

# The Dangers of Regime Change: After Putin

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*The comparison between the crisis in Ukraine and the Cuban missile crisis has occasionally been made. With an honest look at that crisis, history has two lessons to offer for the crisis of today.*

The first is that the Cuban missile crisis demonstrates clearly how the US would respond to Russia encroaching on its sphere of influence and how it would respond to Russian weapons on its borders. The response is enshrined in the two century old Monroe Doctrine that bars the door from any European power encroaching on the American continents and that declares “any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere” to be “dangerous to our peace and safety.” It promises that any alliance between a European nation and a nation in the Western hemisphere would be seen as “the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.”

Kennedy specifically invoked the Monroe Doctrine to justify intervening in Cuba, saying that “The Monroe Doctrine means . . . that we would oppose a foreign power extending its power to the Western Hemisphere.” At around the same time, in April 1961, he would invoke the doctrine more generally. While acknowledging that “any unilateral American intervention, in the absence of an external attack upon ourselves or an ally, would be contrary to . . . our international obligations,” he, nonetheless, said that “If the nations of this hemisphere should fail to meet their commitments against outside Communist penetration then I want it clearly understood that this government will not hesitate in meeting its primary obligations which are to the security of our nation.”

Given its own commitment to the Monroe Doctrine, the US might have anticipated and understood Russian concerns and warnings not to encroach on its borders by moving weapons into Ukraine and Ukraine into NATO.

The second lesson is that the Cuban missile crisis demonstrates how such a crisis can be solved and war avoided. Though American mythology tells a story of the Cuban missile crisis being resolved by Kennedy coldly staring down Khrushchev and forcing a withdrawal, the historical record shows something different. The crisis was resolved when Kennedy

negotiated with Khrushchev and promised to remove the US Jupiter missiles that were threatening Russia from their positions in Turkey – and possibly Italy – if Khrushchev would remove the Russian missiles that were threatening the US from Cuba.

It was a *quid pro quo* agreement that brought the crisis in Cuba under control. Upon Khrushchev's offer, Kennedy knew that the US would be in an "*insupportable* position" were he not to accept because "to any man at the United Nations or any other *rational* man, it will look like a very fair trade."

The historical lesson was clear as Russian troops moved into Ukraine from the east, and the US and NATO moved into Ukraine from the west.

But there is another crisis from the same period that also offers important historical lessons. In the early days of the Vietnam War, US officials were talking about, as they are hopefully talking about now, "frustrating Soviet ambitions without provoking conflict." Those were the words of CIA Station Chief in Saigon William Colby. US planners at the time were very cognizant, in the words of Lindsey O'Rourke in *Covert Regime Change*, that actions could be "potentially costly – especially if [they] escalated to involve the USSR or China."

In those early days of the Vietnam conflict, the US actively considered solving its problem with North Korea by removing Ho Chi Minh by covert regime change. President Johnson eventually backed away from those coup plans because of the risk of bringing China into the war but also because, as US ambassador to Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. warned, "I do not think it profitable to try to overthrow Ho Chi Minh, as his successor would undoubtedly be tougher than he is."

The US faced a similar problem in the south. As confidence in President Diem waned, US officials began to talk about a coup. Secretary of State Dulles worried, however, that "no substitute for him has yet been proposed." A fact finding mission led by Secretary of Defense McNamara similarly warned that "The prospects that a replacement regime would be an improvement appear to be about 50-50."

The US would, eventually, cooperate in a coup against Diem. It backfired by destabilizing Vietnam even more and, ultimately, contributed to bringing America into war in Vietnam.

In both North and South Vietnam, before engaging in regime change, the US considered the alternative leader that could follow the removal of the regime. Though the US has too many times failed in its care or its calculations, it has long been a crucial part of the coup calculus to identify an acceptable alternative to the government you are taking out.

Though the calls are growing for a coup in Moscow, it is not clear that US planners have carefully done their calculations.

On March 26, President Joe Biden clearly called for a coup in Russia. Before he ended a speech delivered in Poland, [Biden added the call](#) that "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power."

Biden's fixers struggled to retranslate the potentially dangerous comment. He "was not discussing Putin's power in Russia, or regime change," the White House translated. "The President's point was that Putin cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbors or the region." But Biden spurned their awkward attempt to walk back his call for a coup. While

saying that he wasn't "articulating a policy change," Biden [insisted](#), "I'm not walking anything back. The fact of the matter is I was expressing the moral outrage I felt toward the way Putin is dealing, and the actions of this man – just – just the brutality of it." Two months later, in an [opinion piece](#) in *The New York Times*, Biden did walk it back, saying "the United States will not try to bring about his ouster in Moscow."

But if Biden's two month call for a coup was off the official script, then it was an unofficial script that was widely distributed. On May 11, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the US's most loyal Western European ally, would repeat the call. Following discussions in Sweden with Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, a spokesperson for Johnson [said](#) that "relations with Putin could never be normalized." Andersson, whose country is applying for membership in NATO, joined Johnson in his statement.

Canada's Deputy Prime Minister, Chrystia Freeland, also seemed to [call](#) for regime change when she said in a speech that "Putin's assault has been so vicious that we all now understand that the world's democracies – including our own – can be safe only once the Russian tyrant and his armies are entirely vanquished."

The call for regime change in Moscow has been heard in Eastern Europe as well. On May 9, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis [said](#) "From our standpoint, up until the point the current regime is not in power, the countries surrounding it will be, to some extent, in danger. Not just Putin but the whole regime because, you know, one might change Putin and might change his inner circle but another Putin might rise into his place."

Of course, [Zelensky has also hinted at regime change](#), hoping that, before the eventual peace process and the eventual talks, "we would be discussing the issues of who Ukraine will negotiate, with what president of the Russia Federation," adding that, "I hope that will be a different president in the Russian Federation."

But in the calculus of coups, there are [many ways in which removing Putin could lead to a worse alternative for the West](#). A little discussed one is that the removal of Putin could lead to an alternative with a more hardline foreign policy toward the West.

Richard Sakwa, Professor of Russian and European Politics at Kent, who has written extensively on Putin, says that Putin has never subscribed to a "virulent anti-Westernism." He has called Putin "the most European leader Russia has ever had." During his first several years in office, Sakwa says Putin attempted "to forge a closer relationship with the European Union" and that he "envisaged Russia joining NATO" to form a "greater West" and "even suggested membership [in] NATO." Putin did not formally ally with the West, not because of a lack of willingness, but because Washington vetoed the idea of Russia's membership in NATO.

Stephen Cohen, who was Professor Emeritus of Russian studies and politics at Princeton, has pointed out that Putin "long pursued negotiations with the West over the objections of his own hardliners." Though the West has portrayed Putin's foreign policy as aggressive toward the West, Cohen says that the historical record points more to a past of US instigations and provocations to which Putin did not react until compelled to. "As a result of this history," Cohen says, "Putin is often seen in Russia as a belatedly reactive leader abroad, as a not sufficiently 'aggressive' one."

These are the forces that could fill the void left by Western removal of the Putin regime.

These forces, this “influential faction in Kremlin politics,” as Cohen calls them “has long insisted . . . that the US-led West is preparing an actual hot war against Russia, and that Putin has not prepared the country adequately,” a warning that may sound more real than it did when first articulated.

Though Putin has now surely given up on relations with the West and has moved to a position of extreme hostility, that was not always so. As recently as the Minsk agreements, and even as late as December, 2021, when Putin sent the US [a proposal on mutual security guarantees](#) and requested immediate negotiations, he was still willing to work with the West.

Putin began his presidential career pursuing, like Gorbachev and Yeltsin, partnership with the US, holding back harder line forces in Russia that could be the alternative after regime change. Alexander Lukin, Professor of International Relations at HSE University in Moscow, has argued that the West has had “a fundamentally incorrect understanding” of Putin’s foreign policy. The “main driving force” behind Putin’s foreign policy is domestic policy, “namely, a desire to maintain stability.” For that reason, Putin has avoided expansionism in order to avoid confrontation with the West until Russia “was forced to respond” to the “strategic threat” of “Western encroachments on its traditional sphere of influence and threats to its security.” Hence the hardline criticism that Putin is “belatedly reactive.”

But Putin has been a restrainer not only on expansionism and foreign policy. He has also restrained the Russian nationalists who “believe in creating the ‘Russian world’ by annexing the territories of the neighboring countries populated by ethnic Russians.” Like the political forces that are less reactive and more aggressive, Putin restrains these political forces because they, too, risk confrontation with the West and threaten hard won domestic stability, reacting only when forced to respond with the aim of “neutralizing Western encroachments on its traditional sphere of influence and threats to its security.”

The hardliners in line behind Putin have been critical of this reluctance to confront the West and annex ethnic Russian territories in neighboring countries when they have requested it. Russian hardliners today blame Putin for not going further than the annexation of Crimea following the coup in 2014 by annexing the Donbas as well. Anatol Lieven, senior research fellow on Russia and Europe at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, told me that the hardliners criticize Putin for trusting Germany and France’s promise to ensure the implementation of the Minsk Agreement. The Minsk agreement met Putin’s goal of autonomy for the Donbas. But Minsk never happened because Germany and France failed to keep their promise, refusing to break with the US or pressure Ukraine into implementing the agreement. Putin had the *cases belli* and the military ability at the time to annex the Donbas, and Russian hardliners are angry with Putin for his restraint.

Still today, there are, according to Sakwa, “domestic pressures” on Putin to respond more assertively to Western efforts to isolate Russia economically and politically, by, for example, nationalizing Western assets in Russia. “So far,” Sakwa says, consistent with concerns about regime change, “Putin is holding the line, but he is being pushed to be more radical.”

Western calls for regime change in Russia ignore the coup calculus of the “plausible domestic political alternative.” The only other interpretation is even more reckless. The other possible alternative, Lieven suggests, is that the US is willing to allow hardliners to fill the void left by the removal of Putin both because of the weakened Russia that the coup would escort in and because a new hardline government, more manifestly hostile to the

West, would provide the justification for the isolation and subordination of Russia that the US seeks.

Either way, the risk is great and ominous. Removal of Putin through regime change could at last open the door for the hardliners in Russia who are willing to prepare for and to risk greater confrontation with the West. And it is dangerous to assume, history has shown, that a post regime change Russia would remain weak.

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