
What's Old is New — Kennan, Putin, and the Russian Competitive Viewpoint

November 30, 2015 | Lieutenant Colonel Michael A. Adelberg

U.S. foreign policy experts in 1948 would be familiar with modern Russia. George F. Kennan or President Harry Truman would immediately recognize modern Russian behavior. Nationalist rhetoric, economic brinksmanship, the cult of personality, and aggressive shows of force? All old. Therefore, it is worth reviewing some basic foundations of Soviet foreign policy to understand modern Russian foreign policy.

On February 9, 1946, Joseph Stalin gave a speech at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, Russia. Although the war was over, he called for a level of military production three times higher than in the pre-war years. Stalin “justified the sacrifices this would require” because of “capitalism’s tendency to produce conflict”; pure Marxist rhetoric that initially did not even raise the interest of the Moscow Embassy. “No one familiar with Stalin’s thinking would have found much new in the speech: it reflected what he had long believed and often said.”¹ It did, however, get Washington’s attention. The State Department sent a request to the Moscow Embassy for an “interpretive analysis of what we may expect in the way of future implementation of these announced policies.”²

The response on February 22 was Kennan’s now-famous Long Telegram. The analysis Kennan put into the telegram remains just as relevant and insightful today as it was nearly 70 years ago. His conclusions help explain Russia under Vladimir Putin, just as much as they helped explain the Soviet Union under Stalin. Stalin and Putin’s rhetoric share common trends and themes, which would imply that the Kremlin psyche was not exclusively derived from communist ideology, and that there are (or may be) enduring Russian constants. The themes that Kennan identified are mirrored today in the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, and in current Russian actions and rhetoric.

First and foremost, Kennan used the words “Soviet Union,” “Russia,” “Moscow,” and “the Kremlin” fairly interchangeably throughout the telegram, and also in his “Mr. X” article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.” While the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

(USSR) was certainly more than just Russia geographically, the halls of power remained firmly in Moscow. Kennan deduced two tenets of Soviet foreign policy that remain relevant today.³

The first tenet Kennan deduced was the goal of Soviet foreign policy “to advance the relative strength of USSR as a factor in international society.” This same tendency is present today in Russia. Western analysts generally agree that “the post-communist Russia of President Vladimir Putin, who has led the country with an iron grip for 15 years, hopes to remake itself into a global superpower.”⁴ Among those with this view is Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former secretary-general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), who assessed in February 2015 that “the Kremlin’s true goal was to shatter NATO solidarity and reassert Russian dominance over Eastern Europe.”⁵

A second tenet Kennan identified was that “Soviet efforts, and those of Russia’s friends abroad, must be directed toward deepening and exploiting the differences and conflicts between capitalist powers.”⁶ While this assessment by Kennan pre-dated the Washington treaty, as the former secretary-general stated, it is considered one of Russia’s current goals to foment division within NATO. U.S. Commander of Army Forces in Europe Lieutenant General Frederick B. Hodges warned that Putin is seeking to destroy the NATO alliance by splintering it rather than outright attacking it with overt Russian forces.⁷ Stephen Zsabo, executive director of the Transatlantic Academy, highlighted numerous efforts by Putin to fracture European cohesion and unity:

One of Putin’s major goals is to divide Europeans from each other and Europe from the United States. He has attempted to do this in a number of ways, waging information warfare and disinformation campaigns on social media and through the purchase of major newspapers and the financing and cultivation of anti-European political parties, most notably the National Front in France, Jobbik in Hungary and Syriza in Greece. His recent visit to Hungary, where he was warmly received by Prime Minister Viktor Orban, is another indication of fault lines opening in Europe.⁸

Even relatively minor events in Europe result in small cracks and fissures among the allies when Russia is involved. In April 2015, the U.S. Ambassador to the Czech Republic was banned from Prague Castle, the official Czech presidential residence, after he publicly criticized the Czech president’s decision to attend a World War II memorial ceremony in Moscow when other European Union leaders boycotted the ceremony due to Russia’s actions in Crimea and Ukraine.⁹

This line of reasoning does not establish a causal relationship of events, but it does establish a historically consistent correlation of actions between Communist Soviet Union and modern Russia. However, Kennan did posit a set of causal factors to explain Soviet actions in both the Long Telegram and more fully in the Mr. X article. Like his

implications for Soviet foreign policy, his insights into the sources still appear to remain relevant in post-Soviet Russia. Kennan attributes the Soviet “political personality” to a mix of ideology and circumstance. The ideology has passed into history in Russia, but the circumstances by which the Soviet leaders found themselves, as identified by Kennan, remain and in fact have been reinforced by the Cold War.

At the heart of these circumstances is the geographical-historical basis that shaped the Kremlin. Kennan wrote that “[f]rom the Russian-Asiatic world out of which they had emerged they carried with them a skepticism as to the possibilities of permanent and peaceful co-existence of rival forces” that was “unmodified by any of the Anglo-Saxon traditions of compromise.”¹⁰ In the Long Telegram, he described Russia as “this land which had never known a friendly neighbor or indeed a tolerant equilibrium of separate powers, either internal or international . . .”¹¹ Together these ideas paint the picture of a Kremlin that has an historical mistrust of any outside powers.

This world view remains prevalent today in Russian thought. The 2014 “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation” describes the world thusly:

World development at the present stage is characterized by the strengthening of global competition, tensions in various areas of inter-state and interregional interaction, rivalry of proclaimed values and models of development, instability of the processes of economic and political development at the global and regional levels against a background of general complication of international relations. There is a stage-by-stage redistribution of influence in favour of new centres of economic growth and political attraction.¹²

The Military Doctrine takes this view of ever-present competition further by defining NATO activities as the first of its stated main external military dangers, including the build-up of NATO forces and the advancement of NATO membership to countries along its borders. Thus, modern Russia paints the picture of being surrounded by adversaries, if not outright enemies. This aligns nearly perfectly with Kennan’s views on the Soviet perception of the world. For the Soviets, this perception of being surrounded by a hostile world was necessary, in order to maintain the instruments of the regime. Kennan assessed that “the stress laid by Moscow on the menace confronting Soviet society from the world outside its borders is founded not in the realities of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home.”¹³ The idea of creating or exaggerating an external threat to unify a people is hardly a novel idea. Just recently, Stephen M. Walt quipped, “As both democratic and authoritarian leaders have long known, you can get people to do a lot of foolish things if they are sufficiently scared.”¹⁴ There is no shortage of examples of the Putin regime using state mechanisms to eliminate political opposition, from trumped up criminal prosecutions to allegations of outright assassinations.

Kennan also illustrated to the U.S. leadership in his reports that the Soviet view was a natural follow-on to pre-Revolution Russian hostility to the outside world. To demonstrate this point, in 1936, Kennan wrote a report on the topic “taken wholly from the dispatches of Neill S. Brown, the U.S. minister in St. Petersburg from 1850 to 1853.”¹⁵

This parallel of the Soviet Union and modern Russia both viewing the outside world as a threat is interesting, but the implication of this parallel is what is important. As Kennan presented the concept of containment, he gave a cautionary word:

It is important to note, however, that such a policy has nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward “toughness.” While the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige. Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by its sense of realism.¹⁶

In the present, Russia, and Putin in particular, continue to behave as if the entire West were the aggressor, much as Soviet Russia before. However, as Kennan identified with the Soviets, modern Russian foreign policies are often more about internal security and regime survival than about addressing external issues. Therefore, if the current Russian view is still aligned with the 1940s view of the world, which in itself was rooted in the czarist views, then one can surmise that Russian leadership tendencies are not so far removed from the Soviet era as the United States might have believed. Therefore Kennan’s analysis that the Kremlin was amenable to considerations of prestige for internal audiences are probably just as applicable to the modern Kremlin.

Two insights emerge. First, the Russian world view is, and will continue to be, one of competition rather than cooperation. Second, the Russian leadership is less concerned with responding to external pressures than with maintaining internal political dominance. Therefore, Russian leaders, especially Putin, will probably not respond cooperatively to coercive measures, as that would be seen internally as weakness. This domestically motivated behavior is a trend since before the Communist revolution. Sanctions, blustering rhetoric, shows of force, and other hard-line approaches are unlikely to achieve any short-term desired outcomes and will only play into Russia’s narrative of being threatened by the United States and Western Europe.

Subsequent to the assessment of the root causes of Soviet conduct, Kennan offered the following prediction of future U.S.-Soviet relations:

It is clear that the United States cannot expect in the foreseeable future to enjoy political intimacy with the Soviet regime. It must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena. It must continue to expect that Soviet policies will reflect no

abstract love of peace and stability, no real faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the Socialist and capitalist worlds, but rather a cautious, persistent pressure toward disruption and, weakening of all rival influence and rival power.¹⁷

Therefore in modern times, it is not unreasonable to assume that, since modern Russia is exhibiting many of the same tendencies, consistent with the same worldview, of its predecessor Soviet regime, then it is likely that the future of U.S.-Russian relations will follow with Kennan's predictions of the U.S.-Soviet relations. This means, of course, that Russia will continue to view the West as a threat and a rival, and will likely not be willing to cooperate, unless cooperation gives Russia a clear relative advantage over the United States.

Thus in dealing with Russia, U.S. leaders and policymakers should remain ever-cognizant of the Soviet background of Russian foreign policy. The United States may need to consider adopting a give-and-take approach to dealing with Russia in the foreseeable future, with an understanding that the Kremlin may not be all that different than it was in 1947. Recognizing that Russia is amenable to considerations of prestige, this approach means granting Russia some measure of prestige and recognition. For example, recognize some realities, like the fact that the Crimean annexation is complete and irreversible, and concede the point to Russia. The United States may not like it, but it is also not in any position to change it anyway. Other examples include acknowledging that Russia was a significant contributor to completing the P5+1 (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Germany) agreement with Iran or that Russia is a major actor in the Syrian crisis. Acknowledging these facts without actually endorsing Russia's methods is a practical minor concession the United States could probably afford to pay.

ENDNOTES

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, New York: Penguin Press, 2011, pp. 216-217.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

3. George F. Kennan, "861.00/2-2246: Telegram - The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State," February 22, 1946, available from nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm, accessed September 10, 2015. Kennan also identified two lesser implications, which exclusively deal with socialist-capitalist conflict and are therefore less useful now. In addition, as Kennan was writing an official state cable, he occasionally attempted brevity by omitting a preposition or two; the poor grammar is his, not this author's.

4. Thomas K. Grose, "Putin's Army Built to Reassert Russian Influence in the Modern World," *U.S. News & World Report*, online news journal, posted March 11, 2015, available from www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/03/11/vladimir-putins-army-built-to-reassert-russian-influence-in-a-modern-world, accessed March 15, 2015.

5. Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, "Former NATO Chief Says Putin's True Goal Is To Return To Position Of 'Great Power' And Europe Isn't Ready To Fight Back," *The National Post*, online news journal, posted February 6, 2015, available from news.nationalpost.com/news/former-nato-chief-says-putins-true-goal-is-to-return-to-position-of-great-power-and-europe-isnt-ready-to-fight-back, accessed March 15, 2015.

6. Kennan, "861.00/2-2246: Telegram - The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State."

7. Justin Huggler, "Russian President Vladimir Putin Trying To Destroy NATO: US Commander," *The Age*, online news journal, posted March 5, 2015, available from www.theage.com.au/world/russian-president-vladimir-putin-trying-to-destroy-nato-us-commander-20150304-13vm69, accessed March 16, 2015.

8. Stephen Zsabo, "Divide and Conquer," *U.S. News & World Report*, online news journal, March 5, 2015, available from www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/world-report/2015/03/05/vladimir-putin-wants-to-break-up-the-us-german-partnership, accessed March 15, 2015.

9. "Czech President Bans US Ambassador From Prague Castle: Reports," Reuters, April 6, 2015, available from www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/czech-president-bans-us-ambassador-from-prague-castle-reports/ar-AAatzAm, accessed April 6, 2015. On April 10, the Czech President announced that he would not attend the Moscow parade, but would still attend other memorial events in Moscow, and that this decision had nothing to do with pressure from Ambassador Schapiro or from Czech political leaders. See Hana de Goeij, "Czech Leader Won't Attend Moscow Parade After Criticism," available from www.nytimes.com/2015/04/11/world/europe/czech-leader-wont-attend-moscow-parade-after-criticism.html?ref=europe.

10. George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," originally published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947, posted as "George Kennan, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct' (1947)," *The History Guide: Lectures on Twentieth Century Europe*, online journal, April 13, 2013, p. 3, available from www.historyguide.org/europe/kennan.html, accessed December 12, 2014.

11. Kennan, *Telegram*, Part 2.

12. *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, Part II, Sec. 9, The Government of the Russian Federation, available from rusemb.org.uk/press/2029, accessed September 10, 2015. *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* is more akin to the U.S. *National Security Strategy* than it is to the U.S. military use of the word "doctrine." The version quoted here is the English translation posted on the official page of The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Other sources have slight differences in translation.

13. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," p. 4.

14. Stephen M. Walt, "Chill Out America," *Foreign Policy*, May 29, 2015.

15. Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, p. 97.

16. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," p. 7.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The views expressed in this Of Interest piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This article is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press articles should contact the Editor for Production via email at SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College."