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## George F. Kennan, Containment, and the West's Current Russia Problem

by Matthew Rojansky<sup>1</sup>



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At the core of the Western strategy for managing the Cold War, from the late 1940's to the 1980's, was an American-led policy of "containment" of Soviet power and influence. This containment policy, which is generally credited to U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan and his influential writings in the early Cold War period, diagnosed in Soviet foreign policy an expansionist undercurrent, which had the potential to threaten the foundations of economic prosperity and political stability on which vital Western interests depended. Accordingly, Kennan advised "a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies," not only in Europe, but globally.<sup>2</sup>

Containment was a mode of East-West relations that many presumed would be relegated to the dustbin of history at the end of the Cold War. Yet the current period might accurately be dubbed the era of "new containment," with many urging the United States, NATO, and Europe to once again contain, constrain and counter what they view as Russia's expansionist policies and malign influence on the world stage.<sup>3</sup> From the West's perspective, there may now be compelling reasons for adopting a renewed containment approach toward Russia.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore important to revisit not only the core assumptions that underpinned Kennan's vision of containment during the early years of the Cold War, but to inquire whether the current period in East-West relations merits a similar response, and on what basis it might be developed.

This paper argues that although the circumstances around the conflict between Russia and the West today differ considerably from those of

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<sup>2</sup> G. Kennan, The Source of Soviet Conduct, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>.

<sup>3</sup> J. Rubin, What a real Russia policy would look like, *Right Turn*, *The Washington Post*, 2015. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2015/12/01/what-a-real-russia-policy-would-look-like/?tid=hybrid\\_content\\_2\\_na](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2015/12/01/what-a-real-russia-policy-would-look-like/?tid=hybrid_content_2_na).

<sup>4</sup> E. Chausovsky, Why the U.S. Feels It Must Contain Russia, *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 2015. Available at: <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/why-us-feels-it-must-contain-russia>.

the Cold War, it nonetheless poses a serious threat to European security and stability, and demands a careful and comprehensive Western response. Accordingly, it will present Kennan's rationale for a containment policy in response to the threat from Moscow, with reference to the potential application of his arguments in the present conflict. It will then describe Kennan's own understanding of containment, as a primarily non-military strategy, focused on recognition of the adversary's vulnerabilities while strengthening the West's capacity to solve pressing problems and inspire others to do the same. Finally, the paper will recall Kennan's specific recommendation that defeating the Soviet threat would require a robust Western capacity to understand Russia—a capacity that Kennan would judge to be sadly lacking today.

## Russia and the West in the Cold War and Today

*“The Russians look forward to a duel of infinite duration, and they see that already they have scored great successes.”<sup>5</sup>*

Russia's military interventions in the post-Soviet neighborhood, particularly in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine since 2014, have made other nearby European states nervous about their own security vis-à-vis a militarily resurgent Russia, and have thus dragged into the spotlight NATO's “Article V” promise of collective defense. This is most acutely felt in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, where NATO member states share land and sea borders either with Russia directly, or with Russia's most vulnerable post-Soviet neighbors, and where Russia is presumed to be able to project military,

economic and political power with relative ease.<sup>6</sup>

Many European states and international observers have also begun to think of Russian non-military influence in its neighborhood and globally as a malign force, in much the same terms that the West perceived Soviet influence to be inherently threatening during the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in addition to imposing economic, diplomatic, and political sanctions as a direct response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, which have been answered by Russian counter-sanctions, Western governments have begun to search out and closely examine Russian investments, diplomatic and cultural activities, and links with political actors within their own borders—all reminiscent of the Cold War's rivalry not only of arms, but of ideologies, economics, and diplomacy.<sup>8</sup>

There are even surprisingly significant stylistic and structural similarities in the current East-West conflict to the state of relations during the Cold War. On both sides, demonization of the other has largely replaced reasoned dialogue, let alone introspection. As Robert Legvold has argued, both sides have now been conditioned to think of the other side as fully responsible for the creation of the current crisis, and each side portrays the other as intentionally and nefariously seeking to exploit the situation to damage, disadvantage and undermine the other's interests.<sup>9</sup> In fact, political leaders have begun consistently labeling one another as adversaries, and have fully embraced the threat narrative with respect to the other.<sup>10</sup>

The most troubling structural similarity between the current East-West conflict and the worst decades of the Cold War may be the reemergence of proxy conflicts between Russia and the West. Of course, armed clashes that occasionally involved Russian forces broke out

<sup>5</sup> G. Kennan, The Source of Soviet Conduct, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947.

<sup>6</sup> M. Fallon, Russia a threat to Baltic states after Ukraine conflict, warns Michael Fallon, *The Guardian*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/feb/19/russia-a-threat-to-baltic-states-after-ukraine-conflict-warns-michael-fallon>.

<sup>7</sup> E. Goldberg, Russia: And the Danger of an Irrelevant Gas Station, *The World Post*, *Huffington Post*, 2015. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/edward-goldberg/russia-and-the-danger-of\\_b\\_8327376.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/edward-goldberg/russia-and-the-danger-of_b_8327376.html).

<sup>8</sup> A. Kramer, Russia Seeks Sanctions Tit for Tat, *The New York Times*, 2014. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/09/business/russian-parliament-moves-closer-to-adopting-law-on-compensation-for-sanctions.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/09/business/russian-parliament-moves-closer-to-adopting-law-on-compensation-for-sanctions.html?_r=0).

<sup>9</sup> R. Legvold, Managing the New Cold War, *Foreign Affairs*, (93 (4)), 2014. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2014-06-16/managing-new-cold-war>.

<sup>10</sup> J. Green, Pentagon: Russia poses ‘existential threat’ to the US once again, *WTOP*, 2015. Available at: <http://wtop.com/national-security/2015/08/pentagon-russia-poses-existential-threat-us/>; P. Sonne, U.S. Is Trying to Dismember Russia, Says Putin Adviser, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-is-trying-to-dismember-russia-says-putin-adviser-1423667319>; J. Nye, The Challenge of Russia's Decline, *Project Syndicate*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-decline-challenge-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-04>.



around the post-Soviet periphery in the 1990's and afterwards, and Russia and the West disagreed sharply over the handling of crises and conflicts from the Balkans to the Middle East during the same period. Yet the past two years have for the first time in decades witnessed not only direct military conflict between forces supported, equipped and trained by the West against those backed by Russia in Syria and Ukraine, but also numerous airspace interceptions between NATO and Russia, and even one case in which Turkey, a NATO member state, shot down a Russian jet in November 2015.<sup>11</sup> Rather than isolated incidents in an otherwise harmonious international environment, these episodes illustrate the degree to which both sides are striving to separate friend from foe globally, and to secure favorable international alignments or coalitions reminiscent of Cold-War geopolitical "blocs."<sup>12</sup>

Of course, a broad strokes analogy between the current Russia-West conflict and that of the Cold War clearly fails when one considers the vast disparity between Russian and Western power today. While Russia has significantly recovered from the economic, demographic and political collapse it suffered after losing its East European and Soviet empires in 1989-1991, it is no longer close to equal to the United States in economic, demographic, or conventional military terms, much less to NATO or the West as a whole. With a far wealthier and more developed China increasingly flexing its diplomatic and political muscles, Russia is no longer even the predominant power in Eurasia. In practical terms, the only geographic areas in which Russia evinces a capacity to balance or potentially supersede the West are in its immediate post-Soviet periphery, and even then, only if it applies overwhelming force against relatively soft targets, and then relies on its vast nuclear arsenal to seek to deter a Western response.<sup>13</sup>

Even if one accepts that Russia and the West may have reignited a Cold War style geopolitical rivalry over the post-Soviet space, the domestic and global context of the current period is nothing like that of the early Cold War. Despite divergent media narratives and the imposition of sanctions and counter-sanctions, Russians and Westerners are far more interconnected by trade, professional, community and family ties than at any time in the past, and both are deeply engaged with China and the global economy. Ideological elements of the current conflict, while apparent in debates over human rights, democratic legitimacy, and international law, are still relatively limited by comparison with the Cold War's all-encompassing struggle of free market capitalism versus communism.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Russia and the West have maintained some channels of communication and have cooperated successfully on important global and regional security issues, most notably the Iran nuclear agreement, even in the context of an overall deterioration in relations.<sup>15</sup>

Still, reminders that the world has changed and that the Cold War is long in the past offer cold comfort to governments and societies worried that Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine signal its ambitions to upend the relative security and stability that Europe has enjoyed for the past quarter century. Even for those in the West who reject the new Cold War paradigm and perceive no direct threat from Russia today, a new containment policy might be justifiable on the grounds that the importance of reassuring nervous European neighbors far outweighs the cost of lost partnership and engagement with Russia, which might well be illusory in the first place. After all, Russo skeptics argue, the Russian leadership has been habitually dishonest about its intentions in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere, while its state-funded media organs are engaged in a systematic global disinformation campaign.<sup>16</sup> How, they ask, can

<sup>11</sup> BBC News, Turkey's downing of Russian warplane - what we know. *BBC News*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>.

<sup>12</sup> Moscow's efforts to cajole, constrain and coerce its closest post-Soviet neighbors to support its position on Ukraine are a prime example of the goals and potential difficulties of maintaining Cold War type "bloc" positions on today's controversial questions of European security. See, e.g. A. Taylor, (2014), Why Kazakhstan and Belarus are watching Crimea very, very carefully. *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/03/11/why-kazakhstan-and-belarus-are-watching-crimea-very-very-carefully/>.

<sup>13</sup> B. Colby and J. Solomon, Facing Russia: Conventional Defence and Deterrence in Europe. *Survival*, Vol. 57, Issue 6, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> M. Rojansky, Triple Threat: America, China and Russia on the Path to Conflict? *The National Interest*, 2015. Available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/triple-threat-america-china-russia-the-path-conflict-14020>.

<sup>15</sup> F. Lukyanov, US-Russia Mideast cooperation in balance over Ukraine? *Al-Monitor*, 2014. Available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/ukraine-middle-east-russia-syria-us.html#>.

<sup>16</sup> CBN News, Russia 'Dishonest' About Counteroffensive Actions. *CBN News*, 2014. Available at: <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2014/August/Russia-Dishonest-About-Counteroffensive-Actions/>.



there be any value to partnership with a regime that cannot be trusted?<sup>17</sup>

## The Need for Containment Then and Now

*“This would of itself warrant the United States entering with reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interest of a peaceful and stable world.”<sup>18</sup>*

Taken together, Western perceptions of the threat posed by Russia make an apparently credible case for the restoration of a kind of containment doctrine today, a quarter century after the end of the Cold War. So it is no surprise that George F. Kennan, as the intellectual father of containment, is now again frequently cited to justify the restoration of this approach.<sup>19</sup> But would Kennan in fact have recommended such a policy in response to the present crisis in East-West relations, and if so, how might it have differed from the current policy?

It is beyond dispute that Kennan, in both his famous “Long Telegram” of 1946 and his equally famous “Mr. X” article from the following year, argued for a policy of strong resistance against Soviet expansionism, which he and others characterized as a containment doctrine. Kennan even described Soviet foreign policy in terms not dissimilar from those used in the growing Western consensus about Russian foreign policy today. Kennan assessed the Soviet leadership to be, on the one hand, sincere in its belief that the world was gripped by a titanic ideological struggle, and thus inclined to spread the Soviet worldview and political influence by all possible means, but on the other hand, entirely

pragmatic in its inclination to push outward only when “timely and promising,” and to hold back when resistance was encountered.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, the most widely cited component of Kennan’s recommendation for a containment policy was to ensure that expansionist Soviet moves encountered resistance from the West wherever and whenever possible. Kennan called for “the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points,” in which he included both Western societies themselves, and the wider world in which Soviet and Western interests collided.<sup>21</sup>

In Kennan’s view, the danger of an expansionist Soviet foreign policy came not only from the Bolsheviks’ distinct ideology, but from their access to the vast power and potential of Russia itself. Although ideological differences are now much less pronounced, Kennan’s assessment of the potential disruptive power of Russian foreign policy for Western interests should be heeded as well today. “This political force,” Kennan wrote of the Kremlin, “has complete power of disposition over energies of one of world’s greatest peoples and resources of world’s richest national territory, and is borne along by deep and powerful currents of Russian nationalism.”<sup>22</sup>

Kennan’s assessment of the methods of Soviet expansionism might also be profitably compared to the behavior we see from Russia today. In his 1947 Foreign Affairs article, he described (with unfortunate overtones of racial and cultural bias) an opportunistic and flexible but inexorably outward-pushing Russian challenge:

[It] Expands where permitted to do so: Here caution, circumspection, flexibility and deception are the valuable qualities; and their value finds natural appreciation in the Russian or the oriental

<sup>17</sup> M. Chorley, ‘Putin is a thug and a liar’: British diplomat tears into Russian President as EU targets banks, arms deals and energy firms. *Daily Mail*, 2014. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2709324/Putin-thug-liar-British-diplomat-tears-Russian-President-EU-tightens-economic-stronghold.html>.

<sup>18</sup> G. Kennan, The Source of Soviet Conduct, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947.

<sup>19</sup> R. Skidelsky, Kennan’s Revenge, *Project Syndicate*, 2014. Available at: <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/robert-skidelsky-uses-the-ukraine-crisis-to-revisit-the-west-s-cold-war-era--containment--doctrine>.

<sup>20</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall* [“Long Telegram”], Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946. Available at: [https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/6-6.pdf](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/6-6.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> G. Kennan, The Source of Soviet Conduct, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall* [“Long Telegram”], Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946.

mind. Thus the Kremlin has no compunction about retreating in the face of superior force. And being under the compulsion of no timetable, it does not get panicky under the necessity for such retreat. Its political action is a fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. Its main concern is to make sure that it has filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power. But if it finds unassailable barriers in its path, it accepts these philosophically and accommodates itself to them.<sup>23</sup>

### *Russia Today*

While today's Russia may bring to bear more modest resources in terms of national wealth, population, and even military potential, it is still a force to be reckoned with, one of the world's two nuclear superpowers, a major international power broker, and by far the strongest national military present in the European theater. Likewise, Russian "expansionism" today varies from overt seizure and annexation of territory, as in Crimea, to murkier "hybrid" interventions in neighboring states as in Ukraine's Donbas region, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, to the assertion of a right to protect the ethnic Russian diaspora living beyond Russia's borders, from the Baltics to Central Asia. Just as Kennan argued regarding Soviet expansionism, Russia's current policy towards its neighborhood is pragmatic and flexible, but appears inexorably focused on the establishment of a sphere of influence, at least in its so-called "near abroad."<sup>24</sup>

While the Kremlin today evinces little interest in promoting more widespread adoption of its particular

political ideology of state capitalism and a strong "power vertical," or in dominating territory beyond its immediate periphery, it nonetheless does seek to project influence globally in ways not unlike those described by Kennan during the Cold War. The main goals of Russian policy in the West were, according to Kennan, "to disrupt national self confidence, to hamstring measures of national defense, to increase social and industrial unrest [and] to stimulate all forms of disunity." He warned that within Western societies, "poor will be set against rich, black against white, young against old, newcomers against established residents, etc."<sup>25</sup> These very approaches are evident in current Russian-sponsored media and political activity in the West, and beyond.

Much has been written in recent years on the topic of Russian-supported broadcast and online media activity around the world, which Westerners have accused of promoting a deceptive and propagandized narrative in service of Kremlin interests.<sup>26</sup> Some even cite Russian media activities as a core component of the so-called "hybrid" threat to Russia's nearest neighbors, including NATO members.<sup>27</sup> The Russians themselves argue that Russian international media activity is no different from that of any other country, and in particular no different from the U.S. media, which has for decades enjoyed an outsized international footprint.<sup>28</sup> Either way, there can be little doubt that Russian-backed TV and radio broadcasting, news agencies and web portals, and apparent armies of paid internet "trolls," all operate in the West today with the goal of "stirring the pot" of anti-government political views, and more broadly undermining public confidence in core Western institutions, from national and local government to major corporations and prominent NGOs.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> G. Kennan, *The Source of Soviet Conduct*, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947.

<sup>24</sup> P. Beaumont, Russia makes latest high-risk move to keep pieces of its 'near abroad' in check, *The Guardian*, 2014. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/02/russia-moves-keep-near-abroad-soviet-states-in-check>.

<sup>25</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall ["Long Telegram"]*, Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946.

<sup>26</sup> G. Kates, Russia's Media Machine Looks West. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2014. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-media-machine-looks-west/26767603.html>.

<sup>27</sup> D. Johnson, Russia's Approach to Conflict - Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defence, *Research Paper No. 111*, NATO Defense College, Rome, 2015. Available at: <http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=449>.

<sup>28</sup> D. Babich, Why West paints Putin as villain & Russian media his evil servants, *RT*, 2015. Available at: <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/317524-west-syria-ukraine-putin-propaganda/>.

<sup>29</sup> M. Kofman, and M. Rojansky, *A Closer look at Russia's "Hybrid War,"* Washington, D.C., 2015: Wilson Center. Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/7-KENNAN%20CABLE-ROJANSKY%20KOFMAN.pdf>; A. Chen, The Agency, *The New York Times*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>.

Russia's media activities in the West are complemented by Kremlin-backed political activities aimed at strengthening not only policies favorable to Russia's interests, but also establishing connections with fringe political groups on both the right and left of the political spectrum. These contacts go beyond merely fostering fellow-traveler sentiments among the most vocal critics of the United States, NATO and the established European order, to include providing direct financial assistance to political parties, and even payoffs to individual politicians in the form of consulting fees.<sup>30</sup> Once again, Kennan's assessment of Soviet interference in domestic politics in Western countries appears relevant to the present conflict. "Where suspicions exist," Kennan wrote, "they will be fanned; where not, ignited. No effort will be spared to discredit and combat all efforts which threaten to lead to any sort of unity or cohesion."<sup>31</sup>

## Kennan's Containment Doctrine

*"This is [the] point at which domestic and foreign policies meet. Every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués."*<sup>32</sup>

The striking similarity between Kennan's insights about Soviet foreign policy at the outset of the Cold War and today's well documented trends in Russian policy toward the West suggests that Kennan's analysis and his conclusions are indeed likely to be relevant in developing a coherent Western response to the Russian challenge. To the degree that Kennan's containment doctrine entailed vigilance, strength and readiness to defend against and deter Russian expansion, it is already being actively discussed and widely endorsed by Western political leaders.<sup>33</sup> This is especially true of NATO, where the declaration of the 2014 Wales Summit identified Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine as a game changer for the vision of Europe "whole, free and at peace," and accordingly reiterated NATO's mandate for collective defense, security, and crisis management.<sup>34</sup> The NATO Warsaw summit in 2016 is likely to produce further focus on the Alliance's current and future capabilities to respond to Russian aggression, from the Baltic to the Black Sea region and elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

Despite his later reservations about an overly militarized response to the Soviet threat, and his vocal opposition to post-Cold War NATO enlargement, Kennan was a supporter of NATO's central role in European security.<sup>36</sup> He was himself at the center of early Cold War strategy discussions that produced the U.S. proposals for a North Atlantic Alliance and the Marshall Plan, key instruments of containment in Europe.<sup>37</sup> Yet close attention to Kennan's writings suggests he intended containment to entail much more than a geopolitical game of "whack a mole,"

<sup>30</sup> In the Kremlin's pocket, *The Economist*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21643222-who-backs-putin-and-why-kremlins-pocket>.

<sup>31</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall ["Long Telegram"]*, Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> A. Mohammed, and P. Zengerle, In U.S. strategy on Ukraine, a whiff of Kennan's 'containment,' *Reuters*, 2014. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/07/us-ukraine-crisis-containment-idUSBREA2600320140307>.

<sup>34</sup> Wales Summit Declaration, European Parliament, 2014. Available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014\\_2019/documents/sede/dv/sede240914wales-summit/\\_sede240914walessummit\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/sede/dv/sede240914wales-summit/_sede240914walessummit_en.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Karl-Heinz Kamp, *Security Policy Working Paper No. 9: The Agenda of the NATO Summit in Warsaw*, Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, 2015. Available at: [https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/working\\_paper\\_security\\_policy\\_9\\_2015.pdf](https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/working_paper_security_policy_9_2015.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Kennan called NATO enlargement after the end of the Cold War "a tragic mistake," and worried that it would be the beginning of a new Cold War. He predicted that "the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies," while forecasting one of NATO's chief political challenges today, namely that it has "signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way." In the same 1998 *New York Times* column in which Tom Friedman conveyed Kennan's concerns, he commented that we might hope for a future in which, "the forces of globalization integrating Europe, coupled with the new arms control agreements, proved to be so powerful that Russia, despite NATO expansion, moved ahead with democratization and Westernization, and was gradually drawn into a loosely unified Europe." We know now that this hopeful vision was not fulfilled, and the retrospective debate over NATO's post-Cold War expansion seems to rear its head every time there is a new crisis in relations between Russia and the West. T. Friedman, *Foreign Affairs*, 1998; Now a Word From X, *The New York Times*. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html>.

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian, (n.d.). *Milestones: 1945-1952: Kennan and Containment, 1947*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/kennan>.



deploying countermeasures and closing Western ranks in response to any and every Soviet provocation. In fact, Kennan was especially concerned to ensure that it was the West, not the Kremlin, which would control the agenda, believing that the challenge was “within our power to solve...without recourse to any general military conflict.”<sup>38</sup>

Kennan’s certainty that the Soviet threat could be deterred in order to prevent overt military conflict derived from his previously cited analysis of the basic Russian approach to power projection. Because the Russians were inclined to think of geopolitical competition as a long term struggle, and were thus potentially prepared to cede ground on any given issue in the face of firm opposition, Kennan advised that deterrence could be highly effective in preventing divergent interests from sliding into general conflict between Russia and the West. “If the adversary has sufficient force and makes clear his readiness to use it, he rarely has to do so,” Kennan reasoned, so that “if situations are properly handled there need be no prestige-engaging showdowns.”<sup>39</sup>

By the same token, Kennan warned against needlessly bombastic, blustering responses to the Soviet threat, which he worried Russians might perceive as weakness, or which might push the Kremlin into a domestic political corner where it was forced to escalate:

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. The Russian leaders are keen judges of human psychology, and as such they are highly conscious that loss of temper and of self-control is never a source of strength in political affairs. They

are quick to exploit such evidences of weakness. For these reasons, it is a *sine qua non* of successful dealing with Russia that the foreign government in question should remain at all times cool and collected and that its demands on Russian policy should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige.<sup>40</sup>

If the West is to benefit from Kennan’s insights today, it is essential that it balance between demonstrating the collective political will necessary to maintain a credible deterrent, and charting a way forward for negotiated settlement of differences, selective cooperation, and even eventual reconciliation in Russia-West relations overall. At a time when European and trans-Atlantic unity have been strained by a seemingly relentless spate of crises, striking this delicate balance is no small challenge.

The most difficult dimension of a successful containment strategy may also be the most often forgotten or misconstrued from Kennan’s original writings: Kennan flipped on its head the Marxist-Leninist contention that capitalism contained the “seeds of its own destruction” to argue that in fact, it was the Soviet system that would eventually bring itself to ruin thanks to its internal contradictions, reactionary leadership, and fundamental structural flaws.<sup>41</sup> Thus, rather than be provoked into rash action in the name of preventive security, or pursuing adventurist interventions inside Russia itself, Kennan advised the West to practice strategic patience, in the confidence that much of what was threatening about Soviet power would ultimately ensure its own demise.

Once again, Kennan’s insights offer vitally important lessons for Russia-West relations today. For example, the fact that the Soviet leadership evinced innate hostility toward the West and the wider capitalist world—what Kennan referred to as the Kremlin’s “aggressive intransigence”—was emblematic of the Bolshevik regime’s tendency toward paranoia and self-isolation.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Kennan wrote, “the very disrespect of

<sup>38</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall [“Long Telegram”]*, Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> G. Kennan, *The Source of Soviet Conduct*, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Russians for objective truth—indeed, their disbelief in its existence—leads them to view all stated facts as instruments for furtherance of one ulterior purpose or another.”<sup>43</sup> Western politicians have lamented similar strains of self-isolating,<sup>44</sup> and deliberately dishonest or manipulative behavior on the part of the current Russian leadership.<sup>45</sup>

Following Kennan’s advice, a successful containment strategy would treat these unsettling Russian behaviors not as threats in and of themselves mandating a forceful Western response, but rather as confirmation of the inherent brittleness of the current Russian political system. Ironically, it is almost certainly the hawkish Western rhetorical response to Russian provocations in the human rights arena, and around the Ukraine and Syria crises, that has helped boost President Putin’s popularity from a low near 60% prior to his reelection bid in 2012, to 80% or higher for much of the past two years.<sup>46</sup> If it is true that the Russian leadership has been dishonest in its dealings around Ukraine and Syria, and if it has in fact isolated the Russian people and the Russian economy from the wider world, then Kennan’s vision of containment would suggest that the West’s task is now, to echo the oft-repeated slogan on the British home front in World War II, to keep calm and carry on.

Even if it weathers the storm of economic and political isolation it has stirred up by its hostile actions in Ukraine, the Russian state faces an existential challenge entirely of its own making in the coming decades. Once again, Kennan’s insights are indispensable. He cautioned that despite its outwardly strong appearance, the Soviet regime was fundamentally weak, and that its weakness would become evident as it attempted to perpetuate itself and propagate new leadership generations: “That they can keep power themselves, they have demonstrated. That they can quietly and easily turn it over to others remains to be proved.

Meanwhile, the hardships of their rule and the vicissitudes of international life have taken a heavy toll of the strength and hopes of the great people on whom their power rests.”<sup>47</sup>

If the objective of Western policy is to achieve a radical transformation in Russian policy by altering the composition or the mindset of the Russian leadership today, then it is surely doomed to fail. Such an approach would wrongly substitute urgency for gravity, and would clearly overreach in terms of the West’s actual capacity to influence events within Russia and its immediate neighborhood. As Kennan observed of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the Russians are “still by far the weaker force” when gauged against the West as a whole. Thus, he argued, “their success will really depend on [the] degree of cohesion, firmness and vigor which Western World can muster. And this is [a] factor which it is within our power to influence.”<sup>48</sup>

Effective containment, in Kennan’s view, required not only cohesion for the sake of resisting the Kremlin’s “divide and conquer” tactics within the Western camp, but also consistency over time and across many related areas of national life and state policy. He advised the United States to “formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of [the] sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in past. It is not enough to urge people to develop political processes similar to our own. Many foreign peoples, in Europe at least, are tired and frightened by experiences of [the] past, and are less interested in abstract freedom than in security.”<sup>49</sup> Far from a dated reference to Europe’s exhaustion and vulnerability in the aftermath of World War II, Kennan’s words capture a renewed sense of vulnerability to internal and external threats in Europe today, and underscore the continuing indispensability of U.S. leadership.

<sup>43</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall [“Long Telegram”]*, Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946.

<sup>44</sup> Bloomberg News, *Obama: Russia Is Isolating Itself From the World*, [video] 2015. Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/b/4469c476-4689-466d-bc6a-ef918a49e1f>.

<sup>45</sup> C. Good, *Obama Accuses Putin, Russia of Dishonesty on Ukraine*, *ABC News*, 2014. Available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-accuses-putin-russia-dishonesty-ukraine/story?id=23562277>.

<sup>46</sup> D. Treisman, *What you need to know about Putin’s popularity*, *The Washington Post*, 2014. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/07/what-you-need-to-know-about-putins-popularity/>.

<sup>47</sup> G. Kennan, *The Source of Soviet Conduct*, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947.

<sup>48</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall [“Long Telegram”]*, Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*





The West's challenge in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, its exploitation of far right politics throughout Europe, and its media activities around the globe, is clearly not only determining how to defend NATO allies militarily. It is also to strengthen the bulwarks of healthy and successful politics, security and commerce, by offering a compelling alternative future vision. In Kennan's words, "It is rather a question of the degree to which the United States can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time."<sup>50</sup> Containment, in Kennan's own words, was as much about reaffirming and broadcasting the vision at the heart of Western power and prosperity, as it was about devising a direct response to Russian power.

## The Missing Piece: Understanding Russia

*"We must see that our public is educated to realities of Russian situation. I cannot over-emphasize importance of this. Press cannot do this alone. It must be done mainly by Government, which is necessarily more experienced and better informed on practical problems involved."*<sup>51</sup>

Kennan's focus on restoring vitality and credibility at home and abroad of the Western vision for peace, prosperity and problem solving within a rules based international order is not matched by the efforts of today's European and U.S. political leaders. Still, these basic challenges are very much on the table in policy discussions around the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, and in the lively debate around the future of the European Union. Yet to extract from Kennan's writing on containment only the paired recommendations of forcing Russia to confront its own systemic weaknesses while offering a clear and

compelling alternate vision globally, would be to miss the third and most fundamental pillar of his analysis.

In the policy recommendations at the conclusion of his famous Long Telegram, Kennan advises Americans, and the wider West by extension, to know much more about Russia and Russians on both the official and general public levels, cautioning that, "there is nothing as dangerous or as terrifying as the unknown."<sup>52</sup> Those words could hardly be truer or more relevant today, and yet this absolutely central message of Kennan's work has all but disappeared in the quarter century since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

While Kennan's central message about the importance of knowing Russia in order to handle it as a foreign policy problem is more relevant than ever, Kennan himself would likely have agreed that much more work is needed to update and build on his analysis of the sources of Russia's worldview and foreign policy conduct from the middle of the last century. Do the U.S., NATO, or Western countries, collectively or individually, now have the capacity to do this as a foundation for developing an effective policy towards Russia? Unfortunately, the answer is mostly negative. Even with Russia constantly in the headlines, there has been only limited investment in sustaining expertise on Russia in North America and Western Europe over the past two decades.

In the United States, Russian area expertise has suffered as a casualty of trends promoting quantitative methodology in academia, across-the-board cuts to government programs supporting Russian education and research, including cuts of over 50% to critical language training, and near complete elimination of advanced research fellowships for Americans on Russia and the region.<sup>53</sup> These reductions in the overall pool of academic expertise have been reflected inside government as well, where analysts and diplomats working in support of policymakers have seen career incentives reoriented to favor expertise on other regions, such as the Middle East, or on crosscutting issues such as counter-terrorism or democracy promotion and

<sup>50</sup> G. Kennan, *The Source of Soviet Conduct*, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947.

<sup>51</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall ["Long Telegram"]*, Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> T. Gerber, *The State of Russian Studies in the United States: An Assessment by the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES)*, Pittsburgh: Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, 2015. Available at: <https://pitt.app.box.com/FINAL-ASEEES-assessment>. p. 4-5.

development.<sup>54</sup> The situation in Western Europe has been similar over the same time period, with increasing pressure in recent years for area expertise focused on the South, rather than the East.

As a recent externally funded field study of Russia expertise in the United States concluded, “Russian studies within the social sciences are facing a crisis.”<sup>55</sup> Political science faculties in the top three-dozen U.S. universities have together awarded an average of only 7 PhDs per year with at least a minimum (defined as 25% or more) focus on Russian area studies.<sup>56</sup> The situation in economics and sociology is even more dismal, with a grand total of only 4 economics and 5 sociology PhDs with a focus on Russia awarded since 2009. Even the broader field of Slavic Studies, which includes language, literature and culture experts, is in decline, with barely a quarter of its PhD graduates from this decade employed in tenure-track teaching jobs.<sup>57</sup> Given declining interest in Russian studies among incoming students reported for most of the past decade, and the elimination of many faculty positions that were previously earmarked for Russian specialists, it is no surprise that universities have fewer students enrolled in Russia-focused electives and core courses that might equip the United States’ future political, social and business leaders with even a basic knowledge of Russia.

The news is not uniformly negative about Russia expertise in the West. Central and Eastern European states have tended to maintain a much stronger capacity to understand and analyze Russia, which has in many cases proven indispensable to NATO and the European Union. In fact, the divergence of expertise between East and West had become so pronounced by the end of the last decade that in many intra-European and Euro-Atlantic forums, a *de facto* division of labor emerged in which representatives of Central and East European member states assumed primary responsibility for analyzing and developing collective policy recommendations towards Russia and the

former Soviet space. Yet for the United States, NATO and the West as a whole, understanding Russia by proxy is patently inadequate to the task at hand.

#### *Restoring Russian Expertise*

If we are to follow Kennan’s advice to study Russia with “courage, detachment [and] objectivity,”<sup>58</sup> what can we now do to enhance Western capacity as a foundation for developing and implementing an effective comprehensive policy towards Russia? First, the United States and Western Europe must restore financial support for the development of robust Russian area expertise as a top national security priority. Funding for language study, scholarship, research and exchange is essential to broadening and deepening knowledge of Russia in the West, and neither universities themselves nor the private sector have shown sufficient ability or resolve to substitute for Cold War era government programs that have been cut or eliminated. While many Western governments are under intense public pressure to cut expenditures, this investment is comparatively small—at its height, the entire U.S. “Title VIII” Russian area studies program cost around \$5 million per year—and it should be recognized as a national security imperative, not a luxury.<sup>59</sup>

It is instructive here to recall that Kennan himself underwent his early training in Russian studies at the University of Berlin, and then gained close up expertise on the Soviet economy while serving at the U.S. legation in Riga, Latvia. Now as then, it is important that universities and research institutions remain bastions of intellectual freedom, while fostering contacts with government and offering timely and policy-relevant insights through publications, seminars and media commentary. Likewise, Kennan’s own academic and professional experience crisscrossing the United States and Europe reminds us that the development of Western expertise on Russia should be a shared undertaking. Individual institutions and experts from North America and all parts of Europe should be encouraged by their

<sup>54</sup> Karoun Dimeitrijian, “Lack of Russia Experts has some in U.S. Worried,” *The Washington Post*, 30 December 2015, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/12/30/lack-of-russia-experts-has-the-u-s-playing-catch-up/>.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> G. Kennan, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall* [“Long Telegram”], Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers, 1946.

<sup>59</sup> Federal Cuts for Eurasian and Eastern European Studies, *Inside Higher Ed*, 2013. Available at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2013/10/23/federal-cuts-eurasian-and-eastern-european-studies>.



governments to collaborate, mirroring the NATO Alliance's foundational commitment to collective and cooperative security.

Some important limitations and rules of thumb should inform government programs supporting scholarship on Russia, and should likewise guide the policy-oriented work of Russia experts themselves. Far too often, the call for expertise on Russia from the press, civic groups, private grant-makers and government agencies is focused primarily on “understanding Putin,” or explaining “Putin’s Russia” in a particular context. This preoccupation with Putin is echoed in a similar trend of universities and think tanks that have reacted to Russia’s political and foreign policy shift during the Putin presidency by recasting much of their work as a new brand of “Kremlinology.” As one prominent Russian scholar has pointed out, the focus by Westerners on “Putin’s Russia” gets it exactly backwards, because the current occupant of the Kremlin would be much better understood as “Russia’s Putin.”<sup>60</sup> Though his own perceptions are necessarily shaped by his unique personal experience, Putin is more than anything a reaction to and expression of much broader trends in Russian society, politics and economic life over the past several decades.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, while close study of Russia can cast considerable light on the trends and context influencing elite decision-making, there is generally little basis for the type of palantir-gazing “Kremlinology” depicted in films and spy novels. These approaches also seem to neglect a vital lesson of the Cold War, during which not even the most ingenious Russia watchers had much success reading the minds of the Kremlin elite, much less predicting the most consequential developments in Soviet foreign policy or within the Soviet Union itself. As a former senior U.S. diplomat recalled, even by the summer of 1991, most Russia experts in government and universities were expecting that during the following year, Moscow would at most slightly relax its control over the Baltic Republics, but that the Soviet Union would remain strong and intact for a long time to come.<sup>62</sup>

In pursuit of restoring and renewing the West’s Russia expertise, we must embrace both caution and humility, since there are seldom demonstrably right answers in the study of human societies and cultures, and the most important insights are seldom those that seem obvious to most people. We must also be patient, as deep and balanced understanding of any people and place develops over years, even decades, though renewed investment may be well rewarded even in the short term by attracting back to policy relevant work the most capable and experienced Russia experts who have migrated to other fields. Finally, we must approach the study of Russia with a truly open mind, avoiding convenient but false assumptions based on deep-rooted prejudice, or on all too common Western literary, cinematic and political stereotypes of Russians.

## The Long Road Ahead

*“Surely, there was never a fairer test of national quality than this. In the light of these circumstances, the thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin’s challenge to American society.”<sup>63</sup>*

It seems to be the habit of every generation, and perhaps it is a conceit of human nature, to imagine that the challenges of the modern world must be quite distinct from anything we have seen before. Advances in technology, prosperity, and shifts in religious and political beliefs, plus of course the lessons of history themselves, are most often cited to justify why this is so. Yet some insights are undeniably as relevant today as they were in the past, including on matters of international security and relations among today’s great powers. Kennan’s evaluation of the sources of Russian foreign policy and his recommendations for a comprehensive Western strategy of containment stand out as particularly valuable in the face of the current challenge facing Western policymakers.

<sup>60</sup> N. Zlobin, *Russia’s New Course*, [audio recording], Wilson Center, 2014. Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/russias-new-course>.

<sup>61</sup> F. Hill, and C. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> J. Collins, *Author Interview with Ambassador James F. Collins*, 2010.

<sup>63</sup> G. Kennan, The Source of Soviet Conduct, *Foreign Affairs*, (25), 1947.

Kennan's firsthand analysis of Russia in the early years of the Cold War, and his recipe for a sophisticated, sustained containment policy as recounted above, have tracked to a considerable degree with key elements of the Western policy response to Russia in the current period. Faced with the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine, the West has imposed punitive economic, political and diplomatic sanctions, maintaining a united front against considerable political countercurrents, thereby deepening Russia's self-imposed isolation from much of the global economy. Western governments have also provided direct assistance to strengthen Ukraine's ability to defend its sovereignty while conducting extremely difficult but vital reforms aimed at rooting out corruption and breaking the monopoly on power of a few oligarchic cliques.

These efforts have hardly had a transformative impact on either Russian policy or Ukraine's political, social and economic hardships, but if considered in terms of Kennan's containment doctrine, they need not do so. Rather, Western policy toward Russia today, just as in the Cold War, should be oriented towards success over the longer term. Strengthening the pillars of the West's already considerable economic, political and cultural accomplishments presents an attractive force for individuals and whole societies caught between the geopolitical forces of Russia and the West, and by the same token blunts Russian interventions designed to exploit internal weakness or sow divisions within NATO or the European Union.

Demonstrating sufficient unity and resolve to pose a strong deterrent against military aggression, the West can also choose not to engage with Russia in a tit-for-tat competition of maneuvers and symbols in the post-Soviet space. This will deny the Kremlin one of its most powerful fonts of anti-Western propaganda, and leave

Russians to decide for themselves whether they are satisfied with their political leaders and their country's role in the world. Targeted and sustained investments in enhancing the West's capacity to understand Russia can help divorce fact from fantasy, and illuminate not only what Russians think about their own country and the world, but why they think it.

Not surprisingly, some in the West today would find Kennan's vision of containment unsatisfying. Many already argue that Russia's military aggression, defiance of basic international norms, and attempts at geopolitical and even historical revisionism deserve a tougher and more immediate response than careful analysis, strategic patience and unity on collective security, deterrence, and shared values.<sup>64</sup> Even within the U.S. administration he served, Kennan faced strenuous opposition from more hawkish colleagues, most famously Paul Nitze, who thought about the Cold War as "a battle of will and numbers," and argued for overwhelming the Soviets with superior capabilities and deployments across the board.<sup>65</sup>

It is certainly true that a containment policy cannot succeed if it is perceived to be a path of least resistance, or if the term is invoked merely to paper over internal political differences. If the West is to revive containment as a guiding principle of its Russia policy in the current period, then it is essential to be clear about what we mean by the term, and consistent in applying the policy. Most importantly, political and thought leaders who advocate a new containment doctrine should be well equipped to explain why it is the right response to Russia's challenge to the West, and how it will, over the long term, deliver a much brighter future for Westerners and Russians alike.

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<sup>64</sup> S. Ben-Ami, Taking On Revisionist Russia, *Project Syndicate*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/revisionist-russia-ukraine-fight-by-shlomo-ben-ami-2015-03>.

<sup>65</sup> B. Youngsmith, Warriors, Hot and Cold, *New Republic*, 2010. Available at: <https://newrepublic.com/article/77221/hawk-and-dove-nicholas-thompson-nitze-kennan-cold-war-soviets>.