



Russia/U.S. Relations: The basics from the Army officer perspective.

It is not terribly difficult to see how we got where we are today with regards to US/Russian relationships.

In December 2015, Putin signed an updated Russian national security strategy that names the United States and NATO as threats.

In November 2015, US Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley [told the Defense One Summit that Russia was an existential threat to the United States for two reasons](#): its nuclear capacity and its increasing aggressive action. In July 2015, Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Russia is the greatest security threat to the United States saying, [“if you look at their behavior, it’s nothing short of alarming.”](#)

And in September 2015, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, [was released](#). In it, Steven Lee Myers, a journalist for the New York Times, provides background and context for much of the actions and rhetoric of leaders of Russia and the US in the second half of 2015.

Myers presents the Russian leader’s role in the KGB during the Cold War. That experience in the KGB shaped his thinking about Russia and its role in history and the world today which led him to say to the Russian legislative assembly in April 2005 that, “it should be recognized that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century... Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory.”

Myers shows that as early as 1987 Putin wanted Russian reform to be deep and not just superficial. According to Myers, “he favored evolutionary change, not radical reform.” This preference caused him tremendous personal turmoil after the Soviet Union did collapse. As Myers puts it:

Not at all by his design, Vladimir Putin landed on the winning side of the collapse of the Soviet Union. And yet he did not share the euphoria that many Russians felt. On the contrary, the experience was for him a difficult one... ‘In fact,’ he said, ‘it tore my life apart.’”

So, [when NATO expanded in 2004 to 26 countries](#), including the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Putin continued to be torn apart. He and his government saw that expansion as a persistent US presence. Myers quotes then-Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov from the ceremony marking the occasion: “[T]he presence of American soldiers on our borders has created a kind of paranoia.” This



paranoia existed even though there were no US soldiers in any of those countries at the time.

Since then, of course, Russia has taken military action in Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine. Terms like “little green men” and “hybrid warfare” have been coined or taken new forms. Much is made of Russia’s prolific use of information as an instrument of war. (Or is it something other than war?) [And the United States is reassembling a plan to deal with these things.](#)

Part of the US Army’s 4th Infantry Division headquarters is in Germany as the mission command element for Operation Atlantic Resolve, US European Command’s response to Russian aggression in the region. In addition to the team from Fort Carson, elements of heavy brigade combat teams from the 3rd Infantry Division rotate into and out of Europe to train with the 2d Cavalry Regiment and the 173d Airborne Brigade, both based in Germany. These events and exercises always involve host and partner nation forces, as well. As a sign of the importance of this effort, the Army has deployed a mobile public affairs detachment and a press camp headquarters—extremely robust messaging formations—to Europe work to counter the Russian information campaign. These specialized units are usually reserved for responses to natural disasters and places named Iraq and Afghanistan.

To make the milieu even more compelling, Putin gave a speech at the United Nations on September 28, 2015 (coincidentally, the day before Myers’ book was released). In this speech, Putin made his case for adjusting the world order to meet present challenges, as he sees them. Of course, there is an expected amount of anti-US rhetoric. But in the speech is a particularly gripping point. In addressing Russian ambition—real or perceived—Putin said, “[i]t is not about Russia’s ambition, dear colleagues, but about the recognition of the fact that we can no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world.”

We can no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world.

I doubt that Russia’s new national security strategy surprised anyone; it certainly should not have. According to Jim Garamone of DoD News, Air Force Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, the commander of US European Command and NATO’s supreme allied commander for Europe, said recently that the strategy “[merely codified Russian actions for several years.](#)” But that does not make it any less disconcerting and problematic. If the US senior military leadership is correct about Russia being the most prominent threat that the US faces today, US military leaders at every level might do well to better understand the threat. The Foreign Military Studies Office’s publication *OE WATCH*, in [the most recent edition](#), has almost 3x as many articles on Russia as the other regions covered.



Most of us who have been in the Army longer than the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been going on remember learning all the features and characteristics of the Russian military hardware we would see on the battlefield. Much of that hardware has changed but so has the very nature of the conflict. Today, the it is a battle of ideas more than hardware. Today's Army leaders from company-grade up would do well to read what the chief of the staff of the Army and the chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff think about Russia, then explore what the combatant commander and Army service component command commander are doing about it. While considering that, read the January/February edition of *Military Review* to see what [Putin](#) and his general of the army, [Gen. Valery Gerasimov](#), each think about the world and conflict today. Then read [the article by Charles Bartles](#) that contextualizes Gerasimov's thoughts on conflict. And while examining those articles, read Myers' [The New Tsar](#).

The US Army continues to evolve after the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and we continue to work to know ourselves. The other part of the equation to defeat an enemy is to know the enemy. We have looked at Russia in various ways over the years. In times past we thought we knew that enemy, but maybe we didn't. Or maybe the enemy is quite different now. Regardless, we have to study this enemy and the current and emerging body of literature allows us to do that.