FOREIGN AFFAIRS

July/ August 2020
Volume 99 • Number 4

Pinning Down Putin

How a Confident America Should Deal With Russia

Victoria Nuland

Pinning Down Putin

How a Confident America Should Deal With Russia

Victoria Nuland

Few nations elicit such fatalism among American policymakers and analysts as Vladimir Putin's Russia. For some, the country is an irredeemable pariah state, responsive only to harsh punishment and containment. Others see a wronged and resurgent great power that deserves more accommodation. Perspectives vary by the day, the issue, and the political party. Across the board, however, resignation has set in about the state of U.S.-Russian relations, and Americans have lost confidence in their own ability to change the game.

But today's Russia is neither monolithic nor immutable. Inside the country, low oil prices, the coronavirus pandemic, and Russians' growing sense of malaise all bring new costs and risks for the Kremlin. Abroad, Putin has played a weak hand well because the United States and its allies have let him, allowing Russia to violate arms control treaties, international law, the sovereignty of its neighbors, and the integrity of elections in the United States and Europe.

Washington and its allies have forgotten the statecraft that won the Cold War and continued to yield results for many years after. That strategy required consistent U.S. leadership at the presidential level, unity with democratic allies and partners, and a shared resolve to deter and roll back dangerous behavior by the Kremlin. It also included incentives for Moscow to cooperate and, at times, direct appeals to the Russian people about the benefits of a better relationship. Yet that approach has fallen into disuse, even as Russia's threat to the liberal world has grown.

VICTORIA NULAND is Senior Counselor at the Albright Stonebridge Group and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. She served in the U.S. State Department from 1984 to 2017, including as Ambassador to NATO from 2005 to 2008 and as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs from 2013 to 2017.

Whoever wins the U.S. presidential election this coming fall will—and should—try again with Putin. The first order of business, however, must be to mount a more unified and robust defense of U.S. and allied security interests wherever Moscow challenges them. From that position of strength, Washington and its allies can offer Moscow cooperation when it is possible. They should also resist Putin's attempts to cut off his population from the outside world and speak directly to the Russian people about the benefits of working together and the price they have paid for Putin's hard turn away from liberalism.

The fatalists may prove right that little will change inside Russia. But U.S. interests will be better protected by an activist policy that couples a strong defense with an open hand if the relationship improves. Such an approach would increase the costs of Putin's aggressive behavior, would keep democracies safer, and may even lead the Russian people to question their own fatalism about the prospects for a better future.

THE 20-YEAR SLIDE

When Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, he set two goals to justify his policies and consolidate his power. Internally, he pledged to restore order, after years of chaos and impoverishment during the 1990s. Externally, he promised to restore greatness, following the humiliating loss of territory, global influence, and military dominance that had come with the collapse of the Soviet Union almost a decade earlier. Both ambitions resonated with the Russian people. Over the next two decades, Russians would steadily relinquish more and more of their rights—freedom of expression and assembly, political pluralism, judicial fairness, and an open economy (all of which were then new, tenuous, and unevenly shared)—in exchange for the stability of a strong state, a return to oil-fueled growth, and the prospect of middle-class prosperity.

In the United States and Europe, too, some hoped that Putin would put an end to the oligarchic excess, ruble crashes, dependency on foreign bailouts, and general lawlessness of the 1990s. Russia might, the thinking went, become more predictable and more reliable as an international partner. Western governments generally looked the other way as Putin's methods for reestablishing control became increasingly Soviet during his first decade in power: closing down opposition newspapers and TV stations; jailing, exiling, or killing political and economic rivals; and reestablishing single-party dominance in the

"Russia Without Putin": at a protest in Moscow, February 2020

SHAMIL ZHUMATOV / REUTERS

parliament and regional governments. The George W. Bush administration, preoccupied with terrorism after the 9/11 attacks, believed that Moscow's internal affairs were its own business and of little consequence to the U.S.-Russian relationship.

When it came to Russian foreign policy, Putin had three initial priorities: reasserting Russian hegemony in neighboring states, rebuilding the military, and regaining influence at the global decision-making table. For the most part, the United States and its allies encouraged Russia in its pursuit of the third goal, bringing Moscow into the World Trade Organization and creating the G-8 and the NATO-Russia Council. They also made sure to take important decisions, such as whether to launch the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan in 2001 and whether to intervene in Libya in 2011, to the UN Security Council and the G-8 for debate, so that Russia could join in. The belief was that Russia, like China, would

become a more "responsible stakeholder" in global affairs by being integrated into rules-based international institutions.

U.S.-Russian nuclear reduction talks continued, but Washington paid too little attention to Moscow's substantial military investments outside the nuclear realm. The Bush administration made an early blunder in 2000 by only cursorily consulting with Moscow before withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in order to build bigger missile defenses against Iran and North Korea. The Bush team later sought to rectify the mistake by offering transparency and collaboration in missile defense development to meet the growing threats from Tehran and Pyongyang, but Putin rejected the offer. He had already knit the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty into a narrative of grievance against Washington. He later felt justified in cheating on two other pillars of 1980s arms control architecture, the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, accusing Washington of having broken Moscow's trust first. Taking lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan and Iraq and from Russia's own subpar performance in the 2008 war with Georgia, Putin also poured money into irregular warfare, cyber-capabilities, long-range conventional weapons, and hypersonic missiles. Washington and its allies would not wake up to the impact of these investments until Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea.

Putin has played a weak hand well because the United States and its allies have let him.

Both Democratic and Republican presidents worked closely with U.S. allies to prevent Putin from reestablishing a Russian sphere of influence in eastern Europe and from vetoing the security arrangements of his neighbors. Here, a chasm soon opened between liberal democracies and the still very Soviet man leading Russia, especially on the subject of NATO enlargement. No matter how hard Washington and its allies tried to persuade Moscow that NATO was a purely defensive alliance that posed no threat to Russia, it continued to serve Putin's agenda to see Europe in zero-sum terms. If Russia couldn't reclaim lands it had once dominated, only a zone of nonalignment stretching from eastern Germany to the Baltic and Black Seas would keep Russia safe, Putin asserted. But few in Washington considered it an option to slam the door on the new democracies of central and eastern Europe, which had worked for years to meet NATO's rigorous admission stan-

dards and were now clamoring for membership. Leaving them in a geopolitical gray area would not have kept those states safe and free. Russia's brutal treatment of those countries that were left in security limbo—Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—has since made that clear.

Putin has always understood that a belt of increasingly democratic, prosperous states around Russia would pose a direct challenge to his leadership model and risk reinfecting his own people with democratic aspirations. This is why Putin was never going to take a "live and let live" approach to former Soviet lands and satellite states. Instead, he seized on practically every democratic struggle of the last 20 years—Kosovo's successful push for independence in 2008, the protests that set off the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Bolotnaya Square protests in Moscow in 2011–12, the Maidan uprising in Ukraine in 2014—to fuel the perception at home of Russian interests under siege by external enemies. For a long time, it worked. Russia's conquests in Ukraine and Syria were wildly popular at home and deflected attention from its internal problems. With these successes, Putin's geopolitical appetite grew. He came to believe that democratic states were weak and that Russia could corrode their political systems and social cohesion from the inside.

In no small measure, the United States and its allies have enabled Putin's boldness. Over the past 12 years, Putin and his cronies have paid a relatively small price for their actions. Russia has violated arms control treaties; fielded new, destabilizing weapons; threatened Georgia's sovereignty; seized Crimea and much of the Donbas; and propped up despots in Libya, Syria, and Venezuela. It has used cyberweapons against foreign banks, electrical grids, and government systems; interfered in foreign democratic elections; and assassinated its enemies on European soil. The United States, meanwhile, has drawn redlines it later erased, pulled out of treaties and territory it needed to pressure Russia, openly questioned its own commitment to NATO, strained its alliances with tariffs and recriminations, and even lent presidential credibility to Putin's disinformation campaigns. U.S. and allied sanctions, although initially painful, have grown leaky or impotent with overuse and no longer impress the Kremlin. Russian diplomats attend international negotiations on Syria, Ukraine, arms control, and other issues with instructions to stall any real agreement, thereby buying their country time to strengthen its ground position. Russia has also mastered the art of exploiting divisions in and between the United States and allied countries, thwarting their efforts at crafting a coherent counterstrategy.

RUSTING RUSSIA

The United States and its allies have also lost focus on the one thing that should worry the Russian president: the mood inside Russia. Despite Putin's power moves abroad, 20 years of failing to invest in Russia's modernization may be catching up with him. In 2019, Russia's GDP growth was an anemic 1.3 percent. This year, the coronavirus pandemic and the free fall in oil prices could result in a significant economic contraction. International sanctions deter serious foreign investment in Russia from most countries except China. Putin's insistence on tight state control and on the renationalization of key sectors of the economy has suppressed innovation and diversification. Russia's roads, rails, schools, and hospitals are crumbling. Its citizens have grown restive as promised infrastructure spending never appears, and their taxes and the retirement age are going up. Corruption remains rampant, and Russians' purchasing power continues to shrink. In polls conducted in the country by the Levada Center last year, 59 percent of respondents supported "decisive, comprehensive change," up from 42 percent in 2017. A staggering 53 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds said they wanted to emigrate, the highest number since 2009.

Putin, meanwhile, is not going anywhere. A fourth-term president barred from running in the next election, set for 2024, he is technically a lame duck. But the Russian parliament and the Constitutional Court have already rubber-stamped constitutional amendments allowing him to run for two more six-year terms and potentially stay in power through 2036. To give the process a veneer of legitimacy, Putin announced a national referendum on the amendments before the coronavirus pandemic put those plans on hold. Another Levada poll, from March of this year, found that only 48 percent of Russians supported extending Putin's term, with 47 percent opposed, and 50 percent of those surveyed said they favored alternation of power and new faces in politics. Given those figures, Putin may reconsider holding the referendum at all.

More generally, the air of resignation and cynicism inside Russia today is reminiscent of past eras when Kremlin leaders focused too much on adventures abroad and too little on their own people's welfare, including the stagnant 1980s. The difference is that Putin still has money to throw around. Russia's two financial crises in the 1990s—and the need to keep his capos fat and happy—incentivized

him to maintain a large rainy-day fund. Russia currently has $150 billion in its National Wealth Fund and more than $550 billion overall in gold and foreign reserves. It remains to be seen how much of this money Putin is willing to spend to support Russia's health system and the country's economic recovery from the coronavirus. Russians may prove less patient this time around if the pandemic hits their country hard and the oligarchs get bailouts while average Ivans get empty promises and overflowing hospitals.

A UNITED FRONT

The challenge for the United States in 2021 will be to lead the democracies of the world in crafting a more effective approach to Russia—one that builds on their strengths and puts stress on Putin where he is vulnerable, including among his own citizens. To call this "great-power competition" or "a new Cold War" would be to give Putin too much credit: today's Russia pales in comparison to the Soviet adversary. Depicting Putin's Russia as a peer or an invincible enemy denigrates the United States' ability to deter and resist dangerous Kremlin policy. But the United States should not take this on alone. As in the past, it must mobilize its global alliances, shore up their internal defenses, and work jointly with others to rebuff Russian encroachments in hot spots around the world.

The effort should start among the democracies themselves. As the U.S. diplomat George Kennan counseled in his "Long Telegram" of 1946, when dealing with Moscow, "much depends on [the] health and vigor of our own society." The first order of business is to restore the unity and confidence of U.S. alliances in Europe and Asia and end the fratricidal rhetoric, punitive trade policies, and unilateralism of recent years. The United States can set a global example for democratic renewal by investing in public health, innovation, infrastructure, green technologies, and job retraining while reducing barriers to trade. Free people around the world also need their leaders to provide a shot of inspiration and confidence in democracy itself.

Moscow should also see that Washington and its allies are taking concrete steps to shore up their security and raise the cost of Russian confrontation and militarization. That includes maintaining robust defense budgets, continuing to modernize U.S. and allied nuclear weapons systems, and deploying new conventional missiles and missile defenses to protect against Russia's new weapons systems. As the

United States improves in areas in which Russia seeks or has gained an edge—hypersonic missiles, undersea weapons, cybersecurity, and anti-access/area-denial capabilities—it needs to do more to bring its allies along. For example, it should develop more of its high-tech weapons systems jointly with its allies, establish permanent bases along NATO's eastern border, and increase the pace and visibility of joint training exercises. U.S. requests for targeted military investment would also lead to better burden sharing among NATO allies than has endless political hectoring.

American leaders need to relearn how to communicate with the Russian people.

With its own strength reestablished, the United States will be better positioned to bring Russia to the negotiating table. The one lesson Putin appears to have learned from the Cold War is that U.S. President Ronald Reagan successfully bankrupted the Soviet Union by forcing a nuclear arms race. Not wanting Russia to suffer the same fate, he is eager to extend the 2010 New START treaty, which limits U.S. and Russian long-range nuclear weapons systems and is set to expire in 2021. Washington should use Putin's sense of urgency to tie discussions over New START to wider negotiations on all aspects of military power—nuclear and conventional, space and cyberspace. To allow time for those talks, the treaty could be provisionally extended for a year or two, but Washington should not grant Moscow what it wants most: a free rollover of New START without any negotiations to address Russia's recent investments in short- and medium-range nuclear weapons systems and new conventional weapons. Nor should it insist on including China in the talks right away, as the current administration advocates. If the United States and Russia reach an agreement, they can jointly pressure China to negotiate, but the United States should not sacrifice its immediate security needs in the hope that China will someday agree to trilateral talks. Doing so would just give Putin more time to build new weapons.

Russia's weaponization of the Internet is no less dangerous. The U.S. president must lead a campaign to harden democratic societies against Russia's efforts to interfere in free elections, spread disinformation, inflame societal tensions, and conduct political influence campaigns. Democracies around the world need to pool their resources and work more effectively with technology compa-

nies and researchers to expose and deter Russia's malign activities as they happen, not months or years later. In the meantime, governments and technology companies share a responsibility to educate citizens to recognize when they are being manipulated from abroad. They also need to negotiate changes to the profit structure of the Internet, which currently favors virality over truth and allows Putin's troll armies to get paid by Facebook, YouTube, and other digital platforms while prosecuting their covert war. And there is no reason why Washington and its allies shouldn't be more willing to give Putin a dose of his own medicine inside Russia, while maintaining the same deniability.

Ukraine is another battlefield for democracy that the United States must not cede to Putin. American and European support for the country have prevented its collapse or complete dismemberment, but the war in the Donbas continues, with Ukrainians dying almost every day. Russia has actually agreed to terms for its withdrawal from the Donbas, in contrast to the situation in Crimea, as laid out in the Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015. What has been missing is a consistent diplomatic effort from Washington, Kyiv, Berlin, and Paris to implement the deal and pressure Putin to follow through. Instead, Putin has stalled and divided them, and key European leaders have blocked the United States from participating directly in the talks, against Ukraine's wishes. If the United States and its allies make clear to Russia that the road to better relations with all NATO and EU countries goes through Ukraine, Putin might get more serious. If Russia continues to stall, sanctions and other forms of political, economic, and military pressure should be increased. At the same time, the United States should offer Russia a road map for gradual sanctions relief if and as Putin meets his obligation to get out of Ukraine.

Russia's successes in the Middle East are another product of U.S. ambivalence and neglect. In Syria, Putin saw an opportunity to support a fellow autocrat under pressure from his people while protecting and extending Russia's regional influence. The United States, seeking to limit its own commitment, mistakenly expected that deeper Russian involvement in Syria would create an incentive for Moscow to help settle the conflict and support free elections. The theory was that with skin in the game, Russia would want the game to be played fairly. Instead, Russia's military intervention ensured the survival of Syria's dictator, Bashar al-Assad; further opened the door to Iranian influence; and sent hundreds of thousands of addi-

tional Syrian refugees into Jordan, Turkey, and Europe. The United States, meanwhile, made both Putin's and Assad's lives easier by neutralizing a shared threat, the Islamic State, or ISIS.

Today, Russia bombs hospitals and schools in Idlib Province to regain territory for Assad and uses the threat of new refugee waves to deter Turkey, European countries, and the United States from pushing back. Russian troops regularly test the few U.S. forces left in Syria to try to gain access to the country's oil fields and smuggling routes. If these U.S. troops left, nothing would prevent Moscow and Tehran from financing their operations with Syrian oil or smuggled drugs and weapons. The U.S. footprint in Syria need not be large, but it cannot be zero, unless Washington wants to ensure that Putin emerges as the Middle East's definitive power broker. Russia's recent inroads in Libya, where it is supporting the forces of General Khalifa Haftar with weapons and advice, demonstrate that its appetite in the region is not sated—and why would it be, if relatively cheap investments buy it territorial control, influence, and the ability to violate international humanitarian law with impunity?

AN OFFER OF SHARED PROSPERITY

As it works on protecting its interests at home and abroad, the United States should also consider what Putin wants out of the U.S.-Russian relationship. He certainly wants sanctions relief, so U.S. and European leaders should be clearer about their conditions for rolling back or removing sanctions. Traditionally, they have also offered Russia affirmative incentives—political and economic—for better relations. In 2013, for example, as both the United States and Ukraine were negotiating free-trade agreements with the EU, Washington offered to drop some tariffs and regulatory barriers so that Russia, too, would obtain some benefit from the agreements being settled around it. Russia's seizure of Crimea froze those discussions.

It is possible that Putin's sense of security is by now so tightly tied to the Kremlin's control of the economy that American and European offers of free trade and investment would not interest him. He might also fear that opening the door to better economic relations would make him look weak and needy. That should not prevent Washington and its partners in the G-7 from trying—and offering to provide the Kremlin with an alternative to its growing dependence on China. The carrot could take the form of a joint investment fund, free-trade zones,

or the removal of tariffs on certain goods. It could also include public-private partnerships in sectors such as clean energy, a business-to-business roundtable, and internships for young Russians to work in American and European firms. NATO could offer Moscow a fresh start, including resuming joint military exercises in areas such as accident prevention and emergency response. The United States and Europe could reopen the question of a pan-European security dialogue of the kind then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev suggested in 2008, so long as doing so would not weaken existing institutions, such as NATO, the EU, or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. If the United States and its allies resume working together on their Iran and North Korea policies, they should invite Russia to be a constructive contributor.

Washington would want to start by placing those offers in the shop window. To seal the deal, Russia would need to demonstrate its commitment to ending its attacks on democracies and to negotiating in good faith on arms control, Ukraine, Syria, and other difficult issues. Any incentives would need to be reversible in the event that Russia reneged on its end of the deal.

In parallel, the United States and its allies should do more to reach out directly to the Russian people, especially younger citizens and those outside the major cities. A package of economic incentives with concrete benefits for ordinary Russians would help: it would undercut the Kremlin's argument that the United States seeks the continual impoverishment and encirclement of Russia and that win-wins are impossible. Putin has spent 20 years blaming the United States and NATO for his leadership failures at home and aggression abroad. By labeling as "foreign agents" any Russian nongovernmental organizations with collaborative programs with liberal democracies, he has cut off U.S. contact with Russian civil society activists, political opponents, doctors, journalists, and many others. He also closed down most academic exchanges. The clampdown has worked exactly as he intended: fewer Russians know Americans, work with them, or see a future in closer ties.

Washington and its allies could also offer Russians stronger inducements to break out of Putin's information stranglehold. With appropriate security screening, the United States and others could permit visa-free travel for Russians between the ages of 16 and 22, allowing them to form their own opinions before their life paths are set. Western states should also consider doubling the number of

government-supported educational programs at the college and graduate levels for Russians to study abroad and granting more flexible work visas to those who graduate. Putin may block his citizens from accepting these offers, but if he does, the blame for young Russians' lack of opportunities will fall squarely on him.

Finally, U.S. leaders need to relearn how to communicate with the Russian people. Reagan and President Bill Clinton spoke directly to them in speeches and interviews, offering a future of friendship and shared security and prosperity if the two nations overcame their differences. Not only have today's leaders forgotten how to do this, but they have acceded to Putin's view that any outreach to average Russians constitutes interference in Russia's internal affairs, even as Moscow runs massive influence campaigns in the United States and Europe.

In the Soviet era, the United States defeated the Kremlin's censorship by disseminating its messages through Voice of America and Radio Free Europe broadcasts, *Amerika* magazine, and regular contact with dissidents. Despite Putin's best efforts, today's Russia is more permeable. Young Russians are far more likely to consume information and news via the Internet than through state-sponsored TV or print media. Washington should try to reach more of them where they are: on the social networks Odnoklassniki and VKontakte; on Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube; and on the many new Russian-language digital platforms springing up. Although no one should expect this group to rise up and demand change anytime soon, the United States should not let Putin remain the primary shaper of young Russians' understanding of democratic policies and values. Washington and its allies must keep making the case that the relationship need not be zero-sum.

THE CHOICE IS THEIRS

Overall, a more coherent approach to Russia will take unity, resources, confidence, and focus. In the United States' past dealings with Putin, one or all of these elements have faltered. Washington has paid too little attention, underinvested, and allowed itself to be divided from its allies or seduced into appeasement in one area by the promise of progress in another (trading Iran for Syria, Syria for Ukraine, and so on).

Some—myself included—have been overly optimistic in expecting that with more integration with the free world, Russia would become a better and more democratic partner. Others have been overly fatalistic, citing Russia's unique set of interests, its geography, or its his-

tory to justify its aggression and violations of international law. Others still have been ahistorical in their outlook, asserting that if NATO just reversed its enlargement and offered Russia hegemony over Ukraine and a larger sphere of influence, Putin's appetite would be sated. None of these lenses has given U.S. policymakers better vision.

The coming U.S. presidential election offers the United States a chance to get off defense, restore the strength and confidence of the democratic world, and close the holes in its security after years of drift and division. Once that resolve is firmly on display, the United States can seize the moment of renewal at home and stagnation in Russia to stretch out a hand again. Putin may not want or be able to take it. But the Russian people should know that Washington and its allies are giving him and Russia a choice.