of cooperation and confrontation between Russia and the West whereas he has a compelling explanation for both. This criticism follows from his claim that I have a monocausal argument based on NATO expansion and that this single factor "can't explain both outcomes." But I never argued that NATO expansion, which began in the late 1990s, led to a state of constant crisis. Indeed, I noted that Russia has cooperated with the West on a number of important issues—Afghanistan, Iran, Syria—but that Western policies were making it increasingly difficult to sustain those good relations. The actual crisis, of course, did not erupt until the February 22, 2014, coup.

Two points are in order regarding the coup itself. First, Sestanovich is wrong to suggest that Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych was removed from office legitimately. In a city racked by violence between protesters and government forces, on February 21 a deal was struck with Yanukovych to hold new elections that would surely have removed him from power. But many of the protesters opposed the agreement, insisting that Yanukovych step down immediately. On February 22, armed elements of the opposition, including some fascists, occupied parliament and the main presidential offices. That same day, the legislature held a vote to oust Yanukovych that did not satisfy the Ukrainian constitution's requirements for impeachment. No wonder he fled the country, fearing for his life.

Second, McFaul implies that Washington had nothing to do with the coup. "The U.S. government played no role in sparking the protests," he writes, "but it did prod both Yanukovych and opposition leaders to agree to a transitional plan." McFaul fails to mention the considerable evidence I presented showing that the

United States was encouraging the opposition to Yanukovych before and during the protests. Such actions included the National Endowment for Democracy's decision to ramp up support for anti-Yanukovych groups and the active participation of top U.S. officials (such as Victoria Nuland, the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs) in the public protests in Kiev.

These events alarmed Putin, not only because they threatened his relations with Ukraine but also because he may well have thought that the Obama administration was bent on overthrowing him, too. As I noted in my essay, Carl Gershman, the president of the National Endowment for Democracy, said in September 2013 that "Ukraine's choice to join Europe" would promote Russian democracy and might eventually topple Putin from power. And when McFaul was the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, he openly promoted democracy in Russia, behavior that led the Russian press to accuse him of, in his words, "being an agent sent by Obama to lead another color revolution." Such fears may have been exaggerated, but imagine how U.S. leaders would react if representatives of a powerful foreign country were trying to alter the United States' political order.

McFaul argues that differences between individual leaders explain Russia's alternating policies of cooperation and confrontation: everything is hunky-dory when Dmitry Medvedev is president, but trouble comes when Putin takes charge. The problem with this argument is that these two leaders hardly disagree about Russian foreign policy, which is why Putin is widely regarded as Medvedev's "realist mentor," to use McFaul's words. Medvedev was president when Russia went to war against Georgia in 2008, and he has fully supported Putin's actions over Ukraine this year. In September, he went so far as to criticize Putin for not responding more forcefully to Western sanctions on Russia. And even during the "reset," Medvedev complained bitterly about NATO's "endless enlargement," as he put it in a 2010 interview.

There is a better explanation for Russia's oscillating relations with the West. When the United States and its allies take note of Moscow's concerns, as they did during the early years of the reset, crises are averted and Russia cooperates on matters of mutual concern. When the West ignores Moscow's interests, as it did in the lead-up to the Ukraine crisis, confrontation reigns. Putin openly welcomed the reset, telling Obama in July 2009, "With you, we link all our hopes for the furtherance of relations between our two countries." And two months later, when Obama abandoned plans to put missile defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland, Putin praised the decision, saying, "I very much hope that this very right and brave decision will be followed by others." It is unsurprising that when Putin returned to the presidency in May 2012, McFaul, then U.S. ambassador to Russia, said that he expected the reset to continue. In short, Medvedev's replacement by Putin was not the watershed event McFaul portrays it as—and had Medvedev remained president, he would probably have reacted to events in Ukraine the same way Putin has.

Sestanovich claims that "today's aggressive Russian policy was in place" in the early 1990s and that the U.S. response was grounded in "power calculations." But the evidence suggests that NATO

enlargement does not represent a realist policy. Russia was in no position to take the offensive in the 1990s, and although its economy and military improved somewhat in the next decade, hardly anyone in the West thought it was seriously at risk of invading its neighbors—especially Ukraine—before the February 22 coup. Not surprisingly, U.S. leaders rarely invoked the threat of Russian aggression to justify expanding NATO; instead, they emphasized the benefits of expanding the zone of democratic peace eastward.

Indeed, although Sestanovich now maintains that "Russia has a leader bent on conquest," there is no evidence that this was his view before the current crisis. For example, in an interview about the ongoing protests in Ukraine published on December 4, 2013—roughly three months before Russia took Crimea—he gave no indication that he thought Putin was set to invade Ukraine (or any other country) or that NATO expansion was necessary to contain Russia. On the contrary, when discussing the alliance's moves eastward with a Voice of America reporter in 2004, Sestanovich suggested that Russian objections were little more than political posturing. "Russians probably feel that they need to object to this in order to indicate that they are a serious country that cannot be pushed around," he said.

Sestanovich's views reflected the liberal consensus at the time, which saw NATO expansion as benign. "Most analysts agree the enlargement of NATO and the EU should not pose a long-term threat to Russian interests," wrote that same Voice of America reporter, summarizing the positions of the various experts he had interviewed. "They point out that having stable and secure neighbors may increase stability and prosperity in Russia, as well as help overcome old Cold War fears and encourage former Soviet satellites to engage Russia in a more positive, cooperative way."

HOW IT ENDS

McFaul and Sestanovich maintain that Putin's behavior over Ukraine has been wrong-headed and counterproductive. It is too soon to know how this saga will end, but there is good reason to think that Putin will achieve his primary aim—preventing Ukraine from becoming a Western bulwark. If so, he wins, although there is no question that Russia will have paid a steep price in the process.

The real losers, however, will be the Ukrainian people. Sestanovich writes that "the best reason not to push for Ukraine's entry into NATO has always been to avoid tearing the country apart." He is correct. But the policies he and McFaul support have done just that.