

Rebuilding the Obama-Putin Trust

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Heading into the last quarter of his presidency, Barack Obama must decide whether he will let the neocons keep pulling his strings or finally break loose and pursue a realistic foreign policy seeking practical solutions to world problems, including the crisis with Russia over Ukraine, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

The year 2015 will surely mark a watershed in relations between the United States and Russia, one way or the other. However, whether tensions increase – to war-by-proxy in Ukraine or an even wider war – or whether they subside depends mostly on President Barack Obama.

Key to answering this question is a second one: Is Obama smart enough and strong enough to rein in Secretary of State John Kerry, the neocons and “liberal interventionists” running the State Department and to stand up to the chicken hawks in Congress, most of whom feel free to flirt with war because they know nothing of it.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, by contrast, experienced the effects of war at an early age. He was born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) eight years after the vicious siege by the German army ended. Michael Walzer, in his *War Against Civilians*, notes, “More people died in the 900-day siege of Leningrad than in the infernos of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki taken together.”

Putin’s elder brother Viktor died during the siege. The experience of Putin’s youth is, of course, embedded in his consciousness. This may help to account for why he tends to be short on the kind of daredevil bluster regularly heard from senior Western officials these days – many of whom are ignorant both of suffering from war and the complicated history of Ukraine.

This time last year, few Americans could point out Ukraine on a map. And malnourished as

they are on “mainstream media,” most have little idea of its internal political tensions, a schism between a western Ukraine oriented toward Europe and an eastern Ukraine with strong ties to Russia.

Let’s start with a brief mention of the most salient points of this history before addressing its recent detritus — and making a few recommendations as the New Year begins. Less than three weeks after the Berlin Wall fell on Nov. 9, 1989, President George H.W. Bush invited Kremlin leader Mikhail Gorbachev to a summit in Malta where they cut an historic deal: Moscow would refrain from using force to re-impose control over Eastern Europe; Washington would not “take advantage” of the upheaval and uncertainty there.

That deal was fleshed out just two months later, when Bush’s Secretary of State James Baker persuaded Gorbachev to swallow the bitter pill of a reunited Germany in NATO in return for a promise that NATO would not “leapfrog” eastward over Germany. Former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Jack Matlock, who was witness to all this, told me in an email, “I don’t see how anybody could view the subsequent expansion of NATO as anything but ‘taking advantage.’”

This consummate diplomat, who took part in the critical bilateral talks in early 1990, added that the mutual pledge was not set down in writing. Nonetheless, reneging on a promise – written or not – can put a significant dent in trust.

Why No Written Deal

Last year I asked Matlock and also Viktor Borisovich Kuvaldin, one of Gorbachev’s advisers from 1989 to 1991, why the Baker-Gorbachev understanding was not committed to paper. Matlock replied:

“There was no agreement then. Both Baker and West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher were putting forth ideas for Gorbachev to consider. He did not give an answer but just said he would think about them. ... The formal agreements had to involve others, and they did, in the two-plus-four agreement, which was concluded only in late 1990.”

Fair enough.

In an email to me last fall, Kuvaldin corroborated what Matlock told me. But he led off by pointing out “the pledge of no eastward expansion of NATO was made to Gorbachev on consecutive days when he met first with Baker and then with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl [on Feb. 9 and 10, 1990].” As to why this pledge was not written down, Kuvaldin explained:

“Such a request would have sounded a little bit strange at that time. The Warsaw Pact was alive; Soviet military personnel were stationed all over central Europe; and NATO had nowhere to go. At the beginning of February 1990 hardly anybody could foresee the turn of events in the 1990s.”

Again, fair enough. But when I met Kuvaldin a few months earlier in Moscow and asked him out of the blue why there is no record of the promises given to his boss Gorbachev, his reply was more spontaneous – and visceral. He tilted his head, looked me straight in the eye, and said, “We trusted you.”

Written down or not, it was a matter of trust – and of not “taking advantage.” Kuvaldin’s boss Gorbachev opted to trust not only the U.S. Secretary of State, but also the West German government in Bonn. According to a report in *Der Spiegel* quoting West German foreign ministry documents released just five years ago:

“On Feb. 10, 1990, between 4 and 6:30 p.m., Genscher spoke with [Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard] Shevardnadze. And, according to the German record of the conversation, Genscher said: ‘We are aware that NATO membership for a unified Germany raises complicated questions. For us, however, one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east.’ And because the conversation revolved mainly around East Germany, Genscher added explicitly: ‘As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned, this also applies in general.’”

NATO’s Growth Spurt

Some of us – though a distinct minority – know the rest of the story. Generally overlooked in Western media, it nevertheless sets the historical stage as background for the upheaval in Ukraine last year. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – and the break-up of the Warsaw Pact – Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2004. Albania and Croatia joined in 2009. And the Kremlin’s leaders could do little more than look on impotently – and seethe.

One can hardly fault those countries, most of which had lots of painful experience at Soviet hands. It is no mystery why they would want to crowd under the NATO umbrella against any foul weather coming from the East. But, as George Kennan and others noted at the time, it was a regrettable lack of imagination and statesmanship that no serious alternatives were devised to address the concerns of countries to the east of Germany other than membership in NATO.

The more so, inasmuch as there were so few teeth left, at the time, in the mouth of the Russian bear. And – not least of all – a promise is a promise.

As NATO expansion drew in countries closer to Russia’s borders, the Kremlin drew a red line when, despite very strong warnings from Moscow, an April 3, 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest declared: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” Both countries, former Soviet states, press up upon Russia’s soft southern underbelly.

Often forgotten – in the West, but not in Russia – is the impulsive reaction this NATO statement gave rise to on the part of Georgia’s then-President Mikheil Saakashvili, who felt his oats even before the NATO umbrella could be opened. Less than five months after Georgia was put in queue for NATO membership, Saakashvili ordered Georgian forces to attack the city of Tskhinvali in South Ossetia. No one should have been surprised when Russia retaliated sharply, giving Georgian forces a very bloody nose in battles that lasted just five days.

Ultimately, Saakashvili’s cheerleaders of the George W. Bush administration and then-Republican presidential candidate John McCain, who had been egging Saakashvili on, were powerless to protect him. Instead of drawing appropriate lessons from this failed experiment, however, the neocons running the foreign policy of Bush – and remaining inside

the Obama administration – set their sights on Ukraine.

One Regime Change Too Many

It is becoming harder to hide the truth that Washington's ultimate objective to satisfy Ukraine's "Western aspirations" and incorporate it, ultimately, into NATO was what led the U.S. to mount the coup of Feb. 22, 2014, in Kiev. While it may be true that, as is said, revolutions "will not be televised," coups d'état can be YouTubed.

And three weeks *before* the putsch in Kiev, U.S. State Department planning to orchestrate the removal of the Ukraine's duly elected President Viktor Yanukovych and select new leaders for Ukraine was placed – chapter and verse – on YouTube in the form of a four-minute intercepted telephone conversation between Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and the yes-ma'am U.S. Ambassador in Kiev, Geoffrey Pyatt.

[Hearing](#) is believing. And for those in a hurry, here is a very short transcribed excerpt:

Nuland: What do you think?

Pyatt: I think we're in play. The Klitschko [Vitaly Klitschko, one of three main opposition leaders] piece is obviously the complicated electron here. ... I think that's the next phone call you want to set up, is exactly the one you made to Yats [Arseniy Yatseniuk, another opposition leader]. And I'm glad you sort of put him on the spot on where he fits in this scenario. And I'm very glad that he said what he said in response.

Nuland: Good. I don't think Klitsch should go into the government. I don't think it's necessary, I don't think it's a good idea.

Pyatt: Yeah. I guess ... just let him stay out and do his political homework and stuff. ... We want to keep the moderate democrats together. The problem is going to be Tyahnybok [Oleh Tyahnybok, the other main opposition leader, head of the far-right Svoboda party] and his guys ...

Nuland: [Breaks in] I think Yats is the guy who's got the economic experience, the governing experience. He's the ... what he needs is Klitsch and Tyahnybok on the outside. He needs to be talking to them four times a week, you know. ...

And so, surprise, surprise: "Yats" turned out to be Nuland's guy just three weeks later, being named prime minister right after the putsch on Feb. 22. And he still is. Talk about luck!

However transparent the dark arts of the "Maidan Marionettes" (the title Russian translators gave the images accompanying their version of the conversation on YouTube), these particular heroics are rarely mentioned in "mainstream" U.S. media (MSM). Instead, pride of place is given to Moscow's "aggression" in annexing Crimea, a move that followed Crimea's voters overwhelmingly choosing to bail out on the coup-imposed regime in Kiev and seek to rejoin Russia.

Seeing No Nazis

In the major U.S. media, the violent coup on Feb. 22 – spearheaded by well-organized neo-Nazi militias who killed police and seized government buildings – was whitewashed from

what the American people got to see and hear. In the preferred U.S. narrative, Yanukovych and his officials simply decided to leave town because of the moral force from the white-hatted peaceful protesters in the Maidan.

So it came as a welcome surprise when an Establishment notable like George Friedman, during a Dec. 19 [interview](#) with the Russian magazine Kommersant, described the February overthrow of the Ukrainian government as “the most blatant coup in history.” Friedman is head of STRATFOR, a think tank often described as a “shadow CIA.”

However, in the mainstream U.S. media’s narrative – as well as others like the BBC where I have had personal experience with the ticklish issue of Ukraine – the story of the Ukraine crisis starts with the annexation of Crimea, which is sometimes termed a Russian “invasion” although Russian troops were already stationed inside Crimea at the Russian naval base at Sevastopol. In the MSM, there is “just not enough time, regrettably” to mention NATO’s eastward expansion or even the coup in Kiev.

The other favored part of the MSM’s narrative is that Putin instigated the Ukraine crisis because he was eager to seize back land lost in the break-up of the Soviet Union. But there is not one scintilla of evidence that the Russians would have taken back Crimea, were it not for the coup engineered by Nuland and implemented by various thugs including openly fascist groups waving banners with Nazi symbols.

Years ago, Nuland fell in with some very seedy companions. The list is long; suffice it to mention here that she served as Principal Deputy National Security Advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney’s in his shadow national security council during the “dark-side” years from 2003 to 2005.

There Nuland reportedly worked on “democracy promotion” in Iraq and did such a terrific job at it that she was promoted, under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to State Department spokesperson and then to Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, giving her the Ukraine account. Nuland is also married to neocon theorist Robert Kagan, whose Project for the New American Century pushed for the invasion of Iraq as early as 1998. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Obama’s True Foreign Policy ‘Weakness.’](#)”]

By December 2013, Nuland was so confident of her control over U.S. policy toward Ukraine that she publicly reminded Ukrainian business leaders that, to help Ukraine achieve “its European aspirations, we have invested more than \$5 billion.” She even waded into the Maidan protests to pass out cookies and urge the demonstrators on.

In keeping her in the State Department and promoting her, Obama and his two secretaries of state Hillary Clinton and John Kerry created a human bridge to the neocons’ dark-side years. Nuland also seems to have infected impressionable Obama administration officials with the kind approach to reality [attributed](#) by author Ron Suskind to one senior Bush administration official: “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”

This may be the nostrum used by Nuland and Kerry to whom Obama has mostly deferred to run U.S. policy vis-à-vis Russia. Ambassador Matlock will find it small solace, but it may help him understand what seems to be going on in policy toward Ukraine.

Writing early last year on the burgeoning crisis there, Matlock said: “I cannot understand how he [Obama] could fail to recognize that confronting President Putin publicly on an issue

that is so central to Russian national pride and honor, not only tends to have the opposite effect on the issue at hand, but actually strengthens tendencies in Russia that we should wish to discourage. It is as if he, along with his advisers, is living in some alternate ideological and psychological universe.”

Putin: Little Tolerance for Other Reality

Before finishing with a few recommendations, let’s apply the proven tools of media analysis to see if we can discern how Russian President Putin is reacting to all this. (Hint: He is not going to yield to pressure on the issue of Ukraine.)

At a press conference ten days after the coup in Kiev, Putin complained about “our Western partners” continuing to interfere in Ukraine. “I sometimes get the feeling,” he said, “that somewhere across that huge puddle, in America, people sit in a lab and conduct experiments, as if with rats, without actually understanding the consequences of what they are doing. Why do they need to do this?”

And in a speech two weeks later, Putin said:

“Our colleagues in the West ... have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed before us an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO’s expansion to the east, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders. ... It happened with the deployment of a missile defense system. ...

“They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner. ... But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line. ... If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. ... Today, it is imperative to end this hysteria and refute the rhetoric of the cold war. ... Russia has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected.”

On Sept. 8, 2013, when Secretary Kerry [swore](#) Nuland in as Assistant Secretary of State, he gushed over “Toria’s” accomplishments, with a panegyric fully deserving of the adjective fulsome. It was a huge hint that Kerry would give her free rein in crafting policy toward Russia, Ukraine, et al.

Fortunately, Nuland was not able to sabotage the behind-the-scenes dialogue between Obama and Putin that enabled Putin to dissuade Obama from attacking Syria in September 2013 by convincing him the Syrians were about to agree to destroy all their chemical weapons. Obama had cut Kerry out of those sensitive talks, but left on his own Kerry continued to try to drum up international support for military action against Syria.

That Kerry was blindsided by the extraordinary agreement worked out by Obama and Putin with Syria, became embarrassingly obvious when Kerry, at a press conference in London on Sept. 9, 2013, [dismissed](#) any likelihood that Syria would ever agree to let its chemical arsenal be destroyed. Later that same day the agreement to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons was announced.

Sadly, to some significant degree, the U.S. mischief in Ukraine can be regarded as payback from Kerry, his Senate buddy John McCain, and of course Nuland for Russia’s dashing their hopes for a major U.S. military bombing campaign against the Syrian government.

Putin: Kerry “Knows He Is Lying”

It is rare that a head of state will call the head diplomat of a rival state a “liar.” But that’s what Putin did six days after Obama overruled Kerry and stopped the attack on Syria. On Sept. 5, 2013, as Obama arrived in St. Petersburg for the G-20 summit, Putin referred openly to Kerry’s congressional testimony on Syria a few days earlier in which Kerry greatly exaggerated the strength of the “moderate” rebels in Syria.

Kerry had also repeated highly dubious claim (made 35 times at an Aug. 30 State Department press conference) that the Assad government was behind the chemical attacks near Damascus on Aug. 21, that he had thus had crossed the “red line” Obama had set, and that Syria needed to be admonished by military attack.

About Kerry, Putin took the gloves off: “This was very unpleasant and surprising for me. We talk to them [the Americans], and we assume they are decent people, but he is lying and he knows that he is lying. This is sad.”

Putin’s stern words about Kerry and the behind-the-scenes Obama-Putin collaboration that defused the Syrian crisis of 2013 appear to have awakened the neocons to the need to shatter that cooperation – and the Ukraine coup became the perfect device to do so.

New Year’s Resolutions

Five things for Obama to do for a fresh start to the New Year:

1 – Fire Kerry and Nuland.

2 – Read the New York Times [op-ed](#) by Putin on Sept. 11, 2013, just after cooperation with Obama had yielded the extraordinary result of the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons.

3 – Stop the foolish talk about the U.S. being “the one indispensable nation.” (The President said this so many times last year that some suspect he is beginning to believe his own rhetoric. This is how Putin chose to address this feel-good, but noxious, triumphalism in ending his op-ed:

“It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord’s blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.”

4 – Lean on the Quislings in Kiev to stop their foolishness. One golden opportunity to do that would be to participate in the international summit called for by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on Jan. 15 in Kazakhstan, where Putin and the leaders of Germany and France are also expected to take part.

5 – Finally, pick a different ending this year for your speeches. How about: “God bless the United States of America and the rest of the world, too.”

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