



Inside the Kremlin

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JUST WHAT IS THE KREMLIN THINKING THESE DAYS? With war in Ukraine, heightened military activities unnerving NATO allies, and anti-Western rhetoric high, Moscow seems determined to worsen its relations with Washington, Brussels, and Berlin, even at increasing cost to Russia's faltering economy. Then, there's Syria, where it can be hard to tell if Russia seeks the same goals as Western countries or whether here, too, it's acting to undermine their interests.

Predicting Russian behavior is hard because Russia does not have a strategy. While it has strategic goals, it pursues them primarily by seeking opportunities, rather than developing clear plans. Moreover, decision making in Russia has become highly personalized, with President Vladimir Putin making most decisions himself, after consulting with very small circles of people. This, too, makes prediction more challenging, since Putin can be whimsical in his choices and his inner circles are increasingly loath to challenge him.

Nonetheless, Russia has identifiable goals. They include substantial influence in Europe and unchallenged sway over at least some of its post-Soviet neighbors. In addition, Moscow wants to regain what it sees as its rightful place as a global power. In the Middle East, this is tempered by a genuine fear of continued instability. Moreover, it is worth

the first among equals of large states whose right it is to decide the fate of small ones.

Russia has been particularly sensitive to what it sees as Western encroachment: the spread of institutions and values eastward. Notably, prior to 2013, EU association, which sparked the Kyiv protests, had not been identified as particularly nefarious—the focus had been on NATO. Russia’s government has, however, consistently identified any support for opposition movements in its own country and nearby as efforts to undermine legitimate governments and has insisted, against all evidence, that there was a Western, and specifically U.S., hand behind the ouster of Yanukovich in Ukraine.

The fall of Yanukovich to what Moscow sees as a Western-backed mob also speaks to a number of fears that, while also long-standing, are more specific to today’s Putin administration. Urban pro-

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remembering that Russia has proven in Ukraine a willingness to jettison economic goals in pursuit of perceived security interests.

Russia also sees itself locked in competition with the United States. A quick skim of Russian government statements going back to the Yeltsin years makes clear that if the United States had long ago written Russia off as a rival, the Kremlin continued to view Washington as consciously and intentionally working to weaken Moscow and its global influence. First and foremost, Moscow saw and sees the post-Cold War settlement in Europe as deeply unfavorable, and has long sought to replace it with one that treats Russia not as one of many countries, but as among

tests in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the winter of 2011–2012 spurred the government to a series of crackdowns on both opposition and free media (although neither had been particularly strong before), an effort to rid the country of “foreign influence,” and an obsessive focus on public opinion. However unlikely, the Kremlin is terrified that what happened in Kyiv could happen in Moscow, and committed to preventing it at all costs.

To Russia, Ukraine is partly a means to demonstrate (primarily to Russians) that governments put in place by protests are doomed to fail, partly a statement of its intention to defend its core interests, including

militarily (as the 2008 Georgia war had been), and partly a first step in rewriting the European security settlement. On the first, Russia has had some success: the Poroshenko/Yatseniuk government is beleaguered by continued conflict in the East, domestic calls to simply jettison the disputed territories, and public anger at the slow pace of reform. However, Russia could arguably have attained this without military action, and it's not clear what more it thinks will be necessary. In some ways, Russia faces a Catch-22 resulting from its choice to embark on a military path in the East. While it doesn't want a full-fledged war and is not interested in the headache of owning the land in question, it also can't allow Kyiv a chance at stability and independence.

In regards to Moscow's core interests and its desire for a new European security order, Russia may well have overplayed its hand. The war in Ukraine has led citizens of the Baltic, Nordic, and East European countries to wonder if Russia sees them as rightly its vassals, too, a role they do not relish. Those who are members of NATO have sought assurances that the Alliance will defend them if Russia's aggression grows. This has led to increasing tension between NATO and Moscow, and feeds, counterintuitive as this may seem, Russia's continuing fears that NATO is a danger. Moreover, Russian threats that Sweden and Finland will suffer if they seek NATO membership do not help its case for a new European settlement.

Turning now to Russia's interests more globally, and specifically to Syria, Russia is well aware that a true great power plays a global role. But just what Russia was after in the rest of the world has historically been unclear, including to Russia itself. Competition and cooperation with China have overshadowed policy in Asia, and relationships in South and Central America have focused on arms sales. In Syria today, however, Russia's interests are clearer. Moscow is genuinely concerned that U.S. policy in the region,

and especially in Syria, is destabilizing. It is also truly fearful of the spread of Islamic extremism, not least in Russia itself, which has exported fighters and leaders to ISIS (reports that Russia is helping Russian Islamists enter Syria may indicate that some in Moscow think exporting them is better than keeping them). Russia believes that the key to stabilization lies in working with its old friend Assad. But it also sees no solution without the United States. Here, Moscow is torn. On the one side are its narrative of standing up to Washington and its view that the United States is part of the problem. On the other is its desire to stand with Washington as great powers cooperating on a critical global issue, not incidentally proving its importance to the United States and encouraging a drop in pressure (and perhaps sanctions) over the Ukraine crisis.

All of this paints a complicated picture for anyone trying to craft policy vis-à-vis Moscow. Russian behavior will not grow more predictable absent a change in government—and unlikely even then. Europe will stay at the top of the Russo-Western agenda: Russian bellicosity would matter far less if it didn't potentially involve NATO allies and if Russia didn't have a substantial arsenal of strategic and nonstrategic nuclear weapons. Because of both of these, the United States and its allies must tread carefully, seeking ways to simultaneously assure allies, convince Russia that NATO is not a danger, ensure that Russia does not become one, and manage the crisis in Ukraine. All of these pose tremendous challenges, particularly in concert. Syria does present an opportunity for cooperation toward common goals, and a mechanism for dialogue, but progress there will continue to be flummoxed by Moscow's insistence that Assad stay and Washington's that he go. For true cooperation to be possible, something will have to give, and it's not likely to be Moscow. □