

Must We Be Enemies? Russia, Putin and the United States

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

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Most Americans know very little about Russia, and what they do know is subverted by many decades of U.S. government anti-Soviet and anti-Russian propaganda. From 1917 to Dec. 26, 1991, when the USSR imploded, Washington depicted the Soviet Union as an immoral aggressor state seeking to destroy capitalism and freedom in the United States and rule the world. Again, from the early 2000s increasingly until today Russia is depicted as a pariah state and danger to the U.S. and its allies.

During the 10 years from 1991 to about 2001, while taking many bows for its Cold War “victory,” Washington worked with the new Moscow government led by pliable alcoholic **President Boris Yeltsin** to eliminate the last vestiges of socialism and to in time catapult the new and dependent capitalist state into the U.S. sphere of influence.



In the chaos of the USSR’s abrupt implosion after 74 years, Russia quickly transformed into a desperately poor country of impoverished citizens. Meanwhile oligarchs became fabulously wealthy purchasing much of the infrastructure of the former powerful communist state at absurdly low prices. Foreign owned businesses paid bargain basement prices to exploit the country’s natural resources.

Yeltsin was not popular. Many Russians disagreed with his decision to break apart the Soviet Union and his embrace of neoliberal economics. In early 2003 there was a massive clash between Yeltsin and parliament. He wanted to dismiss the parliament and was supported by the Bill Clinton administration in Washington. In early October 2003 there were mass protests in the street and opposition in parliament to some of his rulings. Yeltsin called out the military and ordered tanks to fire into the parliament building, causing vast destruction

and the loss of lives. When the uprising was over after a few days the government said that 187 civilians were killed and 437 wounded, but critics announced that up to 2,000 people had been killed. President Clinton did not criticize the Russian leader's action. Secretary of State Warren Christopher was soon sent to Moscow to deliver a speech praising Russian democracy.

At the same time Russian public opinion changed from positive toward the United States to largely negative, according to numerous reliable polls. At first the majority believed the U.S. would partner with Russia as a friend to reconstruct the new society. But the West, led by Washington, was seen to be dubious and distrusting of the new Russia.

According to Moscow's Levada Center polling organization:

"The U.S. bombing of Iraq in 1991 was the first major challenge to pro-American sentiment....[By] 1997, half of the Russian population believed that Russia and the West were foreign policy adversaries, while only 30% saw them as allies. At the same time, only a third perceived the U.S. as a threat to world security — something that soon changed dramatically.

"The events of 1998-1999 were critical for Russian attitudes toward the U.S. This period marked a series of events that strained bilateral relations: NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, the start of the Second Chechen War and the West's subsequent criticism of Russia, the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), and the first eastward expansion of NATO since the collapse of the Soviet Union.... Surveys showed that 55% of the population believed the U.S. position on the ABM Treaty to be against Russia's interests. Almost the same percentage (50%) felt that Russia should respond to NATO expansion by increasing its security and defense capacities."

Relations wavered over the years on the way toward today's virtual Second Cold War.

Enter Putin



In August 1999 Yeltsin, who was very ill, named Vladimir Putin — a former 17-year mid-ranking officer in the foreign intelligence sector of the Committee for State Security (KGB) — to succeed him. Putin won his own presidential election the next year. He has won every election since then and even his Russian opponents acknowledge that his popularity and approval rating is 80%. A relative multitude of oligarchs still exist but are largely under Putin's control. They do as he says, they keep their money.

After Putin's first few years it became obvious to Washington that the new leader had every

intention of keeping Russia totally independent of the United States. Worse yet, from the White House point of view, even though he never weakened his support for capitalism, it became clear to American leaders that Putin planned to rebuild Russia into a world power, not a defeated junior state in Europe subject to Washington's whims and NATO's muscle. Not only that, but Moscow became a major critic of American unilateral global hegemony and its aggressive foreign/military policies.

The second wave of anti-Russian/anti-Putin propaganda, building on the first, began reaching a peak several years after Putin took office, and certainly continues throughout the U.S. political system today:

President Obama on Putin: "He has a foot very much in the Soviet past." Actually that isn't true. Putin today is a culturally conservative capitalist member of the Russian Orthodox Church who has in recent years sharply criticized revolutionary leader V. I. Lenin and the Bolshevik government that took power in 1917. He has stated that Russia's "destiny was crippled by the totalitarian regime" of Joseph Stalin.

Putin is staunch nationalist — and/or neo-traditionalist — dedicated to restoring Russia to the status of a major power that it enjoyed from the days of Peter the Great (1682–1725) over 300 years including the Soviet era until 1991, just a quarter-century ago. Since that beginning Russia has always been a strong centralized state and Putin is dedicated to its continuation. He conducts what has been termed a managed democracy — combining strong leadership from the chief executive in the Kremlin with rights for the people. The large majorities who vote for him are well aware he makes just about all the important decisions by himself and evidently believe he should continue, as long as they are largely correct for Russia.

U.S. press reports that suggest there is massive opposition to "dictator" Putin are incorrect. Bloomberg columnist Henry Meyer, who frequently reports on Russia, wrote this Sept. 2:

The most popular politician in Russia is among the West's most reviled: Vladimir Putin. His personal style matches the muscular nationalism he displayed when he annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula in 2014 and embarked on a surprise air campaign in Syria the following year. It resonates in a culture that admires strength. His instinctively conservative social views, reflected in an anti-gay law that he passed in defiance of foreign protests, also go down well in a country where liberal values are scarce. Rising oil income in the first part of his rule boosted living standards and allowed Russia to reassert power following a decade of post-Soviet humiliation. Now Putin's personal appeal is being tested by economic hardship caused by a collapse in oil prices and financial and energy sanctions provoked by the Ukraine intervention. His popularity has hardly been dented. At least so far.

An article by analyst Gordon M. Hahn in the Dec. 25, 2015, *Russian Insider* titled *Sorry to Disappoint You, but Putin Is Not a Conservative*, reports: "Putin is a statist in politics, economics, and sociocultural matters. In politics, the state and political stability are almost always to be given preference over individual liberty and freedom when these principles clash. For example, if mass public demonstrations run the risk of devolving into violence or attempts to overthrow the authorities, then those demonstrations will be banned or otherwise restricted.

This is not to say there is no freedom of association and speech in Russia. There are political protests held somewhere in Russia everyday, and all points of view can be heard on the state and private airwaves, print media, and Internet.

Most of Putin's decisions relate to resolving important immediate problems and some of them are unexpected and audacious, such as annexation of Crimea (a big boost to his domestic popularity) and Russia's entry into the Syrian civil war on the side of the government, much to Washington's disapproval. (We discuss both these issues at length below.) He doesn't seem to possess either an extensive long-range plan, or a strongly held ideology.

Since both the U.S. and Russia are now capitalist, there is no longer an ideological content to Washington's aversion to a stronger Russia. It's geopolitical, and if Russia agreed to follow U.S. global leadership the problem would dissolve (as it would for the People's Republic of China were it to bend the knee to Uncle Sam).

Vice President Biden says Putin's "a dictator." He's not. His electoral popularity keeps him in office. There were five candidates for president in March 2012, the last presidential election. Putin, the candidate of the centrist United Russia party, received 45,513,000 votes. The Communist Party candidate got 12,288,624 votes. Mikhail Prokhorov, a self-nominated billionaire oligarch, got 5,680,558. The far right Liberal Democratic Party compiled 4,448,959 votes. The social-democratic A Just Russia Party pulled in 2,755,642. There were reports of ballot stuffing but that could not possibly have determined Putin's victory given the vote count.

The number and ideological variety of the four viable Russian parties compare quite favorably with a U.S. two-party system composed of the far right Republicans and the center right Democrats in actual contention, while election rules and government/mass media propaganda continually marginalize progressive, left and socialist third parties.

The September Election

In parliamentary elections Sept. 18, Bloomberg News reported:

"President Vladimir Putin secured a crushing victory that gave the United Russia party its biggest-ever majority. Despite Russia's longest recession in two decades, the pro-Kremlin party will get 343 out of 450 seats in the State Duma, the lower house of parliament.... The [liberal] opposition party... failed to garner a single seat.

Here are the results: United Russia: 54.2%; Communist Party:13.4%; Liberal Democratic Party: 13.2% A Just Russia: 6.2%.

The anti-Putin *New York Times* couldn't conceal that United Russia won "without many voting irregularities" (there were very few) but then charged that this evidently free and honest election indicated "Russia appears to have returned full circle to a pseudo-parliament whose only function is to give a semblance of legitimacy to an authoritarian ruler."

The Carnegie Moscow Center (a subdivision of the Carnegie Endowment for International

Peace in Washington) published an important article Sept. 20 titled “Russia’s Lost Liberals” that pointed out the election results reflect a “gradual decline in support for Russian liberals over two decades....The two main liberal parties, Yabloko and PARNAS, received less than 2% and less than 1%, respectively, of votes cast.....


The current situation is indeed bleak for Russian liberal parties. Only one-third of self-proclaimed liberal party supporters in the 1990s and 2000s still support liberals. Two-thirds have grown disillusioned with liberals and tend to cast their votes for United Russia or the Communist Party. So, who still votes for liberals? Most of their supporters are educated and affluent residents of Moscow. This segment is doing better economically than most Russians. They are more confident in their future and satisfied with their present. They are, on the whole, much happier than the average Russian. Despite these differences, they approve of Putin’s performance as much as the general population.

Many U.S. Politicians Despise Putin

Politicians plus the commercial mass media despise Putin and oppose Russia. Some simply hate him, such as Sen. John McCain, who said he looked into the Russian leader’s eyes and “saw three things — a K and a G and a B.” Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates called Putin a “stone-cold killer.”

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who may become president in November, has been persistently critical of Putin and Russia for many years. During her 2008 campaign for the presidency she commented:

“He was a KGB agent. By definition, he doesn’t have a soul.”

 In more recent years as Secretary of State, Clinton made her contempt toward Putin very public. During Russia’s parliamentary election of 2011 and the presidential election of 2012 she in effect accused him of rigging the outcome. Putin said at the time that her intervention generated several demonstrations against him in Moscow. He has not forgiven Clinton for this.

Now in her second presidential campaign, Clinton and the leadership of the Democratic Party seem to be launching a new Cold War against Russia. This dangerous escalation of tensions is partly the Clinton campaign’s opportunistic response to a statement by her billionaire businessman opponent Donald Trump to the effect that he wanted to create better relations between the world’s two principal nuclear powers. This was perhaps the one good thing Trump has suggested during his otherwise crudely absurd and racist, sexist, anti-Latino, anti-Muslim, nativist campaign.

Trump’s running mate, Gov. Mike Pence of Indiana, echoing his leader’s latest praise for the Russian leader, said on CNN in September, “I think it’s inarguable that Vladimir Putin has been a stronger leader in his country than Barack Obama has been in this country.” But another top Republican, House Speaker Paul D. Ryan, told reporters on Sept: 8 “Putin is an aggressor who does not share our interests.”

The Clinton forces will continue through the campaign to excoriate Trump as a Russian dupe who will work with Moscow against U.S. interests. Her campaign manager Robby Mook has

gone to such lengths as this in characterizing the Republican contender: “Trump is just a puppet of the Kremlin.” “We need Donald Trump to explain to us the extent to which the hand of the Kremlin is at the core of his campaign.” “Trump has deep financial ties that potentially reach into the Kremlin.”

Democratic vice presidential candidate Tim Kaine has joined Clinton in criticizing Trump, saying Sept. 6: “We are entitled to get the information to get to the bottom of this cozy bromance between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.”

Clinton insists that the Russian government hacked the Democratic National Committee’s computers and passed the contents of 20,000 E-mails to WikiLeaks for worldwide dissemination. Some of the mail proved that the Democratic Committee worked to prevent Sen. Bernie Sanders from winning the nomination. At best the U.S government and FBI have expressed “high confidence” that Russia was involved, but does not maintain they actually did it and offers no proof despite possessing the most sophisticated and widespread surveillance apparatus in the world. Interestingly, the New York Times reported Sept. 8 “The FBI is investigating whether Russia hacked into [DNC] computer systems,” weeks after the initial allegations were made and they evidently are still at it.

The same Times article reported “Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter lashed out at Russia on Sept. 7, accusing the government of President Vladimir V. Putin of demonstrating a ‘clear ambition to erode’ international order and warning Russia to stay out of the American election.... Carter used language that evoked a time before the fall of the Berlin Wall, when leaders in Washington and Moscow were entrenched global adversaries.”

CNN reported Democrats asked the FBI Aug. 30 to investigate whether Trump’s campaign had any “overt and covert” connection to cyberattacks alleged to be conducted by Russian government hackers. The letter from the top ranking Democrats on the Oversight, Judiciary, Foreign Affairs and Homeland Security committees follow a similar missive from Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, who also asked the FBI to look into any possible link between the campaign and Russian meddling in the U.S. election.

A measure of Trump-Russia reality was printed in the Sept. 9 issue of *The Economist*: “As with many of Mr. Trump’s proposals, it is unclear how committed he is to his pronouncements on Russia policy, if at all.... Foreign-policy professionals in Moscow understand the risks of Mr. Trump’s unpredictability. ‘If Trump wins, it’s an equation where everything is unknown. ‘There, x times y equals z,’ says Konstantin Kosachev, head of the Russian senate’s foreign-affairs committee. While Mrs. Clinton is seen as fiercely anti-Russian, she is a familiar figure, and even commands grudging respect. ‘As a rule, it is easier to deal with experienced professionals,’ wrote Igor Ivanov, a former foreign minister, in a recent column in *Rossiskaya Gazyeta*, a government newspaper.”

To all of this Putin has replied: “I would like to work with a person who can make responsible decisions and implement any agreements that we reach.” Asked who he would prefer to have at the end of the hotline when he’s trying to stabilize a threatening geopolitical situation, he responded: “Their last name doesn’t matter.” In terms of the alleged computer hacking, Putin said, “We definitely don’t do such things at a state level.” He told Bloomberg News that it was “nonsense” to suggest the Kremlin backed Trump. He also criticized both candidates for so brutally attacking each other.” He continued: “I don’t think they’re setting the best example.... But that’s the political culture of the United States. You have to take it as you find it.”

The Russian leader would be derelict if he paid no attention to a candidate of one of the two U.S. parties who didn't hold an angry grudge against him and his country and seems to abjure the possibility of a war. This hardly means Putin is rooting for Trump or is waiting breathlessly to plow through another batch of DNC correspondence. Some Russian citizens hope Trump wins because they think he won't start a war against them. They know little to nothing about his domestic program.

According to Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Glenn Greenwald on Democracy Now Aug. 31: "Any of us who grew up in politics or came of age as an American in the '60s or the '70s or the '80s, or even the '90s, knows that central to American political discourse has always been trying to tie your political opponents to Russia, to demonizing the Kremlin as the ultimate evil and then trying to insinuate that your political adversaries are somehow secretly sympathetic to or even controlled by Russian leaders and Kremlin operatives.... This was typically a Republican tactic used against Democrats." Times seem to have changed.

Clinton's nationalist political attack is not only exploiting Trump's Putin "connection," but is determined to make him appear unpatriotic because he recently said he disliked the expression "American Exceptionalism." Speaking Aug. 31 to the ultra-patriotic American Legion convention in Cincinnati, Clinton — while not mentioning her opponent's name — declared: "If there's one core belief that has guided and inspired my every step of the way, it is this: The United States is an exceptional nation.... Part of what makes America an exceptional nation is that we are also an indispensable nation. In fact, we are the indispensable nation. People all over the world look to us and follow our lead.... When we say America is exceptional, it doesn't mean that people from other places don't feel deep national pride, just like we do. It means that we recognize America's unique and unparalleled ability to be a force for peace and progress, a champion for freedom and opportunity."

If elected in November Clinton will unquestionably assume a tougher political and military stance toward Russia (and China as well). This would have happened anyway since the principal aspect of her foreign/military policy is to maintain and strengthen U.S. global hegemony, but now that most Democrats probably believe Moscow is seriously seeking to interfere in American elections, and hacking key computers in the process, it will be easier.

However, it is imperative to remember that there has not been a Washington administration since 1917 — with the exception of the Yeltsin years — that has not desired to bring about regime change in Russia as it has done or is doing in many countries, most recently in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. The White House does not want a Kremlin that opposes what it seeks or that will not respect its self-appointed role of world leader. But Putin has rebuilt Russia into a world power, and it is doubtful U.S. anger and criticism will translate into violence, at least in the foreseeable future.

Putin Responds

Contrary to Clinton and nearly all other U.S. politicians, the Russian leader evidences a broad and deep understanding of the relationship between the two countries. Business Insider reported Jan. 10: "Putin told the German daily newspaper *BILD* that he believes Russia's deteriorating relationship with the West was the result of many 'mistakes' made by NATO, the U.S. and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. 'We have done everything wrong, he said.... From the beginning, we failed to overcome Europe's division. Twenty-five years ago, the Berlin Wall fell, but invisible walls were moved to the East of Europe. This has

led to mutual misunderstandings and assignments of guilt. They are the cause of all crises ever since,' he said.

"NATO embarked on an 'expansion to the east,' allowing the post-Soviet Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — to join the organization. This resulted from the U.S. desire for 'complete victory over the Soviet Union' after the Cold War ended in 1991,' Putin claimed." It is rarely mentioned in the U.S. but in 1990 Washington promised Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev — in return for the reunification of Germany — that it would not seek to recruit NATO membership from the impending dissolution of the Warsaw Pact or from the various ex-republics. The U.S. broke that promise right after the USSR imploded two years later and began the process, continuing today, of positioning NATO troops ever closer to the Russian border.

Putin, however, conceded that Russia has made its own mistakes since the end of the Cold War. "He told *BILDd*: 'We were too late.... If we had presented our national interests more clearly from the beginning, the world would still be in balance today. After the demise of the Soviet Union, we had many problems of our own for which no one was responsible but ourselves: the economic downfall, the collapse of the welfare system, the separatism, and of course the terror attacks that shook our country.... In this respect, we do not have to look for guilty parties abroad.'"

The U.S., Russia and the War in Syria

Washington has not explained all its reasons for deeply involving the U.S. in the Syrian civil war for the last five years. Many Americans are unaware of the leading role of jihadists on the rebel side that their government supports. People know that over 400,000 Syrians have been killed so far and that millions have become refugees, but few realize this brutal war could have been prevented if the U.S. has opposed the plan by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad for geopolitical and religious reasons. The notion that they — and the U.S. — were motivated by a desire to impose democracy in Damascus is naïve. This is not to deny the legitimacy of the peaceful protests that began the conflict in northern Syria and were crushed, but to criticize the later mass intervention by the U.S. and its cohorts to support the jihadists in launching a horrendous and seemingly unending civil war.

Both the U.S. and Russia are involved on the same side in the war in Syria against the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (the al-Qaeda franchise that recently changed its name to Abhat Fatah al-Sham, which means "Conquest of Syria Front"). But they are sharply divided on the most important aspect of the conflict. Washington seeks the military overthrow of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad while Moscow defends Assad with air power and other support for the Syrian Arab Army (SRA).

This is a complex contradiction that causes problems between the two powers. But Obama — who originally said Russia's entry into the war would result in a "quagmire" for Moscow — now seems to understand the U.S. needs Russia if it is ever going to extricate itself from what appears to be endless Middle East wars that are distracting the White House from its main goal of "containing" China. For its part, one reason Russia is fighting in the region is to demonstrate rather convincingly that it is a world power once again.

The U.S. began bombing Islamic State positions in Syria in September 2014. Russia began

bombing IS exactly a year later in 2015, completely surprising Obama, who did not expect or want Russia to take part at that time. Russia has also been bombing some American-backed jihadi groups that are fighting to destroy Assad. Some of these groups, to make this alignment entirely confusing, occasionally collaborate with Jabhat al-Nusra — an organization the U.S. is now bombing along with Russia.

Moscow entered to support the government and to eliminate as many jihadists as possible, not least to prevent them from joining thousands of them already in Russia. The U.S. says it is fighting to free the Syrian people from a dictatorship, but there are four other powerful reasons it won't mention (see below).

Russia's intervention has benefitted Syria greatly. The SRA was in a weakened condition after half its troops were killed or wounded in over two years of war against IS, al-Nusra and scores of Sunni fundamentalist jihadi fighting groups plus a small secular contingent called the Free Syria Army. The SRA, supported by Russian and Syrian government aircraft has been on the offensive for the last several months.

The various rebels still occupy about half of Syria in a ghastly war that has taken some 400,000 lives.

The war began as a series of largely civilian protests in the northern part of the country in March 2011 against the Assad government in Damascus, which responded with substantial military force. The U.S. supported the demand that Assad step down from the beginning. In August of that year, President Obama imposed deep sanctions on Syria and created an anti-Assad alliance including leaders of Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the European Union that demanded Assad's ouster. (Washington in time also tried to set up an exile government that it would control, but infighting and opposition from Iraqis living in their country rejected the idea.)

The six Sunni Muslim Arab nations of the Cooperation Council, led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the Arab League, soon began organizing for the overthrow of Assad. Other Sunni states, including NATO member Turkey, eventually associated themselves with the struggle. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar in particular were soon supplying tens of thousands of jihadists with weapons, salaries and other needs. The U.S. sent military supplies and money.

Washington maintains it supports the overthrow of Assad because he is a dictator who deprives his people of freedom. The real reasons, however, are rarely mentioned. Here are a few:

1. For the Saudis and their supporters (such as the U.S.) it is a war waged by Islam's Sunni majority against the Shi'ite minority that constitutes 10% of this religion's world population of 1.6 billion adherents. They want to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad who is a member of the Alawite Muslim branch of the Shi'ite faction governing a Sunni-majority country. The intention is to replace him with a follower of Saudi Arabia's puritanical Wahhabism form of Sunni Islam, if possible. The U.S. seeks a mainstream Sunni leader and probably would prevail. Washington further intends to exercise considerable influence over a new administration. Ironically many millions of Syrian Sunnis support Assad as do the great majority of SRA soldiers, as well as several minorities in addition to the Alawites, including Christians.

2. Another U.S.-Saudi reason for ousting Assad is to eliminate Syria as an ally of Shi'ite Iran. By toppling the secular Sunni government of President Saddam Hussein in 2003, the G.W. Bush administration destroyed Iran's main enemy. Regime change in Syria, depriving Iran of its major regional ally, would partially compensate for Bush's blunder. It will also serve Israel's interests, which are totally anti-Iranian. (Iranian officers and troops plus the Shi'ite militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon are fighting against Islamic state in Iraq and Syria, and against all the jihadists in Syria in defense of the Assad regime.)

Further, it must be recalled as an example of Washington's ruinous participation in Middle Eastern affairs, that Iraq launched a vicious war against Iran in 1980 that lasted until 1988 and was supported by Washington which supplied Iraq with several billion dollars worth of economic aid, dual-use technology, non-U.S. origin weaponry, military intelligence, and Special Operations training, according to Wikipedia. Washington did so to in retaliation for 1979 overthrow of the U.S. puppet monarchy in Iran by the Islamic Revolution that brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power. Up to a million people died in the Iraq-Iran war. Three years later the U.S. was bombing Iraq. Twelve years after that it was bombing Iraq again, resuming in 2014 up to now.

3. Washington has an additional reason for removing Assad. This would also liquidate Russia's only outpost in the Middle East— a geopolitical step forward for the U.S. The USSR and Syria have had warm relations since 1944. The Soviet Union supported Syria's 1944-46 fight for independence from colonial France. In return the Syrian government leased to Russia the naval base in the Mediterranean port city of Tartus in 1971. Moscow has used the base for docking, repair and replenishment ever since. Russia also uses Khmeimim airport in Syria, which was built just before the start of its air war in September 2015. It is noteworthy that Syria and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1980 that continues to this day and explains part of Russia's motivation to defend the regime against another Obama administration regime change operation in the Middle East in addition to Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

4. Lastly, according to a Sept. 21 analysis by Gareth Porter in Truthout:

“The U.S. decision to support Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia in their ill-conceived plan to overthrow the Assad regime was primarily a function of the primordial interest of the U.S. permanent war state in its regional alliances. The three Sunni allies control U.S. access to the key American military bases in the region, and the Pentagon, CIA, State Department and the Obama White House were concerned, above all, with protecting the existing arrangements for the U.S. military posture in the region. After all, those military bases are what allow the United States to play at the role of hegemonic power in the Middle East, despite the disasters that have accompanied that role.”

U.S.-Russian joint work in Syria continues despite misadventures and mutual accusations. Just before the seven-day truce both sides called in September to deliver food and supplies to residents of rebel-held cities, the U.S. Air Force bombed the Syrian Arab Army encampment in Deir el-Zour, killing 62 soldiers and wounding over 100. This allowed the Islamic State to rush in and take over the area. The U.S apologized for its “mistake,” although information about the troops was available.

Days later on Sept. 19, a night attack on a relief convoy destroyed 18 of 30 trucks carrying provisions for civilians in a rebel-held section of Aleppo. Some 20 civilians and one aid worker were killed. The U.S. blamed Russia, alleging two of its planes bombed the convoy. Russia denied the charge, which they deemed ludicrous since they had just days before agreed to call for the cease-fire. The UN refused to back up the American accusation. The same goes for the Red Crescent, which also had representatives at the scene. Russia had two arguments against the U.S. accusation: First, the trucks burned rather than being blown apart by bombs. Second, there were no bomb craters on the ground.

It is still a mystery but new talks soon began between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov.

U.S.-Russia Relations worsen

Despite increasing distrust between the U.S. and Russia since Putin assumed office, it wasn't until Obama's second term in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea that U.S. antagonism boiled over. Washington has denounced Moscow ever since, imposing severe sanctions that have contributed mightily to its current economic difficulties. *Russia Behind the Headlines* reported that On Sept. 1, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed new sanctions on a range of Russian companies and individuals, including subsidiaries of energy giant Gazprom; the contractor building the bridge linking Crimea to mainland Russia across the Kerch Strait and several major shipyards.

Since the annexation of Crimea, which I will discuss below, Washington and NATO have been suggesting Russia may now invade NATO member countries in Europe such as Poland. This is a deception to justify moving troops and equipment closer to the Russian border, supplying more weapons to allies in the region and prolonging sanctions. It is preposterous to think Moscow entertains the suicidal notion of attacking a NATO country.

Putin addressed the matter of engaging in a European war during a Sept. 1 interview conducted by *Bloomberg News* Editor-in-Chief John Micklethwait, who asked if Russia intended to use force elsewhere in the region. The interview was conducted at the Far East Economic Forum held in Vladivostok.

Here is Putin's response: "I think all sober-minded people who really are involved in politics understand that the idea of a Russian threat to, for example, the Baltics is complete madness. Are we really about to fight NATO? How many people live in NATO? About 600 million, correct? There are 146 million in Russia. Yes, we're the biggest nuclear power. But do you really think that we're about to conquer the Baltics using nuclear weapons? What is this madness? That's the first point, but by no means the main point.

The main point is something completely different. We have a very rich political experience, which consists of our being deeply convinced that you cannot do anything against the will of the people. Nothing against the will of the people can be done. And some of our partners don't appear to understand this. When they remember Crimea, they try not to notice that the will of the people living in Crimea — where 70% of them are ethnic Russians and the rest speak Russian as if it's their native language—was to join Russia. Those in the West simply try not to see this....

As far as expanding our zone of influence is concerned, it took me nine hours to fly to Vladivostok from Moscow. This is about the same from Moscow to New

York, through all of Eastern and Western Europe and the Atlantic Ocean. Do you think we need to expand something?

Viktor Yanukovich Becomes U.S. Target for Regime Change

Just last month, Michael Carpenter, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense with responsibility for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, told Voice of America: “Russia, in its invasion and illegal attempted occupation and annexation of Crimea, broke essentially every rule in the basic fundament of the international world order, from sovereignty, territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders.”

This U.S. version of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 is one sided because it refuses to acknowledge that the deed was directly in retaliation for a major regime change operation in Ukraine supported by the Obama administration. A democratically elected president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich — who was basically friendly to neighboring Russia — was violently ousted and replaced by an appointed anti-Russian administration economically dependent upon the United States and the European Union. The purpose was to compromise Russia’s revival as a regional power critical of U.S. policies.

As I wrote at the time, “Russia has taught the United States a stern and embarrassing lesson in Ukraine as a riposte to Washington-backed regime change in Kiev, the capital. Moscow in effect warned a thoroughly shocked Washington, ‘So far, but no further. President Vladimir Putin then annexed Crimea. Nothing quite like this move on the geopolitical chessboard has happened since the U.S. became the world’s single superpower over two decades ago.”

Ukraine became attached to the Russian Empire in 1793 after Poland lost a large portion of the Ukrainian territory it ruled at the time . The empire ruled another part of Ukraine since 1667. When the Soviet Union was formed, Ukraine became one of 15 Soviet Socialist Republics (including the Russian Federation) under the Government of the Soviet Union, which was located in Moscow. (“Soviet” is a Russian term that means an elected local, district, or national council.) When Ukraine entered the USSR it did so without Crimea, which remained part of Russia — including its crucially important Black Sea Navy base. Of all the republics, Ukraine seemed most favored by Russia due to their long shared history, which goes back hundreds of years before it was incorporated into the czarist empire.

Constituent Soviet republics became independent as the USSR was breaking up in the early 1990s. Ukraine declared itself independent in August 1991, four months before the Soviet Union was formally dissolved. The White House sought to maneuver Ukraine from Russia’s historic orbit to that of the U.S. and European Union, hoping to enlist Ukraine into NATO and moving its military bloc up to the Russian border.

The U.S. thought it achieved its objective when it supported Ukraine’s so-called “Orange Revolution” election in December 2004 that brought pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko to the presidency. Relations between Ukraine and Russia are said to have “hit rock bottom” during his troubled reign. Yushchenko sought to integrate Ukraine into the EU and NATO. Political rivalries, infighting and treachery in a basically oligarch-controlled system prevented Yushchenko from achieving his goal, much to Washington’s great disappointment.

Viktor Yanukovich, who was defeated by Yushchenko in 2004, won the 2010 presidential election. He and his Party of Regions were considered to have good relations with their

Russian neighbor. A few months later parliament, with the president's backing, ratified an agreement to extend Russia's lease on the Black Sea fleet base at Sevastopol in Crimea for 25 years. It also voted to abandon the previous government's aspirations to join NATO.

The George W. Bush administration announced in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia were becoming members of NATO. Moscow announced it would not tolerate any such maneuver, and briefly invaded Georgia on the side of separatist South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Neither Ukraine nor Georgia has become members.

In 2009, according to the prestigious German daily *Der Spiegel*, the EU proposed an "eastern partnership" with Ukraine as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Belarus — former members of the USSR. The EU offered cooperation, free trade and financial contributions in exchange for democratic reforms.... The planned partnership agreements were intended to facilitate visa-free travel, reduce tariffs and introduce European norms. The only thing that was not offered was EU membership.

The EU's other goal, even though it was not as openly expressed, was to limit Russia's influence and define how far Europe extends into the east. For Russia, the struggle to win over Ukraine was not only about maintaining its geopolitical influence, but also about having control over a region that was the nucleus of the Russian empire a millennium ago. The word Ukraine translates as 'border country,' and many feel the capital Kiev is the mother of all Russian cities. This helped create Cold War-style grappling between Moscow and Brussels [the EU capital].

This went on for years. Some former Soviet countries rejected the offer fairly quickly but Ukraine took its time. Associating with Europe and the U.S. was particularly popular in western Ukraine but highly unpopular in the east where millions of Russian speakers lived, many of whom were born in Russia. Also, the large right wing in west Ukraine, including fascists and neo-Nazis, hated Russia for its communist past and the fact that the Russian language was on an equal par with Ukrainian in their country.

The Coup d'état That Ousted Yanukovich

After years of talks the EU was under the impression Yanukovich finally was going to sign the 900-page agreement for close economic and political ties to Europe, and thus to Washington at Russia's expense. The proposed date for this was Nov. 29, 2013, in a ceremonial summit meeting in Lithuania.

On Nov. 9, 2013, however, after years of applying considerable pressure and offering many promises to the government in Kiev, Putin secretly meet with President Yanukovich near Moscow at a military airport, and the tide began to turn, not least because Ukraine was nearly insolvent. *Der Spiegel* reported: "In the end, the Russian president seems to have promised his Ukrainian counterpart several billion euros in the form of subsidies, debt forgiveness and duty-free imports. The EU, for its part, had offered Ukraine loans worth 10 million euros (\$827 million), which it had increased at the last moment, along with the vague prospect of a 1 billion euro loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Russia's was a far more comprehensive offer and Yanukovich went for it.

After a public announcement that the government had signed with Russia, not the EU, all hell broke out for three months, resulting in demonstrations and riots in the streets of Kiev,

the overthrow of the Yanukovich government, the vote by 97% of the people of Crimea to secede from Ukraine and become part of Russia, and fighting between the Ukrainian military and pro-Russian militants in two regions near the border.

The entire situation could have been avoided. According to scholar, author and Russia expert Stephen Cohen, interviewed on Democracy Now at the time: "The European Union in November told the government of Ukraine, 'If you want to sign an economic relationship with us, you cannot sign one with Russia.' Putin asked, 'Why not? Why don't the three of us have an arrangement? We'll help Ukraine. The West will help Ukraine.'" Such a deal would have benefitted Ukraine enormously.

The EU and U.S. refused because their objective was to control Ukraine for themselves and substantially weaken Russia by removing the most important country in its sphere of interest — economically, politically, and as a buffer zone through which Russia has been invaded at times in history. A corollary objective was still to move NATO directly up to the Russian border.

On the announcement up to 100,000 people demonstrated opposition to the pact in Kiev's Maidan Square. Breakaway right wing groups fought with police and one such gang broke into city Hall. On Dec. 8 a reported 200,000 protested in Maidan.

By now it was becoming evident that the conservative forces in opposition to Yanukovich were losing control of the demonstrations as extreme right wing organizations began setting up a battlefield in the Maidan. By mid-January Kiev appeared under siege and anti-government demonstrators expanded their protests to several cities in western Ukraine, storming and occupying government offices. Parliament then passed anti-protest laws, but they were ineffective. Prime Minister Mykola Azarov resigned near the end of January. Parliament rescinded the new laws and passed legislation dropping all charges against arrested protesters if they leave government buildings. In mid-February all 234 arrested demonstrators were released and the office occupations ended.

The real trouble began a couple of days later. Some 25,000 people were in the square when gunfire broke out, killing 11 demonstrators and seven police. Hundreds were wounded. It has not been established how it began. Feb. 20 was the worst day of violence when 88 people were killed. The police were largely blamed although there were reports that provocateurs fired at both sides to create even stronger opposition to the government. The next day Yanukovich signed a substantial power sharing deal with opposition leaders, but protests, led by the extreme right, continued and government offices were again occupied. On Feb. 22, as protests continued, Yanukovich 'fled for his life,' ending up hours later in Russia."

The coup was completed Feb. 23 when Parliament, including Yanukovich's Party of the Regions, quickly capitulated to reality and oligarch instructions and voted 328-0 to impeach the absent president. They then elected Obama's choice (which I discuss below), Arseniy Yatseniuk, interim Prime Minister. Virtually the entire U.S. mass media did not question or critically examine the implications of the White House honoring an unelected prime minister who just replaced a democratically elected president who was overthrown by mass demonstrations that included fascists, some of whom are ending up in the new government.

Washington's role in the overthrow of Yanukovich was decisive. Neoconservative anti-Russia Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland — who revealed that over the years the U.S. spent over \$5 billion to pull Kiev away from Moscow — became the point person on the

ground during the tumultuous antigovernment demonstrations. She not only was photographed at the time with leading opponents of the regime, including fascists and neo-Nazis, but also was pictured laughing as she handed out pastries to some of the protesters, urging them on. She worked together with U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt.

A phone call between the two on Jan. 28, 2014, nearly a month before the overthrow, was secretly recorded by a party or parties unknown and appeared on YouTube causing a sensation. While still on the phone they agreed that the post-coup prime minister should be Arseniy Yatsenyuk an America-friendly banker, lawyer and politician. As noted, he was named to that position after the president fled the country. Nuland and her cohort agreed with others that billionaire oligarch Petro Poroshenko should become a candidate for the presidency, which he won in late May. He vowed never to recognize Russia's "occupation of Crimea." Secretary of State John Kerry was a frequent visitor to Kiev during the months of anti-government protests, dashing here and there and making pompous pronouncements on behalf of President Obama.

Obama nominated Nuland and Pyatt to their positions in Ukraine about two months before the uprising began — either to work with Yanukovich when he selects the EU or — as it turned out — with the inevitable opposition should he side with Russia. (News analyst Philip Giraldi wrote in the *American Conservative* May 19: "Where will Victoria Nuland be after January? Nuland is one of Hillary Clinton's protégés at the State Department, and she is also greatly admired by hardline Republicans. (She earlier was an adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney.) This suggests she would be easily approved by Congress as secretary of state or maybe even national-security adviser." On May 19, Obama named Pyatt ambassador to Greece, where his experiences in Ukraine may someday stand him and imperialism in good stead.

According to the calculations of progressive author William Blum, there have been 57 instances of the United States overthrowing, or attempting to overthrow, a foreign government since the end of World War II in 1945. Ukraine is number 57. In a Dec 19, 2014, interview with the Russian magazine *Kommersant*, George Friedman — the founder and CEO of Stratfor, the commercial intelligence network — said this: "Russia calls the events that took place at the beginning of this year a coup d'état organized by the United States. And it truly was the most blatant coup in history.... About three years ago, in one of my books, I predicted that as soon as Russia starts to increase its power and demonstrate it, a crisis would occur in Ukraine." Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote in his book *The Grand Chessboard*, "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire" — as Washington well knows.

Washington participated in and to an important extent led the coup, but there was hardly the whisper of an outcry within the U.S. or among America's many obedient allies. Virtually the entire U.S. mass media did not question or critically examine the implications of the White House honoring an unelected "replacement" prime minister. But the White House has been condemning, sanctioning, and militarily threatening the Kremlin ever since President Putin complied with the subsequent verdict of a Crimean popular plebiscite a month later seeking to depart from the jurisdiction of Kiev and to be readmitted to that of Moscow.

Crimeans Vote for Russian Citizenship

For reasons that never have been convincingly explained, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea, where virtually the entire population had Russian citizenship, to the neighboring Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1954.

The Crimea Russians were not consulted about the decision and they complained, but got nowhere. At least they remained in the Soviet Union, as close to each other as New York to New Jersey. Forty years later in 1994, after the USSR imploded, the people of Crimea held their first referendum on separation from Ukraine and rejoining Russia — and 80% voted for independence. Nothing came of it. Twenty years passed before the second referendum in 2014, and Crimea returned to Russia.

Without firing a shot, Moscow's response to regime change was so adept and nonviolent it could have been choreographed by the Bolshoi. On March 11, the parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea adopted a declaration of independence from Ukraine. Five days later a peaceful democratic and honest referendum was conducted in the region and 96.77% voted to return to Russia. The next day President Vladimir Putin, with overwhelming backing from the Russian people and parliament, annexed the territory.

Our best guess about the initial transfer is that Khrushchev sought to increase the number of pro-Soviet inhabitants since Ukraine at the time contained a large right wing population, many thousands of whom fought on the German side against the Soviet Union in World War II. According to *The Week* "At least 5.3 million Ukrainians died during the war — about one sixth of the population. About 2.25 million of those killed were Jews, targeted by both the Nazis and some Ukrainian collaborators." Many of Ukraine's younger fascists today look up to those earlier right wing fighters as heroes.

About 25% of Ukraine's 46 million people claimed Russian as their mother tongue. A great many of them resided in the Russian-speaking separatist majorities in the eastern Ukraine administrative districts of Donetsk and Luhansk along the Russian border. The Putin government continues to support their independence struggle, which was launched after the coup.

Neither Russia nor Ukraine has officially declared war, but fighting between the separatists and Ukraine forces has resulted in the deaths of nearly 10,000 people, including soldiers, civilians and members of armed groups on both sides, since April 2014. All combatants agreed to measures lowering tensions in February 2015 in what is called the Minsk 2 Agreement, but fighting still continues and other aspects of the accord remain unfulfilled. The Kiev government says [1.8 million](#) people are internally displaced and that almost 30 % are children and 59% are pensioners.

The exception to Khrushchev's jurisdictional territorial transfer was the sprawling Russian Black Sea Fleet base, which has been in continuous use by the Russian Empire and the USSR since 1783, and the nearby city of Sevastopol. The facility is a geopolitical treasure because it is Russia's only significant warm water port. Obviously, Moscow was worried that a U.S.-installed regime in Kiev might refuse to renew Russia's lease on the base and its environs. (As an aside, Russia's main warm water port outside its own territory is in the Mediterranean Sea at Tartus in Syria. From the Russian point of view, the U.S has endangered both strategic assets).

The United States and all its European and other allies know all these facts about the relationship between the coup and Crimea, but all they emphasize to the public is "Russian Aggression."

The Problem of Consolidating Russian Society

Stratfor in 2012 offered some insights into an historic Russian problem that also cropped up after the demise of the Soviet Union: “On Aug. 11 Putin met with regional ombudsmen — intermediaries between the government and the people over social welfare, human rights, ethnic identity and overall relations. At the meeting, Putin said the ombudsmen should think of ways to help consolidate Russian society.

What Putin was touching on is something that has plagued Russia for most of its history: the fact that it is an incredibly large, diverse and socially unstable country. Currently, Russia has more than 185 different ethnic groups, 21 national republics and 85 regional subjects that span nine time zones. Every Russian leader — be they Czarist, Soviet or post-Soviet — has struggled to consolidate this disparate population of 143,500,000 today. The Czars divided the peoples of the Russian Empire into various subjects to try to keep them segregated, but this led to constant uprisings among specific regional subjects against the czars.

The Soviet strategy was to unite all citizens by referring to them as “Soviets,” creating an identity that would supersede divisions created by ethnicity, religion and political ideology. The Soviet strategy was so successful that it not only united the peoples of Russia, but also those in the surrounding 14 republics that made up the Soviet Union. The “Soviet” classification tied together peoples throughout the union — from Tajik villages to Baltic cities to the Caucasus Mountains and at every point in between. The Soviet identity was united in language, literature, institutions, culture and ideology....

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia plunged into a deep identity crisis. Yes, the peoples of Russia knew they were technically citizens of the new Russian Federation (even if they were not ethnically Russian), but there was no coherent idea of what that actually meant. Russia was undergoing economic, political, financial and social chaos. There was nothing uniting the peoples; they were forced to fight just to survive.

This changed when Putin was elected president in 2000; he started to consolidate the Russian peoples under his leadership. Putin was heavy-handed in his tactics. He united the majority of the peoples under one political party, he clamped down on dissidence — political or ethnic — and he purged foreign economic and social influence. Under Putin’s leadership the country began to not only stabilize but to thrive. Through this consolidation process, a mythos began to take root around Putin and his leadership. Many critics compared the myth of Putin to that of a Russian cult leader. But for most Russians the important part was that under Putin, Russia was a strong, globally important country once again.

Following is a somewhat related analysis from an article by Thomas Graham, managing director at Kissinger Associates, that he published Aug. 24 in *The National Interest* titled “The Sources of Russian Conduct.”: “Like his predecessors... Putin] is adamant that Russia — as a political and spiritual community — cannot survive other than as a great power. His authority is reinforced by an elite that, save for a small minority, shares this view, which also resonates with the broader population. Putin’s departure will not likely change the essence of the Russian challenge, no matter how different his successor’s style and tactics might be....

[An] all-encompassing state has been the central and decisive actor in Russian history. It gave structure to a vast, increasingly multiethnic, multi-confessional empire.... Russia’s expansion only stopped when it ran into countervailing

geopolitical forces — the Germanic powers... in the West, China and eventually Japan in the East, and the British Empire in the South. Over the centuries, this dialectic of expansion and resistance created Russia's geopolitical space, roughly the territory of the former Soviet Union or Russian Empire. This is the sphere of influence Russian rulers consider essential to their security. This is why they have pushed back so vigorously against what they see as American encroachments on this sphere in the past 15 years through, for example, the expansion of NATO and the establishment of military bases in Central Asia, tied to operations in Afghanistan....

The internal and external imperatives have combined to feed a persistent sense of vulnerability that never lies far beneath the surface in the consciousness of Russia's rulers.... [They] hope to replicate the success of their predecessors, and avoid the catastrophic failure of Gorbachev, by restoring and sustaining Russia's position as a great power.

The final geopolitical element of Russia's strategy is to rein in the United States, to compel it to take into account the interests of other great powers, including first of all Russia, as it pursues its own. That is the goal of Russia's effort to rally support against the U.S.-led global order for a new multipolar world based on state sovereignty and mutual respect (at least among great powers).

Russia Looks Fairly Strong Today

A number of Russian intellectuals who are critical of the current regime have written articles recently about "Russia's decline," anticipating a change in government in the next 10 to 15 years, when Putin, now 63, and his ruling circle, leave politics. One of them is Denis Volkov, a sociologist and analyst at Levada Center a think tank based in Moscow that is threatened with the possibility of being banned. In a July 6 article titled "Russia of the Mid-2020s: Breakdown of the Political Order" he argues "that the heyday of Putin's regime is already in the past and that in the next 10 to 15 years, the Russian political system may wind up in disarray. The legitimacy of the regime, which has been waning for some time, will eventually undermine its ability to maintain social order and deal with new and impending crises."

We find this critic's brief paragraph about the stability in Russia today — despite serious economic problems, and widespread corruption — to be enlightening:

At present, Vladimir Putin's political regime seems stable and solid. The president himself enjoys the approval of some 80% (82% at latest count) of the population. Approval of the government's performance has also remained high, as the Kremlin has proved rather effective in dealing with the current economic crisis, in executing covert operations to annex Crimea, and in maintaining social stability in the country. The system seems to be legitimate enough, both with the elites and the population as a whole, to suggest that the parliamentary elections of 2016 will once again result in a Duma controlled by the party in power. And, in 2018, Putin will be re-elected president should he choose to run for the office. The regime was able to maintain this legitimacy by demonstrating its vitality and ability to deal with several concurrent and successive economic and political crises. In 2005 and 2011-2012, it withstood a series of popular protests on a national scale (with mass protests on a regional level in 2009-2010); it managed to transfer presidential power from Putin to Dmitry Medvedev in 2007-2008, and back to Putin in 2011-2012; it weathered economic crises in 2009 and has coped adequately with more recent economic troubles. Further, Putin's Russia has projected power in the war with Georgia

in 2008, the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, support for the rebels in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and the intervention in Syria in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Russia's Economic Problems

A portion of Russia's current economic problems, according to an article in *Foreign Policy Journal* by Paul Craig Roberts and Michael Hudson, stems from Washington's advice to develop a neoliberal capitalist economy to trusting Russian leaders in the early days after the downfall.

"Washington abused this trust to saddle Russia with an economic policy designed to carve up Russian economic assets and transfer ownership into foreign hands. By tricking Russia into accepting foreign capital and exposing the ruble to currency speculation, Washington made sure that the U.S. could destabilize Russia with capital outflows and assaults on the ruble's exchange value. Only a government unfamiliar with the neoconservative aim of U.S. world hegemony would have exposed its economic system to such foreign manipulation." The authors also note:

According to various reports, the Russian government is reconsidering the neoliberal policy that has served Russia so badly since the collapse of the Soviet Union. If Russia had adopted an intelligent economic policy, Russia's economy would be far ahead of where it stands today. It would have avoided most of the capital flight to the West by relying on self-finance.

Russian journalist and economic correspondent Dmitry Dokuchaev noted in *Russia Direct* Aug. 24 that "Russian capital flight — one of the major problems complicating the recovery of the nation's economy — has been reduced five-fold since 2015. The Russian economy is gradually recovering from the economic shock of two years ago, which occurred after the sudden drop in oil prices and the pressure from Western sanctions. In the second half of August, both Bloomberg and Moody's announced that Russia's recession was ending. More importantly, statistical evidence shows improvement in Russia's economy."

The 2018 Election and Beyond

According to an Aug. 25 article by Andrei Kolnesnikov published in the *Moscow Times*: "It is apparent that President Putin won't take all members of the old guard with him in 2018 when he is expected to win another presidential election that year. Some will be replaced with younger, more efficient officials."

Kolnesnikov, a senior associate at the Carnegie Moscow Center, continued: "The surprise Mid-August replacement of Sergei Ivanov, a longtime ally of Putin, with former head of protocol Anton Vaino as presidential chief of staff, sparked a host of speculation, most of which can be safely disregarded. But, digging through the unfounded forecasts, one can find a clear message.

A comparison of Vaino's credentials to those of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev suggests that he may well become the new prime minister. Like Vaino, Medvedev previously worked for the central government and was also known as a businesslike and responsible official. Like Vaino, Medvedev was presidential chief of staff and was not considered an independent figure. But

the main point is that the regime needs to prepare a new generation of the elite to stand by Putin in 2018, when his current presidential term ends, and beyond. As chief of staff, Vaino will be instrumental in preparing this new wave of politicians.

The recent removals of officials like Russian Railways boss Vladimir Yakunin, drug tsar Viktor Ivanov, and others are preparations for 2018. The list of retired will only get longer. They will be replaced by a generation of special service operatives, security guards, and technocrat-apparatchiks in their 40s and 50s.

Stratfor reported Sept. 22: "Less than a week after parliamentary elections affirmed the ruling party's hold on power, Putin is once again shaking things up in the Kremlin. On Sept. 22, Putin appointed Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin to head the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) in place of longtime leader Mikhail Fradkov. In the Duma, meanwhile, Vyacheslav Volodin, Putin's former deputy chief of staff, will likely take over as speaker, having won a seat for the ruling United Russia party in the Sept. 18 elections. Rumors of the reshuffle have circulated in the media for weeks, but the motives for the move remain unclear."

Communist Party Critique of Putin's Russia

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) — a remnant of the ruling Soviet Communist Party — is not a revolutionary party and has little power. But it speaks freely and it put forward for this year's parliamentary elections a left agenda titled "Ten Steps Toward Life with Dignity" that calls for substantial changes in the organization of society. It's quite revealing. Here are brief excerpts:

- · The riches of Russia must serve the people and not a handful of oligarchs. We come out for nationalization of the oil and gas industries. This measure alone will increase the national revenue by more than three trillion rubles. Nationalization of key banks, the power industry, railways, communications systems, and defense industries would create a strong government sector in the economy. This would make Russia less dependent on foreign capital. Today the share of foreign companies in metallurgy, railway and power generating machine building already exceeds 75%. That share continues to grow in spite of the sanctions. In effect, we are talking about colonial dependence....
- · Today Russia's financial system is tightly linked to the centers of world capitalism. The country does not enjoy real independence. It is time to restore our economic sovereignty and protect ourselves from the diktat of the dollar. The Central Bank of Russia should be rid of the influence of the U.S. Federal Reserve System. It must serve the cause of developing the national economy and the social sphere. State control of the banking system and currency transactions will be able to stop the appalling flow of capital abroad. In recent years it has turned into an instrument of ruining Russia and robbing its citizens. In the past ten years the country lost nearly 40 trillion rubles, which equals three annual budgets....The new government will also strengthen the country's economic sovereignty by promoting small and medium business and advanced forms of economic management. Our anti-crisis plan guarantees maximum support of people's and collective enterprises....
- · Enough claptrap about import replacement. It is a disgrace for our country to be in 95th place in terms of economic development. It is a disgrace to have 16% of manufacturing industry in the structure of GDP. Its share has to be raised to 70-80%. In Germany the share is 83%. Russia needs a powerful modern industry

based on latest discoveries and high technologies. Its key sectors should be microelectronics, robotics and machine-tool building. Only then would we be able to survive in a world where predatory globalists run the show. Thanks to the perseverance of the CPRF the Law on Industrial Policy has been passed. It has to be made to work....

- · The land of Russia can feed its own population plus another 500 million people with choice food products. Yet half of our food is imported from abroad and it is often of inferior quality. All this can be done if two conditions are complied with. First, at least 10% of budget revenue should be directed to support agriculture. Second, active support must be given to private farmers and peasant households. It has long been proven that such enterprises are more resilient. They adapt far better to changes in the food market.
- · In terms of living standards Russia has dropped to 91st place in the world next to Laos and Guatemala. That is not the way to live. Running the economy like this is a crime. The state is duty-bound to control prices for bare necessities, fuel and drugs. The spending on utilities and housing services must not exceed 10% of the family budget... Taxes must be fair and effective.
- Ten percent of the population has grabbed almost 90% of the national wealth. What is the price of all this? The price is that while some people are wallowing in riches, the majority barely make ends meet. Their labor and pension rights, the right to education and healthcare are under attack.

Moscow's Cooperation With Washington

Since Putin became Russia's leader as prime minister and president — despite Washington's increasing hostility — the Kremlin has cooperated with the White House on numerous occasions. For instance:

- Moscow is the main reason why President Obama did not launch another Middle East war. It was Russia that came up with the deal in August 2013 that allowed Obama to forego his risky commitment to massively bomb Syria for allegedly crossing his "red line" that prohibited the Assad regime from using its chemical weapons against the Syrian people. The government had been accused of deploying the nerve gas Sarin to kill at least 281 civilians in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus — an allegation the regime strongly denied and which has never been proven. (Seymour Hersh argues it was a false-flag endeavor by the terrorist organization al-Nusra and backed by Turkey to provoke U.S. bombing.) Putin arranged that the Syrian government would offer to relinquish its entire chemical weapons arsenal if the bombing was called off. Obama quickly accepted the offer, avoiding massive antiwar protests and opposition from millions of Americans and many members of Congress. The New York Times reported: "President Obama awoke up Monday (Sept. 9) facing a Congressional defeat that many in both parties believed could hobble his presidency. And by the end of the day, he found himself in the odd position of relying on his Russian counterpart, Vladimir V. Putin, of all people, to bail him out." U.S. and British intelligence subsequently acknowledged doubts that Assad ordered the use of poison gas.
- · Russia played a major role in the successful talks with Iran to conclude a nuclear agreement. As an ally of the Tehran government, Moscow was concerned for a number of years that Israel would fulfill its continual threats to take military action against Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons program — a

program Tehran closed down years earlier according to American intelligence organizations. Russia strongly urged Iran to enter one-on-one talks with Washington and then the six party the U.S., China, Russia, Britain and France — plus Germany.

- · Putin and George W. Bush signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty and declaration on a new strategic relationship between the U.S. and Russia in 2002. This was superseded in 2011 by the New Start treaty limiting more nuclear weapons.
- · The U.S and Russia jointly announced the organization of the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism in 2006. In 2009, Russia granted President Obama permission to ship U.S. weapons supplies across its territory, or through its airspace, en route to Afghanistan. Moscow has also granted NATO members Germany, France and Spain the right to use Russian territory to transit military cargos to Afghanistan.

What Now?

There should be a closer relationship and far more cooperation between Washington and Moscow instead of ever greater hostilities that could eventually lead to a most regrettable conclusion. As a socialist I certainly recognize both capitalist governments have, to say the least, shortcomings that should be corrected. But if the U.S. in effect dismounted from its high horse and sought a peaceful and mutually advantageous relationship with Russia it could succeed. Moscow would much prefer a far less antagonistic relationship.

The biggest obstacle is Washington's insistence that the countries in the world agree to follow U.S. leadership, and virtually all of them do because of America's unprecedented economic and military power. At the same time, those who don't line up with the global hegemon frequently experience regime change, wars or both.

Hillary Clinton's braggadocio about U.S. exceptionalism and indispensability means global domination in political practice. The world doesn't need that.

There has to be an end to America's unjust wars, support for repellent dictatorships, and continuous efforts to instigate regime change. As it stands today the U.S. is spending a trillion dollars to make its nuclear arsenal more deadly. It is surrounding both Russia and China with military bases and implicit threats that can lead to no good.

This has to change.

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