

Russia's Role in the World: Gauging Moscow's Active Foreign Policy

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Last month, the Russian government had high level talks with the [Japanese](#), [South Korean](#), [Vietnamese](#), [Egyptian](#) and [Serb](#) governments, which indicate actual and potential gains, without seeming to lose anything. At present, the Russian view on Syria appears to have prevailed over the desire to out-rightly see Syrian President Bashar Assad leave office – a matter that is said to have contributed to [Saudi discontent with the Obama administration](#). The [Russian-Israeli relationship](#) is civilly interacted, with agreement and some disagreement. Chinese-Russian relations do not seem to have taken a noticeable downslide. [Russian-Finnish trade has increased](#) (partly), as a result of European Union (EU) limits. In Russia's "near abroad" and with Ukraine especially in mind, the Kremlin has been rather ironically accused of bullying, along the lines of a reactionary imperial power.

United States (US) officialdom and some prominent Americans outside of government have expressed mixed views about Russia. Two of the more upbeat opinions came from America's Ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul and former US President Bill Clinton. In what can be seen as an effort to diffuse differences between the US and Russian governments, [McFaul pointedly said](#) (at a November 26 gathering in Russia) that Washington and Moscow have more common interests than differences. (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu similarly described his country's relations with Russia during his visit to Moscow last month.) This past September 25 on CNN, Clinton stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin is someone who has kept his word. Clinton went on to laud Russia's potential to further advance itself. The aforementioned segment with Clinton, came two weeks after [Putin's New York Times Op-Ed piece](#), which drew many posted online comments below that article, in support of his overall perspective – in contrast to the response from some American media and political elites.

During the CNN segment, Clinton spoke negatively of Russia's pre-Soviet foreign policy, in a way which suggests that thinking is still noticeably evident in the Kremlin. Terms emanating from the pre-Soviet period like "big stick diplomacy" and "colonialism", have been attributed to other powers, at a time which saw a lesser number of independent nations. Pre-Soviet Russia included numerous instances of cooperation with Western nations. In relative and accurate terms, the disagreements between pre-Soviet Russia and the West should be carefully worded and measured. Western nations have often not been uniform in views. This situation has included serious conflicts among Western nations. As one case in point, Russia's opposition to Napoleon led France included an alliance between Russia and some Western states.

In the CNN feature, Clinton said it is imprudent to give the American government a hard time in the Middle East and how riding an anti-American horse has limits, that do not help

Russia's domestic situation. No mention was given to Russia being among the first, if not the first of nations, to formally express condolences to the US, following the 9/11 terrorist attack and the valid qualms which the Kremlin has with some Western advocated positions.

Clinton characterized Russia having Iran and Hezbollah in Syria. This characterization is somewhat on par with suggesting that the American government's preference for the Syrian rebels has a coordinated relationship with Al Qaeda – a group opposed by Iran and the Syrian government. There is good reason to doubt that Iranian and Hezbollah activity in Syria is very much coordinated (if at all) with the Kremlin.

Shortly before and since the September CNN interview with Clinton, Syria has not been as discussed a topic in the US. This change comes as the good (armed anti-Syrian government opposition) versus evil (Syrian government) image has been marred by simplistic inaccuracy, coupled with a [limited American public support](#) for US military action in Syria. The Russian government has acknowledged the Syrian government bearing some blame in its war against armed opponents, along with favoring an internationally mediated dialogue between the warring parties and a reasoned second guessing on the outcome of Assad suddenly being overthrown.

Awhile back, former US National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, said that Russia would eventually gravitate towards the West, out of a fear of China. The concern over China is something which is discussed among American foreign policy elites. This discussion has included the prospect of other countries becoming greatly opposed to Beijing. For now, there is limited appeal for actively opposing China. This point is noted in C. Raja Mohan's November 23 Observer Research Foundation commentary "[Getting Real With Vietnam](#)". In this piece, Mohan states: "Even as it seeks to balance Chinese power, Hanoi is stepping up its engagement with China. Hanoi's realists have no desire to invite a needless military confrontation with China and understand the complex dynamics of a multipolar world."

[In his own words](#) (Preview) , Brzezinski has made clear that he views Russia as being somewhat of a geopolitical also ran, having key elements with a self inflated image of Russia's actual standing – meshed with other Russians holding an opposite opinion. In turn, it can be reasonably surmised that Brzezinski's open-mindedness is at times contradicted by his perhaps not completely letting go of some past disagreements and misunderstandings vis-à-vis Russia.

Russia is neither on the verge of taking over the world, nor making a last ditch geopolitical effort at greatness before crumbling. On this last point, the challenges facing Russia should (for accuracy sake) take into consideration the problems which other countries face and Russia's history of coming back against difficult odds. The post-Cold War geopolitical situation is one of varied complexities. Keep in mind that Brzezinski sees a not so distant future of declined American global clout (a scenario which has been argued as already being evident), albeit with a remaining influential stature. Brzezinski anticipates a world with no hyper-superpower, successfully carrying on as it pleases – something that has been present for much of history.

Ukraine in the Present

A considerable deal has been written about a duel of sorts between Russia and the West over Ukraine. Overall, English language mass media sources have been prone to favoring

the opinion that the “pressure” being put on Ukraine is a negative one way street from Russia. Deemphasized, is commentary which either makes the case for the Customs Union (involving Russia and some other former Soviet republics) and /or critically assessing what the EU can practically offer Ukraine. Concerning the Ukrainian government’s suspension of signing onto the [EU Association Agreement](#), Nikolas Gvosdev’s November 26 National Interest piece “[Ukraine: Why Yanukovich Said No to Europe](#)”, Anatoly Medetsky’s November 29 Moscow Times article “[Economic Logic Pushed Ukraine to Russia](#)”, Nicolai Petro’s December 3 New York Times Op-Ed piece “[How the EU Pushed Ukraine East](#)” and Anthony Salvia’s December 6 American Institute in Ukraine commentary “[Yanukovich is Right to Insist On a Fair Deal For Ukraine](#)”, are among the opinion pieces that go beyond the facile Russian bullying charge and the EU as a logical choice.

When she was American Secretary of State, [Hillary Clinton advocated](#) an opposition to the Customs Union, because (in her opinion) it marks an attempt to recreate the Soviet Union. Earlier, Brzezinski expressed the thought of lessening Russian-Ukrainian ties to limit Russian power. There are significant differences between the makeup of the Soviet Union and Customs Union, which make Clinton’s comment on the subject appear shortsighted. Brzezinski’s take on Russia and Ukraine seems based on old school thinking, that is not in sync with the present.

In answer to H Clinton, the Customs Union has no uniform foreign policy, unlike the Soviet Union. As one case in point, Russia is the only Customs Union member recognizing South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence. In response to Brzezinski, English dominated Britain includes Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Hong Kong is an affiliated part of China. The Customs Union in its current and projected future form is formatted more loosely than the British and Chinese examples. It is therefore erroneous to suggest that closer Russian-Ukrainian ties are a negative blast to the past.

The likelihood of Ukraine joining the EU as a full fledged member anytime soon, if ever, remains in doubt – as that organization has some struggling issues. Meantime, other nations need to find a practical way to better enhance themselves. A [recent poll](#) indicates a near split of Ukrainian public opinion, over choosing between either the Customs Union or EU. This finding supports the observation that Ukraine’s younger generation (ages 18-39) show a greater enthusiasm for the EU than the older population. There is a tendency among many younger folks to be idealistically driven into positions, which downplay a practical reasoning for taking another stance. Given the EU limits and the interrelatedness between Russia and Ukraine, it is not inconceivable that pro-EU enthusiasm might eventually wane in Ukraine.

In some circles, much hoopla is made of Russia supposedly not coming to terms with Ukrainian independence. In point of fact, post-Soviet Russia recognizes Ukraine’s internationally recognized independence and Soviet drawn boundaries – an act that has not created such a nationalist uproar in Russia.

The Russian government recognizes Ukraine’s right to forge closer ties to the EU. That recognition does not preclude Russia from restructuring its trade relationship with Ukraine. [Unlike the EU](#), the [Russian and Ukrainian governments support](#) three way (Russian, Ukrainian and EU) talks to reach mutually agreeable terms.

Covering Ukraine’s Past to Conform With Current Preferences

Relative to Ukraine, the negative image of Russia has been quite evident within English

language mass media. Robert Coalson's December 4 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty article "[Ukraine's East-West Dilemma Evokes Century-Old Memories](#)", serves as one example, with others to boot.

In Coalson's piece, reference is made to Ukraine having been part of the (Polish dominated) Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, before becoming affiliated with the Russian Empire. Omitted, is mention of the prior Rus period, which concerns the entity that modern day Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are descended from. For obvious historical and cultural reasons, these three nations commemorate the Rus era, much unlike Poland and Lithuania. Over the course of time, many of the ancestors of present day Ukraine came to view Poland as an occupier. The Russian-Ukrainian literary figure Nicolai Gogol's historical novel "Taras Bulba", relates to that sentiment.

Coalson's article includes the faulty claim that Poland fought on the Ukrainian side during the Russian Civil War. More accurately put, Polish leader Josef Pilsudski was interested in a pro-Polish Ukrainian state, which only comprised former Russian Empire territory. He found a Ukrainian ally in Symon Petliura, whose position in Ukraine was weak. At the time, there were people in former Russian Empire Ukraine, who either supported the Whites or Reds, or were leaning in an indifferent direction. While opposing each other, the Whites and Reds supported some form of Russian-Ukrainian togetherness. At this point in history, the desire for a separate Ukrainian state did not reach the level it now has.

Petliura's weak base resulted in him forging an alliance with Pilsudski, which included an acceptance that all of Galicia would be a part of Poland. In turn, the Galician Ukrainians (by and large) agreed to come under the command of the White Russians. Unlike Polish leader Pilsudski, the White Russians did not put stringent conditions on the Galician Ukrainians.

These articles of mine provide a different perspective from Coalson's piece: "[The Russo-Polish History Coverage and Some Related Matters](#)", Russia Blog, October 28, 2009 and "[Pavlo Skoropadsky and the Course of Russian-Ukrainian Relations](#)", Eurasia Review, May 22, 2011

Lavrov as an Ogre and Some Tangential Points

In Susan Glasser's Foreignpolicy.com article of this past April 29 "[Mr. No](#)", an unnamed official from a prior US presidency is quoted calling Lavrov a "complete asshole". Among English language mass media elites like Glasser, such a characterization does not seem to be used when describing Lavrov's Western peers, who do not appear to be less of an "asshole" (whether "complete" or otherwise) than Lavrov. In sync with Glasser's use of an anonymous source, I will add that this thought includes several off record personal experiences, from several individuals, as well as how things look from a distance.

Several months after that piece, Glasser's husband, Peter Baker, came out with a November 5 Foreignpolicy.com piece "[The Seduction of George Bush](#)", which refers to Lavrov as being "hardline". Over the years, Lavrov has come across as a frank individual, who listens and answers back comments directed at him. He has unequivocally spoken out against the controversial comments that the now former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said about Jews and the Holocaust, in addition to acknowledging that the Syrian government is not blameless in its war against insurgents.

There is a significant difference in how Lavrov is depicted to his Polish counterpart Radek

Sikorski. Not so long ago, Carnegie Moscow Center Director Dmitri Trenin, [praised Sikorski as a pragmatist](#).

Circa the pre-internet period for much of the 1990s, I recall a National Review article by Sikorski, which described a train ride conversation he had with a Russian woman. At one point, she asks why he (Sikorski) hates us (Russians)? Sikorski's answer did not deny the basis of the question. Rather, he said that Russians have not come to accept the past faults of Russia. In other instances, Sikorski has noted Poland's period under Russian Empire rule (with other parts of Poland under German and Habsburg rule) and Soviet domination.

When the shoe was on the other foot (so to speak), the Polish domination of Rus related territory included some unpleasant experiences for the subjugated. Rhetorically put, how is the general Polish awareness of this aspect? Has there been any sugar coated deflective spin on that score?

Around the time of the first wave of post-Cold War NATO expansion, I recall Arizona Senator John McCain (in a PBS NewsHour segment) say that it has been centuries since Poland dominated Russia, unlike Poland's historically more recent time under Russian domination. He is not alone in giving such a limited historical overview. Besides that period of Polish domination of Russia brought up by McCain, there:

- were the tens of thousands of Poles who joined Napoleon in his attack on Russia in 1812
- a Polish Machiavellian land grab attempt of some (stress some) territory, inhabited mostly by people with more of an allegiance to Russia than Poland during the Russian Civil War
- the fatal Polish prison conditions for tens of thousands of captured Red Army personnel, at the time of the Soviet-Polish War.

I am favorably acquainted with people of Polish, Russian, Russian-Polish and other backgrounds, who readily acknowledge that historical wrongs were done by Russia and Poland. This recognition includes some respectful differences of opinion and the desire to see improved Russian-Polish relations.

Collective stereotyping as exhibited in Sikorski's pre-internet era train ride story, is an example of an undiplomatically immoderate intellect. In the ensuing years, I have not seen any comments from him which match that expression. People have been known to amend their views at varying points in their life.

I agreeably note Sikorski's comments about how many Russians suffered under Soviet rule. Post-Soviet Russian administrations acknowledge this matter, in what looks to be an ongoing process of Russia at large coming to grips with its past - a dynamic evident with what other nations throughout the world face with their respective history. May Russian-Polish relations dramatically improve.

In more recent times Sikorski has:

- [irked Lithuanian officials](#), with his comment about Lithuania's capital Vilnius, which was part of Poland between the two world wars

- likened the Russian-German gas pipeline arrangement to a [modern Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement](#)
- referred to contemporary Russia having a [19th century foreign policy approach](#).

On the other hand, in a [November 23 RT segment](#), John Laughland attributes an imperial mindset among present day Poles.

I am fully aware that Sikorski has an explanation for the referenced comments he has made as a high ranking Polish official. Western mass media and political elites tend to show a greater understanding of his position and some others, when contrasted to the perspective of Russian officials.

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