

Russia, Ukraine and the West: Is Confrontation Inevitable?

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Roger Cohen

Good evening, everybody. I'm Roger Cohen, a columnist for *The New York Times*. Welcome to this event, which is the inaugural event of a new partnership between Chatham House and *The International New York Times*. This event is being live-streamed. It is therefore not, despite its venue, under Chatham House Rules. Everything is going out around the globe and is on the record. We will take later on in this event not only questions from the audience but tweeted questions.

We meet on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, at a time of great turbulence in Europe. Russia, by annexing Crimea, became the first major European state to annex part of another state since 1945, and of course since then has had a role in stirring up low-level – and not so low-level – violence in eastern Ukraine in which, to this date, several hundred people have already died. This was a shock to many people. I don't think many of us thought President Putin necessarily meant it when he described the breakup of the Soviet Union as the greatest geostrategic tragedy of the 20th century. But nevertheless, here we are.

Prior to that annexation, of course, we had the extraordinary and heady scenes on the Maidan in Kiev – the Gettysburg, if you like, of the Ukrainian nation – and this new state of Ukraine taking form in a new way. More recently, from newly elected President Poroshenko, there has been the offer of a ceasefire, but people continue to be killed. It appears that President Putin may be looking for an off-ramp from the violence that has occurred and has led to Russia's exclusion from the G8 (now G7) and, by some estimates, the departure or exit of at least \$100 billion from Russia.

All this, of course, occurring at a time of American retrenchment – some say weakness.

Michael McFaul

We don't say that.

Roger Cohen

Some do, though. And also at a time of European navel-gazing. So is President Putin, in his new and most autocratic phase to date, really looking for long-term confrontation with the West? Is this Cold War II? Could it last as long as the last one? And, as our motion tonight suggests, is long-term confrontation really inevitable at this stage?

To discuss these issues, we have a wonderfully distinguished panel here tonight: John Mearsheimer, as you all know, professor of political science at the University of Chicago; Chrystia Freeland, now a member of the Canadian Parliament, long a star of the *FT*; Michael McFaul, professor at Stanford University and the former US ambassador to Russia; and Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Chrystia, if I may, I'd like to begin with you. Why do you think President Putin acted now? Why the annexation of Crimea now and why what he's done in eastern Ukraine now, at this moment?

Chrystia Freeland

And I would add: why the revocation of the parliamentary authority to invade Ukraine, to take military action against Ukraine?

Roger Cohen

Please do add away.

Chrystia Freeland

Because I think those things come together. I think what we're seeing from Putin at core – I think our natural instinct is to see this as a big, geopolitical, strategic chessboard, to talk about Russia somehow feeling threatened by Ukraine. I mean, really – Russia threatened by Ukraine? To maybe think about some kind of emotional connection with the threatened Russian speakers in Ukraine – also completely bogus. Russian speakers live more freely speaking Russian in Ukraine than they do in Russia.

At core what we're seeing in Ukraine and in Russia is a fight about post-Soviet authoritarian kleptocracy and how sustainable that political system will be. That's what Putin has decided to build in Russia. It's what Yanukovich was trying to build, and did a pretty good job, in Ukraine. To everyone's surprise, the Ukrainians decided they didn't want it. It was a very 'made in Ukraine' uprising. It was much less about Europe, certainly not about Russia, really about what kind of a political order were you going to have in Ukraine.

Roger Cohen

You're saying Russia is a kleptocracy.

Chrystia Freeland

Yes, absolutely. And for Putin, that's really dangerous, because the example of Ukraine – with all of its similarities to Russia, with so many Russian speakers, with much of the country a similar Soviet experience – if Ukraine can successfully build a rule-of-law, capitalist democracy that actually works, imagine the demonstration effect in Russia. That is the core threat that Ukraine poses to Russia. Ukrainians don't want to pose that threat. They're quite happy to – it's a big enough job to try to do this in Ukraine. But inevitably, because of the neighbourhood Ukraine lives in, they do pose that truly existential threat to Putin.

So I think in response we've seen Putin pushing as hard as he could get away with. So the annexation of Crimea – Ukraine totally unprepared, the West totally unprepared. I think that what we saw in eastern and southern Ukraine, I think we saw actually much less Russian success than the Kremlin had anticipated. I think you had a hope that you would have this strip from Odessa along the Black Sea coast

all the way east and that Russia would succeed in destabilizing that whole area. It didn't work, it only worked in the Donbas.

The good news, from my perspective, is sanctions have worked, at least a little. I do think that we are seeing now the real cost to the Russian economy, the cost to Putin's cronies. Certainly there are still tremendously destabilizing efforts but Putin won't do it overtly, at least for now.

Roger Cohen

John, you blame the United States and the West. You say that it was the expansion of NATO that essentially led to Russia and President Putin feeling cornered, and the West has failed to understand all the ways in which it has provoked the Russian president. After all, there's the Monroe Doctrine in the United States, whereby the United States sees its hemisphere as essentially belonging to it, so why shouldn't President Putin have the same feelings? Is it really the West that has provoked the Russian president into doing this?

John Mearsheimer

Yes, and I'll explain. You have to distinguish between the deep causes and the precipitating causes of the crisis in February of this year. In terms of the deep causes, basically what's going on here is that the West – and the United States is the main force driver here – is trying to peel Ukraine away from Russia's orbit and make it part of the West.

There are sort of three strands to this policy. One, which is the most important one, as Roger said, is NATO expansion. We're going to eventually, so we say, incorporate Ukraine into NATO. Second is EU expansion. Third is the Orange Revolution. This is where we do all sorts of social engineering inside Ukraine, all for the purposes of putting in power leaders who are pro-Western and decidedly anti-Russian. So this is the background, and the Russians have made it clear for many years now that this is just unacceptable. The Georgia war in August 2008 was all about this very issue. So that's the background.

But the question is, why did it happen now? You have to go back to November of last year when Yanukovych said that he was not going to consummate the deal with the EU. Instead, he was going to cut an economic deal with the Russians, which led to protests. These protests got out of hand. But then, most importantly, you had on February 22nd of this year a coup, where a democratically elected leader who was for the most part pro-Russian was overthrown.

Roger Cohen

A coup led by civilians in the street.

John Mearsheimer

Well, it was a coup.

Roger Cohen

A coup is a military thing.

John Mearsheimer

It was a coup that was inextricably linked with American support for the protesters. You want to remember that the Orange Revolution and the social engineering that we're doing inside of Ukraine is all designed to put in power leaders who are pro-American or pro-Western, and overturn those leaders who are pro-Russian. So it's no accident that when that coup took place –

Roger Cohen

You're insisting on this word.

John Mearsheimer

Which word?

Roger Cohen

Coup.

John Mearsheimer

Yes, it was a coup. He was a democratically elected leader. It wasn't a coup?

Roger Cohen

I didn't see any military involved.

John Mearsheimer

It doesn't have to be military.

Roger Cohen

He fled.

John Mearsheimer

That's right. But he fled because he was fearful for his life.

Roger Cohen

No soldiers stormed into his office, like in Cairo.

John Mearsheimer

That may be true but it was still a coup. He was a democratically elected leader who was overthrown, and immediately thereafter Putin went to work. He did two things. One, he took Crimea, and he's made it clear that Crimea is not going to become part of NATO. The second thing is he mobilized troops on the border of eastern Ukraine. Many people say this is because he's trying to create a greater Russia, he's trying to recreate the Soviet Union. I think this was implicit in your comments. This is not what he's doing. He is a first-class strategist. He would not be foolish enough to invade Ukraine. That would be jumping into the briar patch.

What he's doing is, he's in the process of telling the Ukrainians and the West that they have two choices here. One is they back off, in which case he'll back off, or if they don't back off and they continue to try to integrate Ukraine into the West, he'll wreck Ukraine before he allows that to happen. And that's what he's doing: he's wrecking Ukraine. And he has all the tools to do that.

Roger Cohen

Michael.

Michael McFaul

I have a different view.

Roger Cohen

I think you might have a different view, and I'd like to invite you to articulate that different view. Also, having observed it closely, comment on how drastic this authoritarian turn in Moscow is and what its implications are in terms of American and Western policy.

Michael McFaul

The first thing, listening to John, that came to mind is we do a lot of this stuff – and I'm a recovering bureaucrat and a re-learning political scientist, so forgive me if I'm somewhere in between. But we do a lot of counterfactual stuff, right? So imagine a different Russia, and imagine a different leader and a different regime that was not so hung up on the issues that John just described. Imagine that for several years the issue of Georgia membership in NATO or Ukraine membership in NATO was not an agenda item that the highest leaders in my government – because I worked in the government for five years, just for everybody to know, not just in Moscow – or the highest leaders in the Kremlin never talked about.

You don't have to have much of an imagination because that was Russia until just last year. I was at every meeting that President Obama had either with Medvedev or Putin but one – I missed one. I don't ever recall the discussion of Ukrainian membership into NATO being an issue. On the contrary. It's still part of the backdrop – you said structural versus proximate causes. On the contrary, in the Medvedev years, we had a much different dynamic in US-Russian relations. I think that's important to remember because if it's all because of something that happened ten or fifteen or twenty years ago, how do you explain what we were doing just two or three years ago? How do you explain our cooperation on Iran? How do you explain WTO membership with Russia? How do you explain the Northern Distribution Network? Our supply routes, that were a trickle when we came into the government, were over 50 per cent of our supplies to Afghanistan and most of that went through Russia. How do you explain why Russia was selling us fuel to fight in Afghanistan?

And does anybody remember the giant crisis that ruined US-Russian relations when there was regime change in 2010 in that part of the world? Anybody remember it? Do you remember the hundred people that died? Do you remember the 300,000 refugees? There was a dispute that they were just arguing about in the Security Council yesterday, how many people have actually left Ukraine. Samantha Power said 5,000, the Russians said 100,000. But everybody knows that there were 300,000 that left this country. Nobody's responding – this is Chatham House, you've got to know. Kyrgyzstan, thank you. But most of you don't know. And by the way, from our perspective – and I'm speaking here as a government official at the time – Kyrgyzstan was an incredibly important security interest of ours because of something that we euphemistically call now the Manas transit center, but is really the Manas air base, where 95 per cent of our troops flew in and out of to Afghanistan.

Roger Cohen

So Michael, why did things flip?

Michael McFaul

The point is that you can't explain everything I just said and then say, well, NATO expansion caused all this. I want to punctuate that with two other facts. In 2010, 65 per cent of Russians had a positive view of the United States. Now 70 per cent have a negative view. In March 2012, his last meeting with the president – my president, President Obama – I was there in Korea, in Seoul. I'm paraphrasing now and I'm cognizant that we're on the record, but Medvedev, you can go look it up – in fact, you can look it up on your smartphones right now – Medvedev said something to the effect that US-Russian relations have never been better than they are right now.

Roger Cohen

But this makes everything all the more strange. What is your explanation?

John Mearsheimer

What about February 22nd? What happened on February 22nd?

Michael McFaul

I'll explain from my point of view – I'm happy to. The flip was from Medvedev to Putin. Two events are consequential. One of them is February 21st actually and the other one is demonstrations in Moscow in December 2011.

What changed? One, the change from Medvedev to Putin. I've got to say honestly, I did not, as the president's adviser at the time for Russia, I did not fully appreciate how big a change that would mean in policy. We all assumed that Putin ran the show, right? It's Putin. Medvedev is just his puppet, he just reflects some. We assumed there was what we call an inter-agency process, which was a call from the White House to the Kremlin. We assumed that everything we were doing in this cooperative sphere, Putin approved of. We were wrong about that.

Putin has a different worldview than Medvedev. It's not Russia that has a worldview – that's a key distinction I want to say. This is not inevitable because 'Russia versus the West', this is because the change of government at the top brought in place a guy with a different view about us. He has two things that are very different. One is he believes international relations are zero-sum. He's a realist, in the vernacular of academia, most certainly. He basically understands competition as the nature of the game, and if it's two points for Russia, it's minus two for the United States.

Barack Obama – whether it's good or bad, we can debate another time – but he doesn't see the world that way. He most certainly has a different view. He is a liberal institutionalist, in the jargon of our discipline. He believes in win-win outcomes and he believes that on most security and economic issues, our interests overlap with Russia and are not in competition.

The second hang-up he has: he believes that the United States uses covert and overt power to overthrow regimes we don't like. By the way, there is some historical evidence to support that hypothesis, right?

Roger Cohen

Yeah, I'm glad you acknowledge that.

Michael McFaul

There most certainly is. But in my view, having listened to Putin personally several times explain his theory – and he wouldn't disagree with my characterization, by the way. He would say: yes, you're right. He assigns agency to the United States that in my view we don't have. So Tunisia, that was us; Cairo, that was us. Syria, that was us. Russia and those people out on the streets, that was us. And me personally, by the way, in Russia, as he told me personally. He believes that all that happened because of us, not because people want to live in a democratic society, not because they read Jefferson, but because they came to McFaul's house and got money. And in Ukraine he believes the same thing. February 21st, for him, was an affirmation of this theory.

My view on that is different. That is not the way it looked from my perch in Moscow or my role in the administration. I think this is really important because I think this is distorted – at least know the way it looked from our perspective.

Number one, we weren't pushing for regime change in Ukraine. Ask the Ukrainians. They were incredibly disappointed with us. By the way, ask the Egyptians, ask the Syrians, ask anybody. We weren't doing anything. We were way behind. We were not part of anything.

Number two, when things got really out of hand because of the shooting, we got engaged. We did, very actively, on both the opposition side and the regime side. Don't quote me on this but I'll bet you the vice-president called Yanukovich a dozen times in the lead-up to that agreement, and other people in Kiev and elsewhere engaged in the opposition, to cut that deal. We supported that deal. It was a debate in our administration, I'll tell you honestly. Not everybody thought it was such a great thing to do. We thought it was the best of a lot of bad alternatives and we put a lot of pressure on both sides to sign that agreement.

Therefore, we were surprised when Yanukovich left. And that's what he did, he left. I remember it very vividly. We were like: where did he go? We don't know! He's in the Crimea. Why is he there? Can we get him back? Get the vice-president on the phone to tell him to go back. And he left. That's not Putin's view. Putin thinks that we chased him out. But that's not our view. He left.

Roger Cohen

That's not John Mearsheimer's view.

Michael McFaul

That's not John's too. But here John and I do agree: once that happened, then Putin said, to hell with these guys – to hell with us. I was right about them, this is what they do. They're regime-changers. The CIA is running everything. So I'm going to strike back. That's, to me, what Crimea was about.

That's a good news and bad news story – the conclusion, right? Because the good news is that this is not some grand strategy he has to recreate imperial Russia. I don't see any evidence of that. The strongest evidence I have is what he was doing right before February 21st. Right before February 21st, his most important foreign policy agenda was to create the Eurasian Economic Union. He wanted all of Ukraine to be in that union, not just Crimea. Number two, he let Khodorkovsky go. Senior government officials – I was still ambassador at the time – said that was a signal to us that we want a different relationship with you. He let the Pussy Riot singers out. And then –

Roger Cohen

But didn't he just want Sochi to go smoothly?

Michael McFaul

And then he threw this incredible party, \$50 billion worth allegedly, in Sochi. Was anybody there? I was there, it was a fantastic show. But the theme of that show was not confrontation with the West, it was not US versus Russia. I don't remember the speech about how we need to bring the Crimean Russians in. It was a very different theme. It was: we want to be a respected member of the international system. That was just two days before he went into Crimea.

John Mearsheimer

I would just note that the Georgia war, the Russia-Georgia war of August 2008 which was a precursor of the recent conflict, Putin was not in power.

Michael McFaul

No, I think he was, but that's okay.

Roger Cohen

Dmitri, you're the man in Moscow. I think it would be helpful if you could explain, describe, the way Russians are thinking right now. Because it appears that whatever we may think of President Putin's recent actions and whatever the obvious downside to them may be, that Russians are happy about this on

the whole, think it was the right move, back President Putin way more strongly than they did before. The president caught something in the Russian mood: that Russians genuinely felt they'd been humiliated or been cornered or treated badly. What are Russians feeling right now, as you perceive it?

Dmitri Trenin

First of all, I think there are many Russians and there are many views. Some Russians have ceased to be on speaking terms with other Russians as a result of what's been happening.

Michael McFaul

Dmitri and I are still on speaking terms – I want to note that for the record.

Dmitri Trenin

I think that when the Russians see their daily or nightly TV shows, what they see is ordinary people in Donbas suffering at the hands of the Ukrainian military. They see countless interviews with those people. They see houses destroyed. They see aerial bombardments, they see artillery shelling. They also see, gee, these are people like us. It's difficult for me to distinguish between the person on the screen – I don't care whether he or she is a Ukrainian or Russian, but they speak the language I speak, the way I speak it. They look like people next door. So what they see is a civil war very close to home. They also see –

Roger Cohen

Who do they think started this civil war?

Dmitri Trenin

Again, if you take a poll – and we all know that President Putin's popularity has soared. It's not because Russian people are a bunch of dupes. It's not because Russian people are only entitled to a few Russian television programmes. The Russian people, at least the people who care about what's happening down there, have every source of information available here in this town. So if you want to know what's going on, if you want to have different views and opinions, there's no barrier to all that. I don't think there's any barrier.

But basically they think – again, it's very difficult to generalize. There are people, let's say on the radical liberal side, that would say it's all because of Putin. It's all because he wants enemies. It's all because he's a kleptocrat. Everything that Chrystia is saying is actually shared by, I would say, a small but pretty vocal group of Russians.

Then there are other people who would say that Putin is a weakling. Putin is allowing the Ukrainian military to butcher our own people and he is doing nothing. Right now he has dropped the military option, it is no longer on the table, and they're calling him a traitor. They are not in a majority but there's a substantial group of those people. It's actually from those people that recruitment networks recruit people to go into Donbas, because there's a fairly big number of Russian volunteers recruited through those networks who do come to fight for the Russian world or against the fascists, whatever they call them.

Then there are people who are somewhere in the middle. The people who want to live normal lives, the people who don't want their credit cards to stop working all of a sudden, who don't want Russia to be cut off from the rest of the world – but who would say that the West is treating us unfairly, and it's always been treating us unfairly. There is something pretty serious that's happened to a lot of people in Russia. Until very recently they thought that the Western media were by and large balanced and objective. There was a period at the beginning of the Georgia war when they saw that the Western media were telling a story different from the story that they knew, but right now they are appalled that the Western media are not focusing on the civilian casualties in Donbas or on the, let's say, atrocities like the one committed in Odessa. I think when the Odessa fire, in which 60-plus people lost their lives, when it was first reported in *The New York Times*, I think it was on page 17 or something. It was not front-page news.

Roger Cohen

But there are casualties on both sides.

Dmitri Trenin

That's true, that's very true. So a lot of people are confused also because the people on the other side in Ukraine are exactly as Russian-looking as everyone else. They may speak – at official functions people speak the state language, but when they're on their own, they speak Russian.

Roger Cohen

What is 'Russian-looking'?

Michael McFaul

Sounding.

Dmitri Trenin

They sound Russian.

Roger Cohen

Are we Russian-looking?

Dmitri Trenin

No, you're not. Rest assured.

Chrystia Freeland

I am. I'm Ukrainian.

Roger Cohen

Chrystia is Ukrainian.

Dmitri Trenin

It's not about ethnicity. A lot of it is about culture. People who have been born and raised in the Soviet Union bear a certain stamp. You understand where people share your software or not. You get that from the way they speak. In other words, what I'm trying to say is that for most Russian people, it's not a foreign war. It's not a war fought somewhere – it looks from a distance that Ukraine and Russia are two different entities, that there's a border between them. But this border is 20-plus years old. It's very porous. A lot of people cross it, you know. We're dealing with two countries –

Roger Cohen

But Russia recognized this border in 1994.

Dmitri Trenin

Yes, it did, but we're not talking legalities. We're talking about something else.

Roger Cohen

But doesn't legality matter?

Dmitri Trenin

It does – of course it does. That's why Russia is not intervening.

Roger Cohen

President Putin wrote a long piece in my newspaper saying that without international law we were lost.

Dmitri Trenin

I think that for Putin it was a very difficult decision, because that in a way undid so much of his own argumentation, changing borders in Crimea.

Roger Cohen

It certainly did.

Dmitri Trenin

That was a very big decision for him. I think he did it only for one reason. I think what he saw in Kiev as a result of what happened – you may call it a revolution, you may call it a coup – do you call the Bolshevik coup a revolution or a coup? Does it matter? It was a kind of a popular revolt in the capital, a revolt that was not wholly peaceful, as we all know. There were shots traded by both sides in central Kiev, so it was not a wholly peaceful thing.

But for Putin it was the worst of both worlds. Ukraine is to be dominated by virulently anti-Russian elements coming from western Ukraine, so the Russian cultural identity will be sort of – it's not that Russians will be attacked. It's not about that. It's that the textbooks that those Russians or those Russian people's kids will have in their schoolrooms will tell a very different story from the story that Putin wants to be told to the Russian people – about Russia, Ukraine, about that part of the world. So that was one thing.

Roger Cohen

To the Ukrainian people, you mean.

Dmitri Trenin

To the Ukrainian citizens. Let's call Ukrainians those who are Ukrainian citizens. Second of all, it was the threat, in his view, of NATO enlargement including Ukraine. In his thinking, no country in eastern and central Europe – or let me put it this way. Every country in eastern and central Europe that has become a member of the EU has either become a member of the EU at the same time that it became a member of NATO, or the NATO thing preceded the EU thing. You first need a country to be secured for it to be integrated later. Security comes first.

You need to realize that for Putin, Ukraine is absolutely the most important strategic issue for Russia. He may be thinking the things that people in Washington are not thinking about today, but what he knows – what Mike has been telling about Medvedev is extremely important because Medvedev was working under Putin. Putin was above Medvedev when Medvedev was president. Medvedev was Putin's scout, whom Putin sent to the Western world to see what was possible with you guys. When Medvedev came back there were a few things that Putin approved of, such as the new START treaty, the WTO thing and a number of other things. The 123 agreement, many things. But on some of the important items, such as missile defence, which was the centrepiece of Putin's security strategy, there was no real progress.

I think what really changed it was the Libya thing. Libya needs to be seen as, for Putin, a test of Western sincerity. He felt duped. He felt Russia had been taken for a ride. Basically, I think that was one of the reasons why he decided that Medvedev should not be given a second term and that he had to go back to the controls. I've been talking for far too long.

Roger Cohen

Thank you. Chrystia, do you see a way out of this confrontation?

Chrystia Freeland

Yeah, lots of ways out of it.

Roger Cohen

Could you describe the way out that you see? What would be a good compromise?

Chrystia Freeland

Can I just double-down on one point that Dmitri made as preface to that? I think Dmitri's point about Ukraine and Russia, and the Ukrainian and Russian people, is a very powerful one and something that is often not seen from the outside. It's absolutely right that Ukrainians feel very similar to Russians. Much of Ukraine – Ukraine is a truly bilingual country. In the majority of the country Russian is a language in which people are more comfortable than in Ukrainian. Petro Poroshenko, the new president, this sort of virulently anti-Russian nationalist guy, didn't learn to speak Ukrainian until 1996. He speaks Russian at home with his family. His wife doesn't speak Ukrainian. He's from Odessa, from the south, traditionally a very Russian-speaking region.

So those connections are absolutely right. For me, one of the historic ironies of what has happened is when the history of this period is written, Putin is going to be the father of Ukrainian nationhood. I can't say whether that Ukrainian nation will include Crimea; I can't even say with certainty how much of the Donbas it will include. But Ukraine up to the border of the Donbas now is united and focused on a sense of self as being Ukrainian, in a way that has never been before the case.

I was very struck on election day – on the election weekend, I was in Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk. Dnipropetrovsk was astonishing to me. This is a Russian-speaking region. It's where Leonid Brezhnev is from. It was the Brezhnev political power base in the Soviet Union. And election day was like the most kitschy ethnic festival you have ever seen. People were wearing embroidered shirts, girls were wearing blue and yellow nail polish, girls were wearing blue and yellow ribbons in their hair. People actually burst into song after voting. Ukrainian flags everywhere. It was shocking – like the most kitschy expressions of Ukrainian-ness that I experienced in western Canada, in the diaspora, were outdone by Dnipropetrovsk.

Roger Cohen

That's really saying something.

Chrystia Freeland

I really couldn't believe it. Dmitri will understand this. When I speak, I address people – when I'm in Ukraine, I start with Ukrainian and if they answer me in Russian, I go over to Russian. When people heard me speaking Ukrainian, they would try so hard to speak Ukrainian and they would call me [in Ukrainian], which is this western Ukrainian form of address.

So what I'm saying is Putin actually – if his goal was to hold Ukraine close to his breast, he has done absolutely the wrong thing. At this point Ukrainians – we can stand back and we can say: oh, you guys, geopolitically it's the wrong thing. You should just give in to what Putin wants. You shouldn't have wanted Europe, you should have stuck with Yanukovich. These are actual people. These are people who are smart, who think, who use the internet, and they made a choice. They were willing to fight. Britain has this experience of, are you going to choose to fight or are you going to choose to give in to an authoritarian guy from the outside who wants to take you over? It's not an easy path. It's an expensive path. But really, Ukraine (ex Donbas) has chosen it.

Roger Cohen

And given that, what then is the compromise? Ukraine as a kind of Finland? Should Ukraine come into the EU, NATO? Given this new strong sense of nationhood, how and on what terms can there be a compromise with President Putin?

Chrystia Freeland

I actually think there is a real possibility. It all depends on Putin and how pragmatic he wants to be. But I think there is a real possibility for him to do a deal with Poroshenko. Poroshenko wants to do a deal. Ukrainians want to do a deal. The big question is: how far does Putin continue to try to destabilize the Donbas? I agree with Dmitri: it is a human tragedy what's happening there. I worry that we're going to see the Donbas become kind of a Trans-Dniester, which would be a very bad thing for Ukraine and for Russia.

Roger Cohen

John, why shouldn't Ukraine, after all now an independent nation and with a much stronger sense of nationhood perhaps than six months ago, why shouldn't it take whatever decisions it wants to take in terms of its future? Why should it not be able to join the EU? After all, if you were choosing between Minsk and Munich, which would you choose? Ukrainian per capita GNP at the breakup of the Soviet Union was the same as Poland's; Poland's is now five to ten times Ukraine's. Why shouldn't it go in the direction of the West if that's the direction in which a better life lies?

John Mearsheimer

This is the whole notion that the Ukrainians have a right to choose to join the West.

Roger Cohen

Don't they?

John Mearsheimer

No, they don't. Let me make my point. The fact is that when you're dealing with great power politics and you have a country like Russia, it does not make good sense to talk about rights. It's the same thing when you're dealing with the United States of America. If you think Cuba has a right to invite the Soviets into the Western Hemisphere, you're living in a dream world. Fidel Castro has been in power since 1959. We still have a huge embargo on Cuba because they had the audacity to invite the Soviets into the Western Hemisphere. This is the Monroe Doctrine that you mentioned before. We do not tolerate great powers coming into our neighbourhood. Why do you expect that the Russians should accept the idea that NATO, a former military foe, can drive its alliance right up to its doorstep? It can't, in the Russians' eyes.

Great power politics, international law, all those things go out the window when a great power thinks that its core interests are at stake. Do you think we paid attention to international law when we went into Iraq in 2003? (Foolishly, I might add.) We violated international law because George Bush said explicitly that he thought core strategic interests of the United States were at stake. That's what's going on with Ukraine.

Chrystia Freeland

Yes, and that really worked out for the US.

Roger Cohen

Was that good for the US?

John Mearsheimer

No, of course it wasn't, as you know.

Michael McFaul

So why is it good for Russia to do the same in Ukraine? I have this debate every night on Twitter with my Russian friends. 'Well, what about Iraq?' And I say: if you were for the invasion of Iraq, then I can understand why you would support invasion of Ukraine.

John Mearsheimer

I'll answer the question. Critical strategic interests were not at stake in Iraq for the United States. There was no good strategic reason for us to intervene. Furthermore, we were guaranteed to lose, as we have proved. Ukraine is a fundamentally different situation. This is a core strategic interest of Russia.

Roger Cohen

How does the fact the Baltic states are now in NATO and the EU, how does that impinge on core Russian strategic interests? How?

John Mearsheimer

As Dmitri said, Ukraine is of enormous importance to the Russians. We got away with the first two tranches of NATO expansion. The second one included the Baltic states because the Russians were very weak and not in a position to contest us. But they made it clear after April 2008 – this is at the Bucharest summit, when we announced that Ukraine and Georgia would become part of NATO – that this was just unacceptable. It was a bridge too far. As I said before, that's why you got the August 2008 war and that's why you have [indiscernible] crisis.

Roger Cohen

Without it, Putin might well be in Vilnius now.

John Mearsheimer

What does that mean?

Roger Cohen

Without the expansion of NATO, without Article 5, wouldn't President Putin be back in Vilnius?

John Mearsheimer

He would not be. No, Putin showed zero interest in conquering Crimea before the February 22nd coup. In fact, if you look at what he was saying immediately after the coup, he was not even talking about taking Crimea. In fact, he was saying that he wouldn't take Crimea. There is no evidence that anybody in the West, including the intelligence community, thought that Putin was an expansionist and was about to go on an aggressive rampage. No evidence of that. It was the February 22nd coup that precipitated that, and all he took was the Crimea, which was picking off the low-hanging fruit. He is not stupid enough to go into Ukraine or to go into Vilnius or pick a fight with NATO.

Roger Cohen

Yeah, but that's because they're in NATO.

John Mearsheimer

That's correct. That's correct.

Roger Cohen

So why shouldn't the Ukrainians want the same guarantee?

John Mearsheimer

He's not going to let them in. That's the point. He has made it very clear that Ukraine cannot get into NATO. What's going to happen here is that if we pursue the policies that you're advocating, we're going to wreck Ukraine. The United States is leading the Ukrainians down the primrose path, telling them that they have a right to choose which alliance they want to join. This is asking for big trouble and this is what Putin is doing. He is wrecking Ukraine.

We would be much better off if we created a neutral Ukraine. We said NATO expansion is off the table and to the extent that we extended the EU eastward, we did it in conjunction with the IMF, the Russians and the American government, and we worked out some sort of grand economic package. But the idea that you're going to turn this place into a bulwark of the West right on the Russian border, with Putin in control? It's not going to happen, no matter what the Americans on the panel think.

Roger Cohen

Last time I checked, you're an American yourself.

John Mearsheimer

Some would contest that.

Roger Cohen

The last question, then I'm going to throw this open. You objected when I spoke of US weakness, but it's a fact that President Obama drew a redline in Syria, marched the allies up the hill, the French were ready –

went for a walk in the garden of the White House and marched everyone back down again. Everyone around the world took note that US redlines are no longer what they used to be. Lo and behold, in the aftermath of that, we have seen ISIS sweeping through Iraq. We have seen a new assertiveness from China in the East China Sea: no longer, it seems, particularly worried by the United States. We've seen President Putin annex Crimea and cause a lot of instability in eastern Ukraine. And we have seen people throughout the world saying that this is indeed a weak [indiscernible]. Did all this happen by coincidence, in your view? Has nothing to do with a perception of weakness? Did President Putin not act in part because he perceived weakness in the White House and thought, I can do this with impunity?

Michael McFaul

You just asked me a giant question and I know you don't want me to talk for an hour. A couple of things. I'll get to your big question but I just want to acknowledge the paradox of your question compared to this conversation we've been having about the United States. When I was ambassador I felt this all the time, that when I'm back in Washington, talking to Senator McCain or Bob Kagan or our critics that would reflect some of the things you just said, all they talk about is our inability to do anything. When I'm sitting in Moscow, sitting with senior Russian government officials, the highest levels, all they're doing is assigning all this incredible power to us. We did all these things and we brought down the government in Kiev and we are mobilizing Russians against Putin.

I want to highlight that because I don't think Putin's view of our agency in the world is accurate. I think he assigns to us – and John, with all due respect, I think you're doing it tonight as well – you're assigning to us agency that, from my five years in the government, I didn't see. Ukraine in NATO? Who was pushing for that? Seriously, I don't know. Was some op-ed people – I didn't see it, but certainly we weren't doing it. It most certainly was not a major foreign policy agenda for us.

Therefore it just seems there's this bogeyman of West or Russia – and that's the second point I want to make. Our argument to Putin and to his government throughout this entire crisis is: we're not going to make the Ukrainians choose and it's not – I know it does no good to explain to somebody what their strategic interest is, right? I learned that bitterly in government. But I would say strategic interest is in the eyes of the beholder. It's not something you can pull off the table and say, oh, here's the book on Russia's strategic interest. That does not exist, and doesn't exist for Americans either.

We were trying to make a different argument to Putin. What's in your national interest? A strong, wealthy, stable Ukraine. Why is that not in your interest? That's most certainly in Russia's business – I know the business community in Russia well. That's in their interest. This notion that Ukrainians and Russians – I watch TV and I do battle on Twitter every night with Russians. This picture that has been concocted about all this conflict between Ukrainians and Russians – you just heard Chrystia, it's totally now. Six months ago, how many people were dying in eastern Ukraine? None. How many people died in Crimea? None. That is not about strategic interest. That was designed, to have this conflict.

I think in the long run it makes Russia weaker. It makes Russia weaker because Russia – you mentioned the numbers. I've heard other estimates, much bigger. If you add up the stock market, the debt prices and the expenditures that are going to be needed to bring in Crimea, we're talking about hundreds of billions of dollars already lost. That's in the national interest?

So I don't really understand why the option that Putin chose was his only other option. And one thing on the coup, let's just be clear about this. Yanukovich left. Nobody shot him, nobody arrested him. He left. Nobody wanted him to leave, including the Russians, by the way. The Russians didn't want him to leave. I was in Moscow, I can tell you, they did not want him to leave. When he left, the elected parliament of Ukraine, many of whom were in his party – the majority – elected this interim government. What else were they supposed to do, as they said? I don't see it that way.

To your bigger question –

Roger Cohen

Very briefly.

Michael McFaul

Well then let's pass. I'd love to pass on it.

Roger Cohen

I would like a very quick answer. You disagree?

Michael McFaul

In the short term, no. In the long term, yes. In two different ways. I think the public discussion, just now speaking as a public person and not as a former government official, but my view in terms of this – you know, we're in this period of retrenchment, the decline of America. All I would just say is I know enough about the history of my own country and foreign policy to remember these debates from before. I gave a speech at Stanford, a graduation speech, ten years ago where I talked about this. I would just – if you're a betting person, I would hedge your bets to say that this is inevitable, this is this way. I don't see it that way.

I see the institutions for renewal in America, irrespective of Democrat or Republican. I think they're strong. I remember it was all going to end in 1950 and then it was all going to end in the 1970s. That cancer, that was communism, we were just supposed to slow it down in the mid-70s. That looks kind of crazy. When I was a kid everybody was studying Japanese because we all knew the Japanese were going to take over the world, and the people studying Russian was a little group of people. That seems a little bit strange to me. So I just don't think we're very good at predicting long-term power trajectories. I think we're pretty bad at it. So that's the first piece I would say.

On the second piece though, I do think it's a mistake to draw redlines and then not follow through. I'll leave it at that.